URBAN & BUILT ENVIRONMENT NEWS

The Victorian Premier's Sustainability Awards recognise and celebrate positive actions taken by communities in urban areas to protect and enhance their local environments. They encompass initiatives as diverse as litter prevention, recycling, protection of the environment, preserving heritage, community action and leadership and environmental sustainability programs. In this issue we celebrate the works of local governments in Victoria, and delve into the future of sustainability for Australian cities.
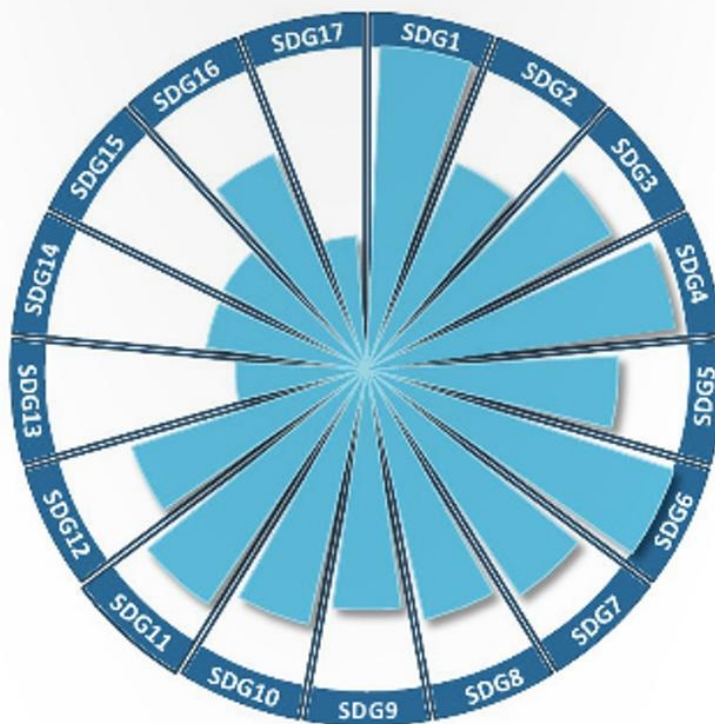

CELEBRATING VICTORIA

The massive urbanisation we face today presents many challenges in terms of our citizen's general health and wellbeing, safety, and overall quality of life as we are exposed to higher levels of pollution, climate change, and human migration, and waste management.

The problems created by rampant urbanization are among the most important challenges of our time. They also represent one of the greatest opportunities, and responsibilities. Sustainable cities are among the UN Sustainable Development Goals. Currently Australia ranks in at 20 on progress toward these goals. So how important is the built environment to Australia's ability to achieve these goals?

Australia, with some of the world's highest carbon emissions per person, rates poorly on the clean energy and climate change goals. It also is detriment on the environmental goals, with high levels of solid waste and land clearing as well as loss of biodiversity (Thwaites, 2016).

As shown in the performance chart below, Australia rates relatively highly on lack of poverty, education and water quality. Inequality, while increasing, is not as bad as it is in the United States or the United Kingdom (Thwaites, 2016).

AVERAGE PERFORMANCE BY SDG

SDG DASHBOARD

Figure 1 Source:https://issuu.com/unsdsn/docs/sdg_index_and_dashboards_country_pr

However, Victorian local governments have stepped up their sustainable neighbourhood initiatives, with councils like Moreland and the City of Philip working actively towards a more green future for their council wards.

The Andrews Labour Government announced the finalists in this year's Victorian Premier's Sustainability Awards. Underpinned by a belief in the power of coming together, the Melbourne Renewable Energy Project (MREP) marks the first time in Australia that a group of local governments, cultural institutions, universities and corporations have collectively purchased renewable energy from a newly-built facility.

Members from City of Melbourne, City of Moreland, City of Port Phillip, City of Yarra have committed to purchase 88GWh of electricity per year from the yet-to-be-built Crowlands Wind Farm near Ararat under a long-term power purchase agreement. The agreement will enable owner/operator Pacific Hydro to progress financing and construction arrangements for the project.

Because the wind farm will generate more than the purchasing group's needs, it will bring additional renewable energy into the market. The Crowlands Wind Farm will create more than 140 jobs during construction and eight ongoing maintenance jobs.

The MREP approach enables cities, corporations and institutions to take an active role in securing renewable electricity supply and to take action on climate change. It provides long-term price certainty and will be critical to partner organisations achieving their ambitious CO_2 reduction targets. Significantly, it also represents a replicable model for other projects around the world to follow.

Many corporations and investors assume that fixing cities is the purview of government, and that government will act. But most governments around the world are stuck. Financially, politically, and often both. They cannot be relied on to single-handedly address the problems of urbanization or to conceive solutions, such as efficient electrification and reliable public transit that will drive economic growth. Implementing those solutions requires large amounts of capital, exceptional managerial skill, and significant alignment of interests—all of which are often in short supply in city governments but abound in the private sector (Macomber, 2013).

Often sustainability solutions center on expanding supply—providing more water, more electricity, more roads, more vehicles. But increasingly local governments and businesses are discovering how to create and claim value by improving resource efficiency.

You can read about the other winners here: http://www.sustainabilityawards.vic.gov.au/2018-winners

SUSTAINABILITY DREAMING

In a recent report funded by the Australian Communities Foundation through the Green Cities Innovation Fund undertaken by a team of researchers from RMIT University presents the outcomes of a pilot study exploring how the building and planning system is delivering a sustainable built environment in Australia.

The built environment accounts for around 40% of worldwide energy use and one-third of greenhouse gas emissions. In Australia, the residential sector is responsible for 12% of final energy use and 13% of emissions (Doyon, Hurley, Moloney, & Moore, 2017).

In Victoria, there has been debate about the need for better building design and performance over the past few years. (Doyon, Hurley, Moloney, & Moore, 2017) However, in their article they argue that the "analysis of appeal cases before the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) reveals significant inconsistencies in decision-making." Moreover, they found tensions between the state planning framework and local government efforts to achieve environmental sustainability design through planning.

They also found that where state governments fail to deliver frameworks to improve outcomes, there are other avenues to change and improve the system. Coalitions and networks, including committed local governments and non-state actors, can organise and act to innovate, build capacities and bring about regulatory change.

We must transform our built environments to reduce the impacts of environmental and climate change. This requires a building and planning system that delivers consistently higher standards of decision-making. In order for that to happen, all levels of government must be committed.

The work of improving the sustainability of our cities is too important to be left to the local groups now working tirelessly to overcome current systemic shortcomings. It is time to recognise the efforts of the few, and join in where possible. Recently the Victorian government has shown some initiative to make energy more accessible and affordable:

1. Premier Daniel Andrews has followed up his billion dollar commitment to rooftop solar panels by announcing discounted solar hot water systems for 60,000 households

2. Under the plan 60,000 households would be able to access a $1,000 rebate to install solar hot water. The scheme would be open for a decade.

Read more about this at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-08-20/as-battle-for-power-heats-up-labor-pledges-more-for-solar/10139032

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