

# Is Sydney really full? The politics of urban density

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Lisa Visentin

It is a question not asked of other global cities. Is New York full? How about Paris? And yet the sentiment appears to be gaining traction in the minds of many Sydneysiders.

For more than a year, the NSW government has championed its delivery of record housing approvals and completions. But the question of density – and how much is too much – is fast shaping up to be a key issue ahead of the 2019 election.



*The question of density, housing and development, is likely to be a huge state election issue. Photo: Peter Rae*

It comes as the government tries to keep up with a racing growth rate, which is expected to see Sydney's population swell by 100,000 people every year for the next 20 years.

Confronted with an increasingly cynical electorate and one which is fed up with congestion, the Berejiklian government, having declared housing affordability among its top priorities, has found itself defending its signature planning strategies aimed at fast-tracking housing supply.

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Politicians might have once dismissed it as fringe nimbyism, but a fermenting contempt for overdevelopment, or the perception of it, is now bubbling to the surface in communities across Sydney.

John Daley, chief executive of the Grattan Institute, says the politics of planning have become poisonous.

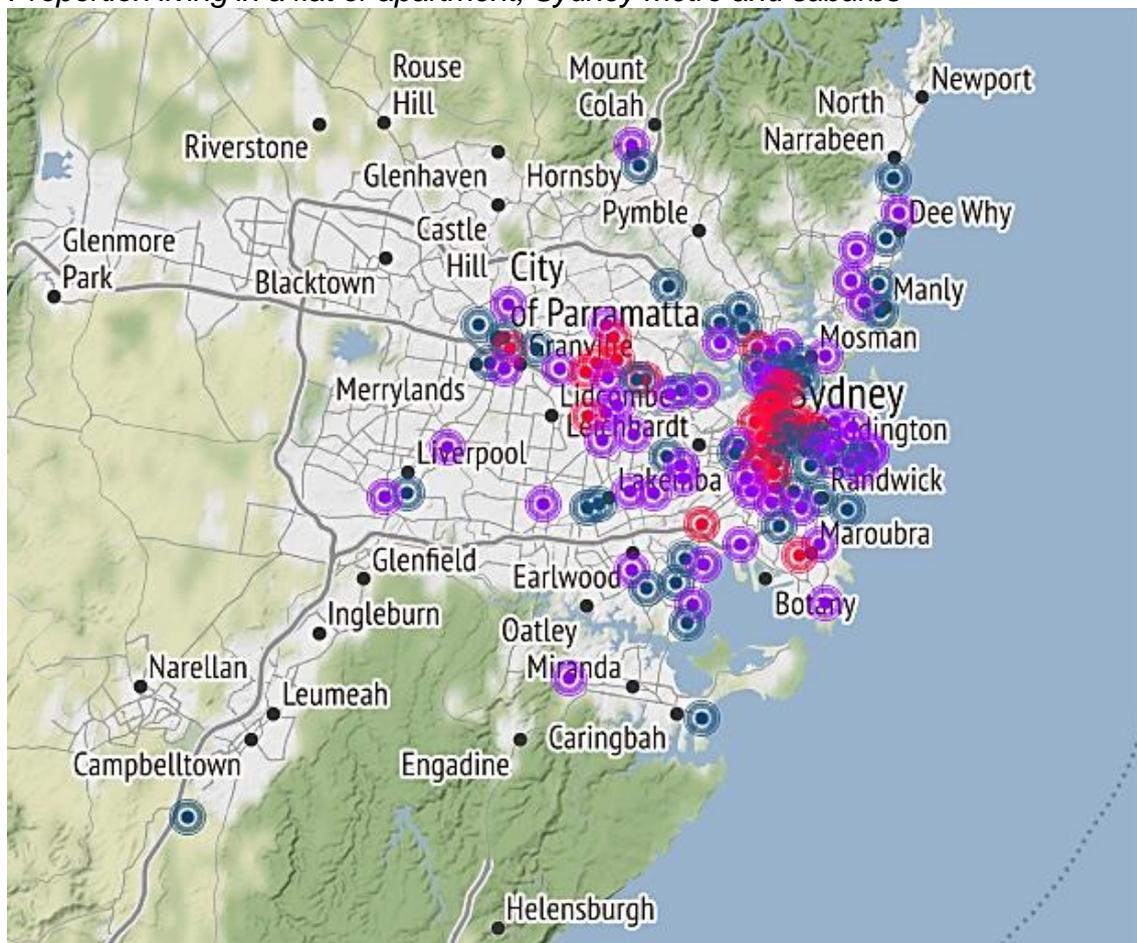
"There's no question that this is politically a very hard sell," he says. "Everybody agrees that density should increase in Sydney in the suburbs next to theirs. That's the issue in a nutshell."

The government, he says, needs to do a better job of explaining the flipside of leaving neighbourhoods unchanged.

"If you do that, your children will not be able to afford to buy a house. And when they do, it will be 30 kilometres from where you are living, so good luck seeing your grandchildren," Daley says.

## High-rise

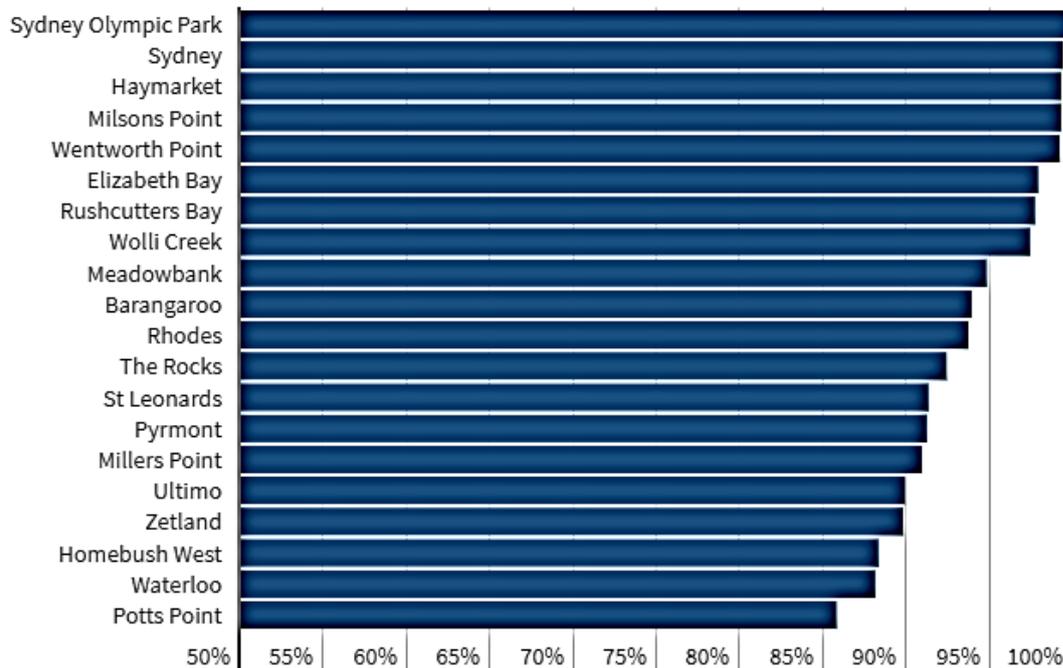
*Proportion living in a flat or apartment, Sydney metro and suburbs*



That sales job could prove to be tougher than usual, given some Liberal MPs are now openly questioning the merits of their own government's policies that would result in thousands of more homes built in their electorates.

Senior government minister David Elliott this week warned of a voter backlash in his Baulkham Hills electorate, after developer Mulpha unveiled its plans for a \$3 billion redevelopment of Norwest Business Park which could accommodate as many as 20,000 residents.

### Top 20 apartment dwellers in Sydney



Source: Census 2016

"This is going to be a huge state election issue – it is the only issue that my constituents are talking about in my electorate, and I know several other MPs have concerns also," he told *The Sunday Telegraph*.

And Drummoyne MP John Sidoti says he will refuse to back the government's plan to rezone the Rhodes East precinct for high-rise development of 3600 homes, unless a new school and transport upgrades are provided first.

"My community is saying Rhodes is at capacity," he says. "If they want my support, that's what I want. I want the community benefit of the infrastructure to go in first."

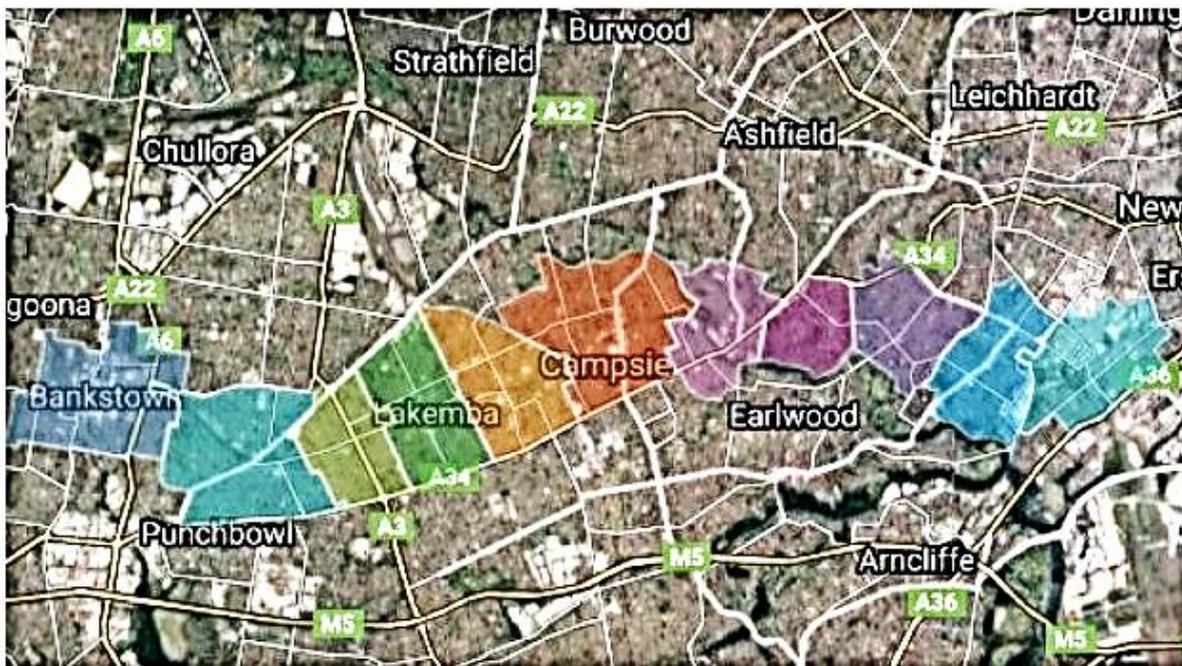
Their comments dovetail with a widely held sentiment revealed last month by a Fairfax ReachTell poll, which found an astonishing [two-thirds of NSW residents believe Sydney is "full"](#).

Labor has recognised the political capital to be tapped from the vein of overdevelopment and has made clear it wants planning strategy to be an election battleground. It has mounted an offensive against the government's core planning process of "priority precincts", which identifies an area as a priority for more density (often around a train station) and accelerates the rezoning process.

Opposition planning spokesman Michael Daley has promised to [immediately junk the priority precincts scheme if Labor wins power in 2019](#), describing them as "just a cheap and nasty mass rezoning".

He has also committed to "shredding" the government's marquee strategy of rezoning around 11 stations along the Sydenham to Bankstown corridor, which snakes for 13 kilometres through Labor heartland.

The rezonings are expected to deliver at least 35,000 new homes over the next two decades, but so far the government has made no commitments towards accompanying infrastructure such as new schools and health centres.



*The government plans to rezone around 11 stations along the Sydenham to Bankstown corridor.*

As part of the corridor strategy, the government has classified four areas along the line as priority precincts – Canterbury, Campsie, Belmore, and Lakemba – which will be rezoned to allow 25-storey apartment towers.

It's the stomping ground of federal MP Tony Burke, who joined Labor's attack this week, hosting an overdevelopment forum in Campsie.

The corridor strategy stood to "jeopardise" every aspect of the community, he told the 300-strong crowd. "Any planner ... who thought they could pick our community because we wouldn't know how to campaign and we wouldn't know how to complain, has another thing coming."

The plans are also being fiercely resisted by Labor-dominated stronghold of Canterbury-Bankstown council, now the state's largest council with 350,000 ratepayers.

"We will not accept this," Labor mayor Khal Asfour says. "We know how to deliver change but these precincts are a tragedy.

"I want [the Department of Planning] to tell me how 25-storey towers are supposed to make those centres better places."

The Greater Sydney Commission, an independent body responsible for shaping long-term planning strategy for Sydney, has estimated the city will need about 725,000 extra homes over the next 20 years as the city's population climbs to 6 million.

And in updated plans released last week, the commission held firm on mandating Sydney councils to [find a way to deliver almost 200,000 new homes by 2021](#), assigning each council five-year housing targets.

Planning Minister Anthony Roberts has been swift in his riposte, accusing Labor of wanting "to condemn Sydney to a decade of high house prices, low growth, congested infrastructure, and lower quality of living".

"Mr Daley must come clean – where will he house 2.1 million new residents?"

Labor is also quick to point out that its heartland suburbs are being forced to absorb the bulk of the population growth, while some blue-ribbon areas have much more modest targets and others are left largely untouched.

Canterbury-Bankstown, for example, must find room for 13,250 more homes over the next five years. Woollahra and Hunters Hill, albeit much smaller communities, need only to provide 300 and 150 new dwellings, respectively.

For its part, the government is backing the Greater Sydney Commission's 40-year vision for Sydney as three connected cities, where homes, jobs and services can be accessed within 30 minutes.

The commission believes reshaping Sydney from a CBD-centric city into a triparted metropolis – comprising a western parkland city, west of the M7; a central river city around greater Parramatta; and an eastern harbour city – will enable 70 per cent of Sydney's projected population of 8 million people access to the "30-minute city" by 2056.

But some urban planners are sceptical about the feasibility of the three-city approach, which is contingent on the concentration of growth and jobs around western Sydney.

The idea of beefing up western Sydney is not new, says Professor Peter Phibbs, head of urban and regional planning at the University of Sydney.

"[The government] has said the same thing in strategy for 25 years and the number of jobs we've turned up in western Sydney is pretty small.

"You can zone things for employment uses but if employers don't want to go there, there's not much you can do about it."

The Grattan Institute's John Daley believes this is "the big concern" with the commission's vision.

The decline of manufacturing and the shift towards a service-driven economy, where businesses conglomerate near the centre of cities, means the government's ability to change the outcome "is relatively limited", he says.

For the most part, the government is pinning its hopes on the slated Badgerys Creek airport to transform western Sydney's economy, hoping it will generate as many as 60,000 direct jobs. While construction is expected to begin next year, the bulk of the jobs won't come until after it opens in 2026.

Dr Marcus Spiller, director of planning firm SGS Economics and Planning, says the commission's plans are the latest in a string of metropolitan strategies that have been commissioned by successive government since 2005.

"What is it about our state and our city that means we make good plans but we don't seem to be able to stick to them and deliver them on the ground," he says.

The problem, as he identifies it, is one of fractured governance, where planning is hampered by government departments operating as silos.

A better model for city planning, he says, is through a metropolitan system of government, such as the Greater London Authority, led by mayor Sadiq Khan. Unlike the commission, it has strategic control over transport, policing, economic development, and fire and emergency planning.

Minister Roberts believes the biggest challenge is not implementation, or even density per se, but "one of public relations".

"The challenge is convincing a sceptical electorate in a combative atmosphere of the value and need of these polices," he told an economic forum last week.

The scale of the political challenge facing the Berejiklian government was evident at a fiery community meeting in Marrickville Town Hall a fortnight ago.

More than 350 people filled the auditorium to hear details of a development proposal by property giant Mirvac to convert the industrial precinct of Carrington Road into a strip of high-rise residential apartment towers. The project is an audaciously ambit bid – a string of 20 buildings some as high as 100 metres tall, well beyond the government's own suggested height limits for the area.

Midway through a council bureaucrat's slideshow presentation, a heckler disrupted proceedings.

"Six storeys max for all of Marrickville," he yelled.

The hall erupted in raucous applause.

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