

Planning Panel Speech

John Calleja on behalf of the Calleja Family.

29 June 2021

I would like to thank the panel for the opportunity to present today.

The purpose of my presentation today is to discuss my concerns, and the concerns of the broader community, that the current amendments as proposed will destroy the unique character and liveability of Toolamba.

I have lived in Toolamba for almost 10 years and prior to that lived in approximately 10 regional and inner-city towns and suburbs across Australia and NZ. I can honestly say that Toolamba is far and away the best place I have ever lived.

As a result I can say with certainty that the characteristics of Toolamba, why it is unique, what makes Toolamba such a great place to live **are very real** and should be protected at all costs.

My family is deeply connected in the community – I am a member of the Toolamba Lions Club and I have sat on the Community Steering Panel and my wife is president of the Toolamba Junior Tennis Club. My children have or are completing their schooling at Toolamba Primary School and my wife is a kindergarten teacher at the pre-school.

The characteristics that make Toolamba special are:

- a rural lifestyle and village feel supported by a predominance of larger blocks with wide open space and low traffic volumes
- safe and friendly atmosphere in a quiet, family and community connected population.
- A strong pre school and primary school providing fantastic educational outcomes along with sporting clubs promoting activity for both children and adults
- An amazing number of community events that are put on via by a group of hard-working community groups

It is important to point out that I along with the overwhelming majority of the submissions support growth in Toolamba provided that it retains the character of the town. This is not about keeping Toolamba locked down in any way shape or form.

In terms of the amendments in short my concerns are

- The amendments will drive a major shift in the Toolamba township from a rural township to an urban high-density township. **Blocks will increase from 100 in number with 80-85% of those blocks being low density to 372 with around 25% being low density.**
- These amendments combined with the geographic barriers and proposed freeway that effectively land-lock Toolamba will result in a dramatic shift in the character of Toolamba **but do not create a critical mass or scale of dwellings that is required to generate meaningful investment in social and community infrastructure.** GV Water is an example of this and I talk further to this below.

- Without this investment in social and community infrastructure the highly valued characteristics of Toolamba will be lost with the only impact to further stress old and undersized infrastructure. Current and future residents will be negatively impacted.
- And linked to this there is not a genuine plan by Council to manage an approximate 300% increase in population from a physical, community and social infrastructure perspective.

I am extremely disappointed that I need to be here today, and I feel the process to date has failed Toolamba, its residents and future residents. I believe that it has also failed the developer.

I want to discuss in more detail issues around land development strategy, infrastructure and the consultation process.

Land Development Strategy

I do not understand Council's strategy as to where Toolamba sits within land development for Greater Shepparton.

- There has not been a clear articulation from Council why you would change Toolamba to a high-density township when Mooroopna and Shepparton are 15-25 minutes away and other towns in the region have so much of the infrastructure that will never be provided in Toolamba.
- Why is Council effectively limiting rural residential living that based on the success of the recent Meadow Woods Estate and submissions indicate is the style of living people want and Toolamba provides so well.
- Of more fundamental concern is the strategy for land use development within Toolamba given the landlocked nature of the township between the forest, river and proposed GV freeway bypass.
- These constraints mean you must be so careful about how land is rezoned as the risk and these amendments create a "half-way house" – a small town pushed into urbanisation but without scale to have infrastructure built to support it.
- In fact, you can add to the half-way house analogy given the growth plan also incorporates mixed used such as multi-storey apartments with ground floor commercial operations **which is a long way from maintaining the characteristics of a rural township.**
- The Council raised in discussions with me that the efficient use of land was an important principle – particularly farmland. I certainly agree with that as a general principle but I think the **relevance of this argument for Toolamba is weak** in light of the scale issue that will not result in services coming to town to match the increase in dwellings. Hopefully this is not George Orwell's 1984 and the desire for people to live on larger blocks remains possible...but **most importantly the landlocked nature of Toolamba means the transfer of large scale tracts of land to low density development is simply not possible.**
- You can already see the impact of the "halfway house strategy". Council is recommending that the proposed medium density development north of Wren Street to be connected to sewerage. This is likely to be uneconomic given the smaller number of large blocks and this position will either drive high density development or no development at all.

Infrastructure Constraints

- In terms of infrastructure the current infrastructure of the towns is stretched now or is inadequate. Whether this be the community hall, the tennis club facilities, car parking, transport, the pre-school and school which is close to capacity, whether its basic things like roadside kerbing. I discussed this in some detail in my submission and will not repeat it
- The combination of the land locked nature of Toolamba and these amendments mean Toolamba is unlikely to ever reach a critical scale of dwellings and population that will support investment by council and other infrastructure providers.
- The amendments and “halfway house strategy” proposed will further stretch this infrastructure and become grossly inadequate or investment will be met in a minimum manner. **Either way this will erode community value and liveability.**
- This risk can be seen manifesting already in a couple of areas:
 - the GVW letter of 18 June 2021
 - GVW will not make any contribution to sewerage connection now or in the future for Toolamba. It must be 100% funded. Clearly GVW does not consider there is sufficient current or future scale in the township to invest its own monies.
 - this doesn’t provide confidence for the Councils’ growth strategy for Toolamba and that it will create a critical scale to attract other investment. In the case of GVW any benefits of reticulated sewerage are likely to be lost to the town and other developments
 - The council itself is unwilling to commit to any investment.
 - In business when you are looking at expansion opportunities – you budget for what is required at various stages to support that investment. There is no such level of commitment by council and there is nothing in future budgets
 - In fact the council simply states these important issues are outside the scope of these amendments and points to bodies such as the Toolamba Steering Committee which has no decision making powers. I have sat on this Committee and I saw real challenges in progressing even minor investments with Council. **If this is not the place for this important element of development for those that live and will live in the community in the future, then where is it?**

Consultation Approach

The Council’s approach to consultation is of real concern and as a lay person I think it makes it difficult for this panel to recommend the approval of these amendments.

Common Sense Provision

- In the growth plan the future direction of Toolamba is a growing town offering a relaxed rural lifestyle in a quiet and spacious setting, supporting its community to be healthy, connected, and active.
- How this ends up in the same document as a predominantly high-density township with future mixed use such as multi-story apartments with commercial ground floors is politely put, difficult to correlate.
- Whilst the Council points to safeguards in the form of the Design and Development Overlay – ultimately when you triple a population, that DDO is not going to do anything

but provide limited aesthetic value – essentially this is analogous to dressing up a pig – you can make it look prettier but its still a pig.

Lack of Transparency

- An example is the large extent of information that has been distributed within 1-3 business days of this hearing being started including key issues such as sewerage.
 - To be honest this is unacceptable and make it difficult for people that have day jobs and family's to meaningful engage
 - This information also would have been valuable for community consideration months ago and has devalued the approach
- Another example is the large amount of information required to be digested to get an understanding of what is being proposed. There have not been clear and concise summaries articulating the plans. This makes it difficult for the average community member with limited time to make sense of the amendments. **For example I found it even challenging to determine the number of blocks and size of the blocks of the proposed development without a ruler....**
- Community consultation feedback has not been replayed and articulated either through submission disclosures by Council or disclosure of the feedback received at consultations such as the ones carried out by Ethos Urban. It is understating to say that the disclosure and consideration of the feedback has been opaque.
- Major shifts in position such as between the draft Toolamba Growth Plan and the final which resulted in further increases to the extent of high-density land were not adequately explained and flew in the face of feedback from community consultation.
- This has been a long and arduous process and notwithstanding consultation fatigue the community has remained steadfast in its opposition to the nature of the proposed growth of the town.

Genuine Community Consultation

- My view as a lay person is ultimately the purpose of consultation is to navigate the reasonable needs and wants of communities, both current and future, the needs and wants of developers with sound planning principles to arrive at appropriate land development.
- I do not consider that genuine consultation has been undertaken. The overwhelming and consistent community feedback has been ignored in the consultation process. **At what point do the desires of a community in the town whose members have invested in the town from social, community and financial perspective have a meaningful say in the future development of the town?**
- In fact, it is impossible to reconcile the amendments with the community feedback (from submissions available not to mention they could not be accessed online but hardcopies that could only be read whilst standing up in council offices) but also from the photos and notes of Ethos Urban community consultation feedback regarding community desires for the future direction of Toolamba.
- You could perhaps argue that good planning principles outweigh the community interest but as I have discussed there is not a clear strategy for land development in Toolamba nor a strategy that will generate a scale of dwellings required for infrastructure investment, nor a genuine plan for infrastructure investment

Consultation to generate Innovation

- There is much common ground between the parties. A desire for continued growth of the town, retention of the characteristics of the town, improvements in liveability and improved social and community infrastructure.
- However, at no time during this consultation process has there been an effort to find “AND” outcomes – the focus has been an “OR” outcome.
- What are the innovative ways to find common ground and win-win outcomes – for example I envisage the obligation to provide sewerage and the cost of sewerage is one of the drivers for the large number of high-density blocks. This appears likely to drive other developments which are more in line with community expectations in the same way.
- Technology has moved on significantly since the 10-15 years since much of the work was done and sewerage investigations took place. **I see no evidence that in the intervening periods advancements in septic system technology have been considered that would allow for environmental outcomes but also allow economic developments with a mix of density sizes that retains Toolamba current profile.**

In closing the lack of strategy and planning underpinning the changes proposed in these amendments will dramatically and negatively alter the scale, character and liveability of Toolamba and are being proposed without sufficient safeguards.

Most importantly the proposed changes are in direct contradiction to the overwhelming desires of those who live in the community. I repeat at what point do the desires of a community in the town whose members have invested in the town from social, community and financial perspective have a meaningful say in the future development of the town? Hopefully it is through this Panel.

Thank you again for the opportunity to present today.