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Tackle 'nimbyism' to boost productivity: Harper

Michael Bleby, Senior Reporter - Sep 15, 2019

Reserve Bank board member Ian Harper threw his lot in with the Grattan Institute think tank and urban planners the country over, saying that tackling "nimbyism" was a key ingredient of making Australia's fast-growing cities work more productively.

In a speech to the Property Council of Australia's annual Property Congress last week, Professor Harper, dean of Melbourne Business School and former [chairman of the federal government's 2015 Competition Policy Review](#), said cities were environments that could make people work together more or less productively and that reducing hurdles to that productivity was crucial.



Tackling "nimbyism" is crucial to help make cities productive, says veteran economist Ian Harper. **Wayne Taylor**

Residents with a not-in-my-backyard mentality in suburbs with good transport and other crucial facilities are not the only impediment to allowing a growing population to live affordably within practical distance of work.

Efficient transport networks were also crucial, he said. However, in a country where the Grattan Institute says housing affordability is fast creating a divide between haves and have-nots, overcoming barriers to denser, well-located housing was crucial, Professor Harper said.

"If you make our places better places to live and work and grow, by tackling congestion, by tackling nimbyism and all the other things that get in the way of making our cities grow and become productive, indirectly what you're doing is boosting our social capital by building community," he said.

While the latest Economist Intelligence Unit ranking this month put Vienna ahead of Melbourne for liveability for the second year in a row – and Sydney jumped to third place from fifth – the much-reported global ranking that focuses on conditions for well-heeled global travellers makes little scrutiny of conditions on the ground for less globe-trotting types on lower incomes.

Alternative research has already pointed out these shortcomings, with [RMIT University's Centre for Urban Research showing in 2017](#) that Australia's large cities were far less liveable when rated on other measures, such as easy, car-free access to services and facilities, open spaces, housing affordability and employment.

But Professor Harper's comments take the argument further, saying cities that function more efficiently would also make for more prosperous cities. While the [Grattan Institute argued last year](#) that policy makers had to overcome the political opposition of well-educated and well-resourced residents to reduce housing inequality, the veteran economist said this was also important economically.

"We're social creatures. We live together. We work together. We spur one another on to greater heights," he said.

"And that happens when we gather together, provided we gather together in places that don't set our teeth on edge and set us against one another, but set us together, in community. I don't need to tell you that place matters for our prosperity."



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