

The 'People's Panel'

In April of 2015, Fleur Rubens, long time member of CRA, was one of a random selection of people, who received a letter from the Melbourne City Council, inviting participation in a 'People's Panel' to develop recommendations for the council's 10 year financial plan.

She writes:

Having lived in the City of Melbourne for 41 years, the prospect of having such a direct input into the Council and my neighbourhood excited me. I felt privileged to be one of the 43 members of The Panel. We were to meet for 6 whole Saturdays.

I was surprised when I met the other panellists - here I was amongst many students and business people, but I was one of only 2 or 3 Carlton residents. We were randomly selected, but our demographic reflected the population of the City of Melbourne (CoM). Students, business people, apartment dwellers, few people from my preconceived notion of my demographic.

Where were our common interests? How could such a diverse group of people find any agreement on our task: to find an answer to 'How can we remain of the world's most liveable cities while addressing our future financial challenges?'

I was to be pleasantly surprised. After years of experiencing the conflict ridden politics of State and Federal Government, I didn't expect that a diverse group of people could find common values and ideals so readily. It became apparent that as a group, our overriding goals were to work towards a fair, equal and sustainable society that gives a hand to those down on their luck, creates opportunities for enterprise, values cultural activities, and is pro-active on issues of sustainability and addressing the problem of climate change.

After introductions, we were given an outline of council responsibilities, information and projections on the challenges of population growth with the associated pressure on services and infrastructure and the task of dealing with sustainability, traffic congestion, and even the congestion on our footpaths.

Various council officers provided us with information and addressed us on their concerns. I was particularly impressed by Rob Adams' presentation. His slide show graphically illustrated how much the city had been 'greened' over the last 20 years. I would never have believed it. Despite the massive increase in population over that time CoM had increased its green space. He outlined how the Melbourne CBD had been transformed from a dying barren place to a vibrant metropolis by encouraging people back to live in its centre. I now understood how you could work at transformation as long as you had the right goals and policies in place. Currently the council is redeveloping an area near my place, right next to the public high rise. It was once street, but it will soon have facilities for the community to congregate, with basketball courts, play equipment, barbeques and seating. Hopefully the facilities will contribute to the integration of the community.

It all makes me very hopeful for the possibilities of improvement.

My other surprise was the openness of the Council. If you look at the Council website there is great transparency. The community is invited to provide input to many projects and proposals. Currently the redevelopment of the Victoria Market is open for comment. The proposals can be accessed on Councils website under 'Participate Melbourne' Participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/newDemocracy.com.au

After hearing from a range of councillors and heads of different council departments, we were encouraged to ask for any additional information we needed to fulfil our task of creating a 10 year financial plan. We were invited to ask whoever we thought could help, to attend the next all day session..

The whole process of this 'deliberative democracy' was developed by the non-profit organisation New Democracy. They believe that there is a better outcome if diverse and representative groups of citizens deliberate together. I agree and think that most Australians have had enough of divisive, adversarial politics.

We were encouraged to be mindful of everyone's chance to contribute, and to not dominate discussions. This was aided by the moderators and the changing structures of our deliberating groups. There was lots of butchers' paper, and difficult choices of priorities to be made but the processes aided us coming to a consensus.

However the hardest task however, was to work towards a balanced budget for the wish list – the recommendations had to be funded.

The final recommendations can be found on the Council's website under People's Panel.

<http://participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/projects/10yearplan>

From my personal perspective, I found that the biggest problem is that the powers of the Council are limited. Many of the issues to be addressed were in the domain of, or shared with, the State and Federal governments. Problems with overdevelopment and poorly designed development, public transport, the consequences of the East-West link, the need for more schools, childcare, care of the homeless, the cost of housing, mitigating climate change and its effects etc., are either shared responsibilities or beyond the domain of local government.

Similarly, the areas where extra money could be raised equitably were also mostly under State government control. Instead of the option of rates increases on homes, I was keen to see the commercial parts of our universities and churches contributing to the council budget.

There was general consensus that development levies should be imposed on high rise developments in order to fund, maintain and upgrade the necessary infrastructure for our rapidly increasing population.

One of my disappointment's was that the Council was not prepared to accept the proposal that they more actively lobby for issues important to our constituents. Yarra and Moreland Councils strongly opposed the East-West link. CoM was noticeably quiet on this issue. In my opinion the Council should set aside a budget to lobby and consult with the State government for facilities and infrastructure affecting our neighbourhood eg. childcare, schools, transport and welfare.

Regulations regarding donations to political parties also need greater transparency. CoM is the only council where a business get two votes compared to one for residential properties - an issue again outside the domain of our remit, but one that surely influences council policy.

Our recommendations are available on the Council's website. The Council committed to our recommendations at the beginning of the process, and will analyse and model our suggestions and explain the extent to which each will be acted upon.

The whole process left me with an enhanced opinion of the policies and practises of the CoM, as well as the value of 'deliberative democracy'.

Website links:

[Participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/newDemocracy.com.au](http://participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/newDemocracy.com.au)

<http://participate.melbourne.vic.gov.au/projects/10yearplan>

<http://www.theage.com.au/comment/experiment-pays-off-melbourne-peoples-panel-produces-robust-policy-20150628-ghzoz4.html>