

Shadow Minister for Planning

David Davis MP



On Wednesday 3 March 2021, the Liberal Nationals in the Victorian Legislative Council sought (ultimately unsuccessfully) to revoke Amendments VC187 and VC190 to the Victoria Planning Provisions, pursuant to section 38(2) of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*. These two planning provisions, VC190 and VC187 are amendments perhaps with good intentions to expedite the rollout of social housing, but they do in fact pull away the powers of local councils and pull away the choice and involvement of local communities.

I want to be clear that we support social housing, we support public housing, and we support a sensible program to allow that to be brought forward at a fast rate. We support the jobs that are created through that, but we also support the public housing and social housing that is needed as a part of our community provision. And Victoria is short on social housing, it is clear, compared to other jurisdictions in Australia and overseas. However, I want to clearly make the point that the fact that we support these things does not mean that we support overriding local communities and local councils.

When you read the provisions, they are full of high-sounding words about the role of the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change, who in effect will make some of the decisions, and the Director of Housing. If they tag a project, an exponent for a project – either a full public project or a project that involves a private component too – the net effect of these amendments will be to diminish and effectively defang any ability of the community to have a proper say.

We say bring forward the social housing, but go through a normal planning process. Go through a process where there is proper community consultation. If you are building something with more than 10 dwellings on it, and that is the scale that is contemplated, you will actually be by necessity having a significant impact on the local community, both the services locally, whether it is the local school or the local health services, but also the amenity in the area – the need for provision of parks, the need for provision of open space and the need for proper arrangements for parking and the movement of traffic in and around.

If you are putting a much larger development in, perhaps with hundreds or even thousands of dwellings, you will have a very significant impact on that local area, and it is our view that the council is best placed in these circumstances to make the decision.

The council is best placed with community input and with review rights by local people – the ability to actually say, ‘Look, we disagree with this decision’ or ‘We disagree with this proposal and we’ll seek the following modifications’.

This is a very sensible point. I think the community understands the need for social housing and by and large is very supportive of social housing but understands that, actually, we can get this wrong. We can actually get poor developments, poorly designed developments, developments that are not responsive to local community needs, developments that in effect override local community wishes and developments that have a very significant impact on the amenity of a local area.

We say there is no reason not to have normal community involvement – proper participatory democracy here. Democracy is not just about a vote at council or just about

a vote once every four years; it is also about a proper involvement in the democratic process. It is also about a proper involvement in decision-making. It is also about a proper involvement in the administrative decisions that go around some of these large projects.

So we say: yes, we support more money to social housing; yes, we support greater provision of a range of housing options; and yes, we support the expenditure and the jobs approach. And we are alive to and thoughtful about how that can be done while maintaining proper community involvement. We do want to see the red tape managed as best as possible, but that does not mean removing the rights of councils and local communities from this decision-making.

I would hope that the lessons of earlier times have been learned, but it seems with these amendments that they have not been, that the government has said, ‘We’re going to ride over communities, we’re going to push through and this will be put in place whether you as a local community want this or not’.

Why are they so afraid that local councils implementing local planning policy will not be able to get this right? I say local councils will be able to get it right, I say that local communities will be able to get it right and I say that this can be done in a way that gets a better outcome for those who would be in the public and social housing but also for the surrounding local neighbourhoods. ●

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