

Talking Point: We need a healthier perspective on urban planning schemes

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Generic photo of a woman having a heart attack - chest pains. Picture: iStock

IN Tasmania, our most common chronic diseases account for about 90 per cent of all deaths and an overwhelming majority of the burden of disease endured by Tasmanians.

Heart disease is the single leading cause of death in Tasmania, and much of the burden of heart disease is exacerbated by common modifiable risk factors. These are preventable.

Lack of physical activity is one of the major preventable risk factors, as is poor nutrition. In Australia, physical inactivity is estimated to cause 14,000 deaths annually and cost the health budget \$1.5 billion a year.

In fact, there is an overwhelming global consensus around the importance of physical activity and eating healthy food in the prevention of heart disease and other chronic diseases.

The importance of increasing levels of physical activity and improving nutrition in populations is echoed by the World Health Organisation, the World Medical Association, the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners and the health department in every state and territory in the country.

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As a research and advocacy leader on the health benefits of good nutrition and physical activity, the Heart Foundation points to the urban environment as a major determinant in encouraging and enabling physical activity and access to healthy food.

In 2016, the State Government consulted on the implementation of a statewide planning scheme. However, even before the Tasmanian Planning Commission had reported on the draft state planning provisions for a Tasmanian Planning Scheme, local communities voiced apprehension about what the state planning provisions would mean for them. On the policy front, health and wellbeing issues continued to be aired.

The Tasmanian Parliament's Joint Select Committee Inquiry into Preventative Health 2016 was released in March.

The select committee made some key points in its findings and recommendations:

LIVEABILITY principles must be embedded in all government policy decisions relating to the built environment, including but not limited to transport, infrastructure and land use planning.

THE Government's health and wellbeing policies should be reflected in the Tasmanian planning system and transport infrastructure policy.

GOVERNMENT should adopt a statewide planning policy that ensures livability principles are embodied in all planning decisions.

GOVERNMENT should ensure transport infrastructure planning and policy decisions embody livability principles.

PROVISIONS in the new statewide planning scheme must give consideration to active transport links (such as walking and cycling), especially within and between urban communities.

GOVERNMENT should investigate options to support and improve access to healthy affordable food and healthy lifestyles for all Tasmanians.

Those recommendations helped to inform the Heart Foundation's representation lodged with the Tasmanian Planning Commission on the draft State Planning Provisions.

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While progressing the provisions for a Tasmanian Planning Scheme, the absence of a comprehensive urban policy allowed the distraction of traffic jams in Hobart to dominate the public debate and for short-term solutions to dominate the agenda.

Inevitably, any disquiet about urban issues turns to traffic. Our cities are expanding and traffic is compounding, so solutions to the traffic dominate.

Unfortunately, solutions that involve public transport raised the ire of those who reduce the argument to “cars versus public transport” dichotomy. This type of binary policy debate is not helpful. What would be helpful is to recognise that equitable access is required for all to participate fully in urban life.

At a time when many cities are investing heavily in urban transit, the best on offer for metropolitan Hobart is the Northern Suburbs Railway. Infrastructure Tasmania’s report in January 2016 recommended the rail corridor for light rail be retained. If other cities are any indication, some form of mass transit for Hobart, whether rail or ferry, in addition to buses is essential for improving equitable access and advancing health and wellbeing.

Land use planning should now focus on protecting corridors or waterfront locations for such services.

On the positive side of improving travel are the street-based improvements that encourage walking and cycling through the provision of safer and more stimulating environments.

Disappointingly, there is still a focus on supporting high-speed, private vehicle use, rather than embracing concepts such as “complete streets” that take a more holistic view of the need to accommodate diverse users — kids, bikes, people walking as well as motorised vehicles.

When it comes to planning and the built environment, the recognition of the health benefits of integrating physical activity into daily routines and using modes of travel that involve walking, cycling or multi-modal transport is paramount to reducing premature death and suffering from heart disease.

We look forward to the planning regime for government and councils having health and wellbeing as its core focus, and for health and wellbeing to be the yardstick from which public policy on planning is promulgated.

The Heart Foundation encourages all Tasmanians to walk, cycle or use public transport for more of our local trips and supports the State Government and councils in the development of safe and attractive streets, mixed density housing, compatible mixed-use, public open space provision and better access to healthy food.

The Heart Foundation will continue advocating for public policies that help increase physical activity in our daily lives and that provide better access to healthy food. If these changes come to pass, we can ensure that a key objective of the Land Use Planning and Approvals Act 1993 — to promote the health and wellbeing of Tasmanians — can be realised.

Graeme Lynch is chief executive of Heart Foundation Tasmania