

*Commuting requires subsidies in addition to the cost to those who engage in it. Instead of providing more commuting resources, we should think laterally and seek solutions to minimise the need, especially of the most expensive type environmentally.*

### **Why apartments win in the short term**

It is unfortunate that residential apartment development is more attractive than commercial development. In NSW, this difference exists partly because workable consumer protections are seriously lacking, resulting in some purchasers having to pay twice. These developments also mean more revenue for governments in the short term until the infrastructure, and other services costs are dealt with, usually by their successors. As a result, the conversation is confined to where these developments should take place rather than in the public interest does a certain parcel best serve as residential land.

The new residents do not spend their lives exclusively in their apartments. Every journey beyond their four walls has two parts: a beginning and an end. But when we discuss what happens during the journey, it is always about what means of transport will be employed and what resources should be devoted to facilitate the journey. There is never a thought about where the destination could or should be.

The planners tell us apartments should be near stations so residents will use trains, despite census evidence that only a minority of people do that. Do we ask why? Could it be because their destination is not well served by public transport? Or there is parking at their destination? Another justification sold to Epping residents in the early days of the Urban Activation Precinct spin was that people who live in apartments don't have children! We know from experience that when offices and educational institutions are located near stations with restricted

parking, the vast majority of those travelling to such places use public transport. Apparently influenced by short term financial considerations, this information and observations are ignored.

### **How Epping could help if allowed to**

Being overshadowed by well resourced retail opportunities at Macquarie Park, Carlingford Court, Hornsby, Top Ryde, Rhodes, North Rocks and even Eastwood, Epping has been more suited to office accommodation. Decades ago it first accommodated the head office of AGC, and later Unilever, the electoral offices of the state seat of Epping and the Federal seat of Bennelong. Reported in the local paper, there was once a firm of surveyors with 70 workers.

Nevertheless, the Epping Town Centre was in need of more intensive development which could have taken place while—

- (a) attracting less private traffic;
- (b) accommodating more workers or students in the same area;
- (c) potentially shortening the commuting distance for many residents but, more importantly, many other people who would otherwise travel through Epping including from as far afield as the Central Coast;
- (d) causing less disruption and pressures to move for existing residents;
- (e) being more compact and walkable than sprawling Macquarie Park with its excessive provision of car parking which generates overburdened roads in the surrounding area, including, coincidentally, Epping itself.

Since AGC established its head office opposite Epping station, bus and train services to the town centre have been enhanced in all directions giving easy access to a large employment pool. But

more importantly, electronic communications have been improved beyond the fax machine and the telex.

### **Times change when you aren't looking**

Because it is not practical to carry tools on public transport, most of the growing numbers of people who use it, or who could use it, are headed for desk jobs where they process data. The raw material often arrives digitally and the processed product leaves digitally. This will continue during the time for which the planners are charged with their tasks. But improved electronic communications mean it is no longer as necessary as it once was for people to travel to a single place or area to "do business". For example, shares are no longer traded in an open market place. Other auctions can also be conducted with remotely placed bids.

Lawyers were once tethered to the shelves of their law libraries and accounting departments but these are now digitised and could be located everywhere. Only some of their work involves the courts and even then much of that "paperwork" is now lodged and served electronically. Most legal research is conducted at <http://www.austlii.edu.au>. Recently, Herbert Smith Freehills, an international firm of solicitors has moved 80% of their headcount from the CBD. This once unthinkable move may well be followed by others who see the rental savings and shorter commutes for many. People who work in teams in large organisations may need to be near their co-team members but are unlikely to have daily contact with those in other teams. Cheque processing is a dying trade. The sub-editors for some Australian newspapers work from New Zealand.

Moving closer to where a large potential workforce lives would be attractive to any company which processes data or serves clients outside business hours (e.g., call centres). Walkable access to public transport, especially frequent train services, is highly desirable for people working out of normal business hours.

### **Why the policy imposed has been wrong, so think again**

The key to minimising the cost and disadvantages of long commutes is to shorten them. Contrary to the common response, achieving this result is not confined to permitting or encouraging people to work from home. Some businesses don't need to be in the CBD. Others could analyse the workflow in their activities and realise that parts of their activities or some of their headcount could be accommodated more conveniently for staff and at a cost-saving outside the CBD.

But these cases are not helped or even permitted when the land around stations that would suit them for office accommodation has been zoned to permit apartments; apartments win every time even when it is not in the public interest or does not accommodate as many people. New residential development is rampant in Macquarie Park replacing commercial development and of course, in Epping already and no doubt elsewhere.

Think about the banks. When customer contact was important, they established branch networks at considerable expense. When customer contact ceased to be important because technology permitted, the branches closed. But, never having had branches to the same extent, many other businesses have not turned their minds to whether there is a place for a (limited) branch network given developments in technology, the increased CBD rents and problems with commuting and congestion for workers.