

Politics Victoria Second CBD

Northern lights: In John Brumby's field of dreams this is Melbourne's second CBD



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Melbourne's CBD is bursting at the seams. Here is where its next cities could be [See all 6 stories.](#)

Former Victorian premier and now La Trobe University chancellor John Brumby says the tertiary institution will continue with plans to create a second city within Melbourne, with or without a major transport infrastructure project.

As the northern councils that take in the university voice frustration at the lack of government support for developing their own economic centre, advocates for outer municipalities have criticised the focus on transforming middle suburbs into a second CBD as short-sighted given the population on Melbourne's fringe surges without supporting infrastructure and services.



La Trobe University's planned University City of the Future at Bundoora.

Some middle suburbs, including Dandenong and Bundoora, have been nominated by the state's 35-year planning blueprint Plan Melbourne as one of seven future economic powerhouses, but have missed out the scale of investment in centres such as Sunshine, with an airport rail link; and Box Hill and Clayton, with the Suburban Rail Loop.

Sunshine, Box Hill and Clayton have been identified as some of the metropolitan area's best options for Melbourne's secondary city, explored in *The Age's* Second CBD series.

The employment centre designated by Plan Melbourne for Melbourne's north – known as the La Trobe cluster – straddles Banyule and Darebin councils and includes La Trobe University, the Austin Hospital and Northland Shopping Centre, and represents 36,000 jobs across education, research, health and retail.

While the area could some day benefit from the Suburban Rail Loop, there is only funding for the eastern section, and it is unknown if the northern or western sections will ever be built.

A 2020 report found the La Trobe cluster suffered the poorest transport connections of the seven employment clusters nominated by Plan Melbourne.

“Building the Suburban Rail Loop in the south-east first, coupled with lack of action to significantly improve the circumferential connectivity of the La Trobe [cluster], will have a serious negative impact on the relative standing of the northern cluster ... with adverse flow-on consequences for Melbourne's north and its people,” the report found.



La Trobe University chancellor and former Victorian premier John Brumby.

Banyule Council Mayor Peter Castaldo said organisations in the cluster were working to co-ordinate up to \$9 billion in investment to cement its crucial role in Melbourne's north. But he called on the Victorian government to declare it a priority precinct.

“The precinct will grow and the jobs will come, but it needs co-ordinated attention and investment to reach its full potential,” Castaldo said.

“There has been limited work undertaken for the La Trobe cluster to reach its full potential. The VPA's [Victorian Planning Authority] framework plan for the cluster has remained in draft form since 2017 and is supported by very limited economic research.”

He said new transport options were the key to linking the cluster to the rest of Melbourne, and to use rapid bus links to improve mobility within.

“It is no use having all these jobs opportunities and the training facilities if we cannot connect the skilled staff with the jobs on offer,” Castaldo said.

A Darebin Council spokesman said better transport, including delivering the Suburban Rail Loop (SRL) northern section, was critical to the future success of the La Trobe cluster.

Brumby said La Trobe University was pushing ahead with a \$5 billion plan to build a “university city of the future” to create thousands of skilled jobs and homes in the next decade.

The former Labor leader said while transport was important, the university's plan was “not SRL dependent” because it would create a 20-minute city that didn't rely on commuting workers.

“People will live and work and research and get educated on the campus,” he said. “[This city] is not dependent on those improved transport links.”

Brumby said while private and government investment was still needed, a developer partner was appointed last year and the La Trobe Sports Park – to be home to the Australian women's soccer team – was almost complete.



National Growth Areas Alliance chief executive Bronwen Clark in Werribee. JOE ARMAO

Brumby, who was in government when Labor planned to turn Dandenong into a second city and was on the advisory team for a since-canceled Werribee super city, said creating employment precincts that spared people travelling two hours to work was the trick to accommodate Melbourne's extraordinary population growth. The city is set to hit 9 million residents by 2056.

"There is no doubt that is the right model for Melbourne, making sure that these precincts become attractive magnets in their own right," he said.

Fringe suburbs also want a piece of the pie. Bronwen Clark, chief executive of the National Growth Areas Alliance, which advocates for outer metropolitan councils, condemned the focus on creating economic centres in middle suburbs using major projects like the Suburban Rail Loop.

"I think it's a little short-sighted to be looking 15 kilometres out of the current CBD to build a new one," Clark said.

She said areas like Box Hill and Clayton already functioned like mini CBDs and there was a need for the government to be more visionary and take opportunities presented by outer suburbs.

Roughly half a million people moved to seven of Melbourne's greenfield areas – the municipalities of Cardinia, Casey, Hume, Melton, Whittlesea, Wyndham and Mitchell – over the past 10 years, accounting for half of Victoria's total population growth. An extra half a million residents are expected in these areas in the next decade.

Infrastructure Victoria last week warned it was up to four times more expensive to provide infrastructure and essential services in greenfield areas than to existing suburbs, but Clark said

it was important to grow the outer suburbs like a city rather than solely allow rampant residential development.

“Highlighting middle suburbs as new centres is still creating an expectation that outer suburban residents must travel in whereas if we established cities in those rapidly growing areas, they become a resource for the middle ring as well as for outer ring,” she said.



Wyndham Mayor Susan McIntyre in front of a paddock once earmarked for East Werribee employment hub. JUSTIN MCMANUS

“Don’t just re-organise the existing suburbs. Build a new city. How exciting would that be?”

Clark pointed to areas she said were ripe for CBD-style investment, such as the Thompsons Road employment zone in the outer south-eastern Casey Council, or Beveridge to the north, where a major freight terminal was planned.

Werribee, already home to a hospital and university, was a “perfect location” to build a city-style development, she said.

East Werribee was once set to be the location of a “super-city” with 50-storey skyscrapers in a \$31 billion project dubbed the Australian Education City, until the Andrews government canned the tender in 2019. Today, 775 hectares of state-owned land still sits undeveloped.

Wyndham Council Mayor Susan McIntyre was still hopeful that the government would commit to creating an employment precinct, which would deliver 60,000 new jobs.

“We are continuing to meet with the state government to discuss this important project and ensure this site’s potential is realised as the jobs precinct promised many years ago,” McIntyre said.

“Right now, two in three working Wyndham residents leave the municipality every day to go to work.”

Mitchell Shire Mayor Fiona Stevens, who chairs a panel representing fringe municipalities, said increasing urban density in Melbourne’s middle ring was important, but it did not address the critical infrastructure gap outer suburbs faced.

Dandenong Council business, engineering and major projects director Paul Kearsley said Melbourne needed to be a “polycentric city”.

“We’ve got a lot more to do [in Dandenong] and we recognise that but without having Dandenong as a CBD, and having other centres as CBDs, we won’t deliver the best for Melbourne,” he said.

Dandenong’s employment cluster is Melbourne’s third largest, with 66,300 jobs, largely in manufacturing. While past second city plans for Dandenong have fallen away, Kearsley hoped a \$600 million revitalisation of its central area and a pitch to build a new \$230 million sports stadium would set the suburb for a strong future.

“We have the skeleton, we have the assets and infrastructure, it would be a shame to have to see those replicated for the sake of replication in other centres when we’ve got them already and are just waiting on things to happen,” he said.

Premier Daniel Andrews said he wanted to grow every suburb in Melbourne, starting with improved transport.

“The Suburban Rail Loop is such an exciting project, and one that will deliver its core mission which is a system that gets people where they need to go. But it’ll do so much more than that – whether that’s a second city or a series of second cities, I don’t know.”

Victorian Greens leader Samantha Ratnam said a review of the planning system and parliamentary inquiry should be the first steps in decentralising Melbourne and reducing congestion.

“Successive state governments have been short-sighted when it comes to our planning system,” Ratnam said.

“Many of the issues we are facing are because of the lack of vision and commitment to plan our cities better.”

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