

Appeal rights will stay

Mathew Duncley

Objectors will still be able to appeal against decisions made under the Victorian government's new development approval system which aims to cut out local political objections.

Long-awaited detail on the establishment of development assessment committees, or DACs, came to light yesterday in proposed government legislation tabled in state Parliament.

Under the proposed law, the committees would be made up of three ministerial appointees — one being the chairman appointed in consultation with local government — and two council appointees and will rule on all permits within designated areas.

Initially, committees will take over decision-making at five major development centres at Camberwell, Coburg, Doncaster Hill, central Geelong and Preston.

But the government intends eventually to spread the use of DACs across 26 so-called Principal Activity Centres.

A spokeswoman for Planning Minister Justin Madden confirmed the bill would not spell the end of third party appeal rights.

"DACs will not remove any rights under the Planning and Environment Act, such as the right to appeal a decision, or for the minister to call in an application," she said.

We need planning decisions to be made in a more timely manner.

Jennifer Cunich, of PCA

"We want to provide certainty to the community, councils and developers and to ensure developments are located appropriately within municipalities."

To head off the prospect of council boycotts, the legislation spells out that a committee needs only a quorum of three members present to make a decision.

Committee members would also have to submit annual returns of their interests which

would be publicly available to manage conflicts of interest.

The government would pay the fees for the committee chairman while councils would pick up the tab for administration of the DACs.

Mr Madden's spokeswoman said councils would still "retain control of the planning permit application".

"This legislation will ensure effective and balanced decisions, in conjunction with local government to make planning permit decisions," she said.

Opposition planning spokesman Matthew Guy said it was outrageous the government had shifted the cost for running a state initiative onto local councils.

Property Council of Australia Victorian executive director Jennifer Cunich said the legislation had been eagerly awaited.

"With Victoria's population growing at a rapid pace, we desperately need planning decisions to be made in a more timely manner and DACs should facilitate this," said Ms Cunich.

Madden to decide on tower

PLANNING Minister Justin Madden must decide on the height of a proposed landmark tower in South Yarra being resisted by many of Melbourne's elite.

Stonnington Council has imposed new height and development limits on three planned developments around Melbourne High School — more severe than those previously recommended by a special minister's panel.

Now Mr Madden must decide which limits to set, with a powerful troupe of Melbourne High old boys — including trucking tycoon Lindsay Fox — among those lobbying for the lower limits.

The debate comes down to two key points — a tussle between the Government's 2030 planning strategy, which encourages such big development in inner-city locations, and the fact the developments are deeply unpopular with residents and the powerful Melbourne

ELLEN WHINNETT
Chief reporter

High old boys network.

The council ruled prominent Toorak family the Kennedys could build a 50m (15-storey) tower on its block, but refused to allow any retail space to be developed there.

A 35m height limit was placed on a second block housing, the Ojays warehouse, with retail also banned there.

And it voted on a 25m (seven storeys) limit on the most controversial development, a block on the corner of Chapel St and Alexandra Ave, owned by developer Jerry Pilarinos.

The limit is well below the 50m recommended by Mr Madden's planning panel and is about a quarter of the height of the original \$200 million proposal.

Mr Pilarinos accused the council of moving the goalposts to pander to powerful lobbyists.

Fear for 26,000 jobs

CAROLINE JAMES
Urban affairs reporter

UP to 26,000 construction workers face losing their jobs within six months, according to a peak industry body.

A survey shows 53.6 per cent of Victoria's commercial construction companies have less than 26 weeks' work on their books.

Based on Master Builders Association figures, more than 49,000 of Victoria's 194,000 building jobs are commercial.

Urban Taskforce, a national body representing developers, blamed banks and ill-equipped councils.

Chief executive Aaron Gadiel said: "Several of the major residential developers I have spoken to tell me within six months they won't have any active construction work on their books."

"The single biggest reason is lending. Most developers are unable to secure debt finance for new residen-

Banks in firing line

tial development. Even if a site is fully leased by a secure long-term tenant, banks are still saying that is not good enough and demand up to 90 per cent pre-sales before lending money. It is virtually impossible."

MBA executive director Brian Welsh said many developments were also being delayed, possibly formally by council red tape.

He said the industry body had "long been critics of the planning system" because it took too long to navigate.

"Under-resourced councils must call for assistance from State Government... not to do so would be negligent. They are jeopardising people's jobs," Mr Welsh said.

One Brunswick project has been

seeking a planning permit for five years.

A developer of the \$800 million Pentridge Village project in Coburg is close to "pulling the pin" on 350 townhouses worth \$150 million because of planning delays of almost six months.

Project director Leigh Chiavaroli said all homes had been sold off-the-plan, but contracts were at risk if delays continued.

Mr Chiavaroli's firm laid off "less than 10" of its 300-plus employees last week.

"We need an answer or will be pulling the pin, parking this project until things turn around," he said.

Urban Pacific Ltd needed a planning permit to move forward with its \$100 million Horizons@Leopold site in Geelong that would employ 2000 people, Victorian general manager Nicholas Stabb said.

Planning Minister Justin Madden had no comment when asked if he was satisfied with current planning permit turn around times.



Waiting game: Abraham Staikouras, 24, has bought a three-bedroom unit in a block of apartments in the Pentridge Village estate in Coburg. The moving in date has been delayed by 12 months because of council red tape. Picture: CHRIS SCOTT