

Land Use Planning

A brief introduction to the planning role

Council planning decisions shape communities and influence the physical environment and quality of life. The consequences of planning decisions are around for a long time.

Planning is essentially about the use, development and protection of land in the present and long-term interests of all Victorians.

The planning system in Victoria is a critical part of many council activities and presents both opportunities and challenges for elected representatives. The planning system contributes towards sustainability objectives, economic development, heritage and environmental conservation, as well as guiding development for long-term community benefit.

The planning system is increasingly complex with high levels of public involvement and scrutiny. Often it is only through planning matters that communities engage with their local government and too often, this experience is not positive.

To be effective in this area:

- councillors must understand and be able to explain their decisions locally;
- build and maintain constructive working relationships;
- actively contribute to local, regional and state policy development and reform; and
- maintain an oversight of planning assessment and policy framework.

For land use planning issues, local governments have two important mechanisms:

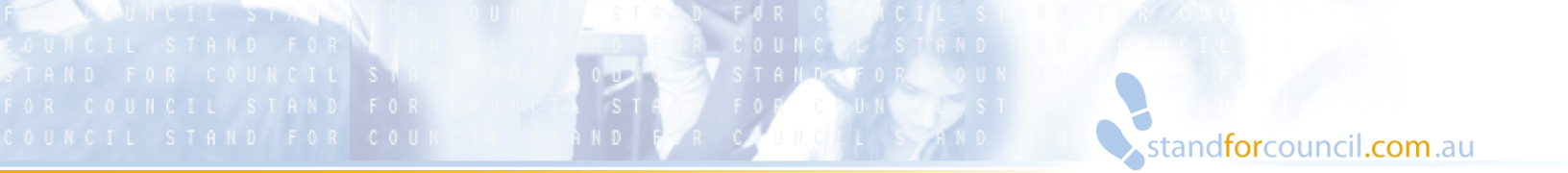
The Council Plan and the Municipal Strategic Statement which are important tools that provide direction about council's objectives for land use planning.

In carrying out its functions under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*, a council has two key roles.

- As *the planning authority*, a council sets the strategic policy framework for the municipality and initiates changes to the planning scheme.
- As *the responsible authority*, a council administers the planning scheme for its municipality and makes decisions on individual applications for a planning permit.

In most cases, local governments have the ultimate responsibility for the strategic direction of the municipality and planning decisions. A council administration must give effect to the strategic direction and priorities developed by council and it is accountable for the decisions made under delegation on behalf of council. Furthermore, individual councillors have no decision making power. This lies with the council – the collective group of councillors.

A councillor does not have to be a professional planner to respond to these challenges and community concerns. Often the best approach is to refer technical questions to the council planner, but a basic understanding of the planning system is essential for a councillor to represent the local



community effectively and to know where to find more information about planning processes or issues.

These are challenging issues because community members have different and sometimes opposing views on development and protection. Councillors are sometimes urged by community members to vote in a certain way on a development application which may be inconsistent with local policy and the MSS. These decisions can be appealed to Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal or VCAT.

