

## A Liveable, Compact Toowoomba: Assessing the Liveable Compact Cities Project

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In 2011, the Southeast Queensland Council of Mayors commissioned the Liveable Compact Cities Project, a research initiative that explores how medium density development may create greater housing choice in SEQ, promote housing affordability in the region and contribute towards the more compact and sustainable urban living being promoted through the SEQ Regional Plan.

Under the South East Queensland (SEQ) Regional Plan, Local Governments have been given a target to meet approximately 50% of housing demand over the next 20 years through infill development within their existing urban areas.

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*Fig 1. Indooroopilly, a suburb of Brisbane was used as a case study.*

One case study focused on Indooroopilly, a suburb located 7 km west of Brisbane CBD with a population of approximately 11,000 people and an area of 7.5km<sup>2</sup>. Indooroopilly has a strong commercial, office and retail presence, including the largest shopping centre in the western suburbs, and home to a large number of students as the main University of Queensland campus is situated in nearby St Lucia. The objective of the study was to plan and manage the growth of the Indooroopilly Centre through sustainable and responsible development. The project required to draft a Neighbourhood Plan for Indooroopilly Centre that will guide the significant growth and change expected over the next decade.

The Indooroopilly Centre Draft neighbourhood Plan Strategy was well received by the community as a result of a thorough and structured community engagement process. As a result, Brisbane City Council is currently waiting for approval from the Queensland Government to formally adopt the Indooroopilly Centre Neighbourhood Plan for its inclusion in Brisbane City Plan 2000.

The Liveable Compact Cities Project was done from 1,900 phone and online surveys across 11 government areas in SEQ, with respondents from various industries and sectoral groups in the Darling Downs were included. Among the findings were:

- Respondents are happy to compromise to various medium density housing options to remain in the local neighbourhood;
- Respondents agree that diversity of housing options is key;
- Respondents agree that proximity to public transport and community facilities is important;
- Respondents said that there needs to be a change in both built form and community mindset;
- Respondents are aware that significant obstacles still exist (Being too close to neighbours and body corporate costs, etc.);
- Respondents agree that sustainability adds to affordability.

One theme that was distinct to the Toowoomba forum was the view that new housing needed to fit with existing heritage housing in the local area. Medium-density housing needs to use building products like timber and Colorbond, etc. A reoccurring comment was that density housing needs to look like traditional housing from the street perspective.

### 5. Attitudes towards Medium Density Housing

Residents were shown five examples of medium density housing and asked how appealing they found each one, both personally and for their local area. *Note: The property types were not named in the survey e.g. 'small lot housing', this is for analysis and identification purposes only.*

Small lot housing appeals to the majority of residents and is the preferred option of the five medium density choices shown. Almost six out of ten residents find this housing style appealing, both for themselves and their local area (Table 16). This property type is similar in form to conventional free-standing houses so it is not surprising that it appeals to so many residents.



Base: Metro/online sample (n=1726)	TOTAL %	Brisbane %	Gold Coast %	Sunshine Coast %	Logan %	Moreton Bay %	Redland %	Ipswich %	Toowoomba %
Appeals personally – very or quite appealing	58	58	62	52	60	63	55	58	57
Appeals for the local area – very or quite appealing	60	59	64	56	59	68	62	60	58

Fig 2. Majority of Toowoomba respondents prefer “small lot” housing, at most two storeys.

However, with low-density housing, large tracts of land are required to build them which further pushes residents further and further away from workplaces and communal facilities. This distance in turn discourages walking for transport, using vehicles instead.

In a paper presented by Paula Grant, Senior Lecturer for Urban and Regional Planning department from the University of Southern Queensland (USQ) during the International Society of City and Regional Planners (ISOCARP) 49th World Congress, compact land use patterns, as opposed to urban sprawl, can improve public health by providing the environment to make walking a feasible mode of transport.

The paper states that Toowoomba’s traditional inner-city suburbs have the built form characteristics of compactness, connectivity, density, lot layout and mix of uses to be walkable. Using existing literature, geographic information systems, data, survey results and a walkability scoring tool, the paper revealed that although being walkable and exhibiting New Urbanism characteristics very few people walk to work in

Toowoomba's urban centre for a variety of reasons. This paper argued that personal value propositions and attitudes are as influential for walking for transport as physical urban environments.

The paper has identified that despite displaying new urbanism characteristics and being walkable fewer people than expected living in these areas in Toowoomba's inner suburbs are walking for transport. This can be one of the signs of a land use and zoning policy that needs improvement.

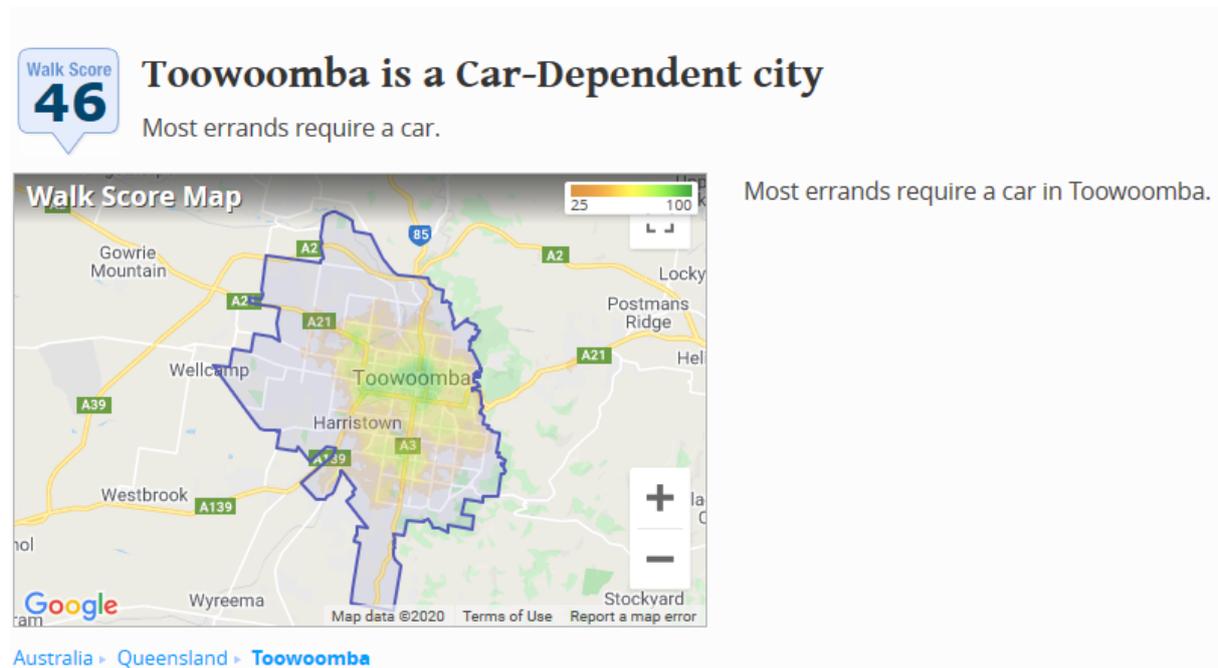


Fig 3. Despite Toowoomba being described as “compact,” its Walk Score is only 46 which tells that zoning and land use policies can still be improved.



Fig 4. With offices, shops and other services within walking distance, walking for transport is encouraged and car usage can be minimised.

Are there areas for improvement? Apparently, Toowoomba's planners need to revisit and smartly implement New Urbanism.

New Urbanism is a planning and development approach based on the principles of how cities and towns had been built for the last several centuries: walkable blocks and streets, housing and shopping in close proximity, and accessible public spaces. The principles were developed to offer alternatives to the sprawling, single-use, low-density patterns typical of post-WWII development, which have been shown to inflict negative economic, health, and environmental impacts on communities. These design and development principles can be applied to new development, urban infill and revitalization, and preservation. They can be applied to all scales of development in the full range of places including rural Main Streets, booming suburban areas, urban neighbourhoods, dense city centers, and even entire regions.



*Fig 5. A compact Toowoomba can be realised based on the principles of New Urbanism.*

Key characteristics that should be included in future housing, as identified by the Toowoomba participants in the Liveable Compact Cities Project included:

1. Housing needs to be within 3km (walking distance) of shops, transport etc.
2. Diversity of lot sizes within the community, without compromising character or heritage.
3. Mix of residential and retail (live and work in the same building/live and shop in the same destination).
4. Usable green communal space within each site.
5. Appropriate landscaping – avoiding too much concrete surfaces.
6. Housing options need to be affordable.
7. Disability/elderly friendly ('ageing in place').
8. Sense of place and local character (simple, timeless designs).
9. Design car parking and refuse onto rear laneways, rather than facing street (two per dwelling).
10. Building heights need to be relative to the surrounding neighbourhood (maximum of two-storeys).
11. Sustainable building materials/eco-friendly design.



*Fig 6. A compact city is where the workplace and communal facilities are within reasonable walking distance. Toowoomba has room for improvement.*

Housing types that best fit these characteristics:

1. Terrace-type housing suits this area best (two storeys maximum, rooftop open space, courtyard etc)
2. Small lots (300m<sup>2</sup> - 450m<sup>2</sup>) – catering for the ‘Australian’ psyche.
3. Duplexes (sizes able to provide a good-sized area of private open space).
4. Villas on smaller lots (300-350m<sup>2</sup>), two storeys max (three levels don’t work in Toowoomba unless it’s a garage on the ground floor).
5. One-two level semi-attached.

In the end, all stakeholders -- from the Regional Council to businesses and residents -- should work for the restoration of existing urban centers and towns within coherent metropolitan regions, the reconfiguration of sprawling suburbs into communities of real neighbourhoods and diverse districts, the conservation of natural environments, and the preservation of our built legacy. Toowoomba is at the forefront of this renewal.

Sources:

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