

# The Mercury

## Talking Point: Mayors unite - push development debate beyond red tape talk

Speeding up approvals is not a silver bullet, but there are ways to accelerate economic recovery, say ANNA REYNOLDS, KRISTIE JOHNSTON, DEAN WINTER and DOUG CHIPMAN

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IN its interim report, the Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Council has questioned the ability of local government to meet growing demand for planning approvals, as the city recovers from the economic impacts of COVID-19.

Tasmanian councils are leading the way in planning approval efficiency at a time when the state has been under unprecedented demand for housing.

Across greater Hobart, 3081 planning applications were lodged during the past financial year, an increase of 11.7 per cent on the previous 12 months.

Investor confidence remains high in Tasmania — even in the shadow of COVID-19 — with new planning applications continuing to find their way to council planning departments.

This is reflected in building approvals data, which demonstrates a modest increase in building activity during the past 12 months in the face of a nationwide decline in the order of 15 per cent.

As the leaders of the four greater Hobart councils (Hobart, Glenorchy, Clarence and Kingborough), we wholeheartedly agree that planning matters should be — and indeed are — a priority for local government.

But when talking about “cutting red tape”, the complex nature of assessing planning applications needs to be considered.

To maintain an efficient and effective planning approval process that best serves the community, simply speeding up assessments is not the silver bullet to take Tasmania through recovery.

Our planning departments comprise outstanding professionals who are passionate about achieving good outcomes for our city and its residents.

They work incredibly hard to meet the statutory processes and time frames imposed by the state and are diligent in their assessment.

Even with the increase in planning applications in all four Hobart councils, our planning departments continue to meet — and often beat — the statutory time frames.

The median number of statutory days taken to assess and determine a Discretionary Use Application is 35.6 days, well below the maximum 42 days.

A recent comparison presented at a national planning forum has shown Tasmania to be among the best performing states in meeting statutory time frames.

That being said, the capacity of the planning teams should not be measured solely by the ability to meet statutory time frames. Delivering quality services at all steps in the development process is important to ensure decisions are fair and in the community’s best interest.

This includes working through issues that arise during assessment and providing effective pre-lodgement advice for which there is also presently a high level of demand.

In fact, this is where developments can often be held up, in the preparation of architectural plans with the right amount of detail, and seeking the necessary approvals through water and electricity providers.

Local government is a key contributor in Tasmania's recovery and has a range of community support initiatives in place to improve the economy and the lives of residents within our own municipalities, and Tasmanians more broadly.

It may be time to open the discussion with the community, industry and all levels of government about broader planning reforms that don't compromise the integrity of the assessment process, but do support long-term economic and social outcomes.

Reforms might include electronic lodgement of title documentation with the Land Titles Office and incentives for early lodgement of those titles (such as delayed land tax payments).

If reform is mandated without input and consultation from all involved in the process, we will end up with a system that is neither more efficient nor beneficial to the community.

For example, recent changes to the Land Use Planning and Approvals Act 1993, which were intended to ensure quicker decisions, will in practice place additional demands on staff resources by adding new steps in the assessment process.

To further speed up this process would mean to cut corners, offering little gain and significant risk of loss.

There are safety considerations, the need to maximise amenity and the protection of heritage values.

There is the right to appeal, with all residents allowed to have their say on matters important to their lives. Compromising this right is certainly not worth the trade-off.

The Premier's Economic and Social Recovery Council (PESRAC) report identifies many initiatives we welcome. For example, the commitment to local procurement and prioritisation of local suppliers, aspects that we, as local government, have always placed great importance on.

Local government wants to contribute to the discussion and we want to be a part of the solution.

We would welcome a conversation with the state to move beyond the "red tape" rhetoric and to include the community in a discussion about the pros

and cons of potentially reducing the various requirements and time frames that apply to the planning process in Tasmania.

The greater Hobart councils have a particularly strong working relationship and are keen to bring this to the table.

By pooling our resources and working with state government and the community, we can meet changing demands as they arise across the whole of greater Hobart and help our city return to the prosperous and vibrant place we know and love in the shortest time possible.

**Councillor Anna Reynolds is Hobart Lord Mayor, Alderman Kristie Johnston is Glenorchy Mayor, Councillor Dean Winter is Kingborough Mayor and Alderman Doug Chipman is Clarence Mayor.**