

Melbourne to build mini-CBDs to cope with the population boom

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PHOTO: Werribee's mini-CBD would become a research hub in Melbourne's west. (Supplied: Australian Education City)

When you drive or fly into Melbourne, catching sight of the city's skyline on the horizon is one of the first signs you're getting close.

Towering over the low-lying suburbs, it sticks out like a beacon, calling people towards the economic heart of the city.

But in 30 years, there could be other CBDs poking up from the sprawl.

"We'll have a Werribee skyline," says Kate Roffey from Wyndham City Council.

"It's obviously not going to be your New York or Sydney style skyline, but we will have some height and scale here. There'll be people coming here for work and jobs."



PHOTO: Ms Roffey is optimistic about the prospect of a CBD in Werribee. (ABC News: Danielle Bonica)

Looking around at the paddocks — where sheep are grazing — it's hard to fathom the transformation.

We're standing by the side of the road just south of Werribee, 30 kilometres west of Melbourne's CBD.

This is where both the Coalition and Labor plan to have an alternative CBD, or as they call it, a "National Employment and Innovation Cluster".



PHOTO: Werribee's main drag, Wotton Street, would be dwarfed by the proposed mini-CBD nearby. (ABC News: Danielle Bonica)

The Victorian Planning Authority wants 50,000 people to work here in what will be dubbed Australian Education City — a place where university campuses will converge with research and technology companies.

Multi-billion-dollar companies IBM and Cisco are two businesses reportedly interested in moving to the precinct.

A private consortium is championing the project, and is now waiting on final approval.

A wide overview of university campus buildings with grass on the rooves, and glass towers dominating the Werribee skyline.



PHOTO: High-rise towers would overlook university campuses at the Werribee mini-CBD. (Supplied: Australian Education City)

Melbourne's eight cities

It certainly appears to make sense on paper — Melbourne's west is booming.

Wyndham City Council is adding more people than any area in Melbourne and governments all over the world are championing the idea of "20-minute cities" — where you can get to work and vital amenities from your home in less than 20 minutes.

The bulk of Melbourne's new homes are likely to be built here, where the urban spread hasn't yet matched the sprawl to the east.

But can you create a thriving economic hub out of nothing, and expect businesses and jobs to follow?

"We tend to think it's probably more risky than it is because it's new, and people say, 'How can you develop all of this land into something substantive like an education city?'" says Ms Roffey.

"But Cisco and IBM want big footprints and that's something you can't get in a lot of places anymore. So you just need one [company], the others will come."

The Victorian Planning Authority is working towards having seven of these mini-CBDs across Melbourne, around Monash University, Parkville, Fishermans Bend, Dandenong, La Trobe University in Bundoora, Sunshine and Werribee.

The idea is to make jobs more accessible to people, as Melbourne sprawls further and further away from the traditional CBD.



INFOGRAPHIC: Melbourne would have seven new mini-CBDs in 30 years under a plan backed by the Victorian Planning Authority. (ABC News)

Taking inspiration from Texas

Demographer Bernard Salt says the "fried-egg" city model — where the best jobs are in the "rich, creamy yolk" of the city centre — works well for a city of up to 5 million people.

But when the city surpasses 5 million — as Melbourne did a couple of months ago — multiple CBDs are the way to go, Mr Salt says.

He points to examples in the USA, like Dallas-Fort Worth in Texas, which has a similar population to Melbourne and is growing at a similar pace.



PHOTO: The Fort Worth CBD is home to nearly one million people. (Supplied: Downtown Fort Worth, Inc.)

"Dallas and Fort Worth are two CBDs separated by about 30 kilometres. In each one of those CBDs, there are Fortune 500 company head offices," he says.

"It creates a figure-eight configuration for the metropolitan area, which opens up more frontage on the edge of the city for affordable housing.

"So you can live on the edge, and commute into your nearest CBD."

Multiple CBDs have been in Sydney's plan for years. The strategy has now been formalised by the Greater Sydney Commission, which has committed to a city of three CBDs: Central Sydney, Parramatta and the area around the planned Badgerys Creek airport in the city's west.

Parramatta has been developing as a CBD since the 70s — around the time the Australian Tax Office was relocated there.

But Marion Terrill, from the Grattan Institute, points to the harbour city as proof that planned alternative CBDs actually don't work.

"Parramatta only has 2.3 per cent of [Sydney's] jobs," Ms Terrill says.

"And that's exactly the same proportion that it had five years ago. So it's just keeping pace — it's not growing.

"And it's been decades that governments have been trying to promote the growth of Parramatta."

Ms Terrill says, despite what people may think, most of the jobs aren't in the traditional CBD either.

In Melbourne, just 15.5 per cent of jobs are in the CBD, Southbank and Docklands. And that percentage share hasn't changed much in five years, despite the skyrocketing population growth. It's a similar story in Sydney.



PHOTO: There are plans to add a high-rise tower to the Parramatta CBD in Sydney's west. (Supplied: Walker Corporation)

"Three quarters of jobs in Melbourne are highly dispersed — they're in shops, small offices, schools, construction sites and so on ... they're not in employment centres," she says.

"Governments don't have that much control over where the jobs are. Firms locate where they want to be for commercial reasons — governments can't choose."

Time for 'calculated risks'

Ms Terrill says the lack of multiple major job centres has, in some ways, kept Melbourne moving, even though the population has boomed.

"It's why commute times and distances haven't changed that much in five years because people aren't actually converging on these centres," she said.

"So it means people aren't using as much public transport, but it also means we're using the whole network."

The planned mini-CBD of Monash, in Clayton in Melbourne's south-east, would be home to Monash University and a medical precinct. But it's not growing either.

Over five years, the Monash region remained steady, having 5.1 per cent of Melbourne's jobs.

Back in the paddock near Werribee, Kate Roffey is optimistic.

"You need to create great cities. They don't happen by chance."

She gestures towards where the sheep are grazing.

"That's not what we want. We've got places for our sheep — but it's not half a kilometre from the [Werribee city centre].

"We have to be more creative.

"And that means you have to take some more well calculated risks."



PHOTO: Paddocks would give way to high-rise towers under plans for a Werribee CBD. (ABC News: Danielle Bonica)

<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-10-16/melbourne-population-growth-plans-for-mini-cbds/10373640?nw=0>