

# Population boom 'to choke city'

## Melbourne at risk of catching 'Sydney disease', experts warn

By **JOSH GORDON**  
STATE ECONOMICS REPORTER

MELBOURNE is in danger of contracting what has been dubbed "Sydney disease" — an exodus of residents who are tired of choked roads, overburdened public transport and unaffordable houses, a study has warned.

A day after Premier John Brumby unveiled his plans for a massive population expansion beyond the city fringes, a report by a prominent demographer suggests Melbourne is not even coping with its existing numbers, and that further growth will increase the problems.

The report, from Monash University's Centre for Population and Urban Research, concludes the city's much-vaunted "liveability" is fast evaporating, and that the State Government's *Melbourne 2030* planning vision is failing spectacularly.

The study, by the centre's director Bob Birrell and senior research fellow Ernest Healy, says that over the next three decades, Melbourne's already-congested roads will need to carry at least an extra 1.1 million cars.

This would mean that by 2036, there could be well over 3 million cars vying for space on

Melbourne's roads, compared to 1.97 million currently. Truck numbers are also expected to increase dramatically.

At the same time, space for an extra 782,000 dwellings will need to be made, with 2.15 million houses expected to be enclosed in Melbourne's boundaries by 2038, compared to about 1.37 million today.

"Victorian political leaders seem to assume that Melbourne is immune to the Sydney disease, which is that when housing prices, congestion and other irritations flowing from the population bite, people leave," the report said. "Melbourne, too, is likely to be hit by this disease, given the scale of the city's projected population growth."

The report comes after a poll published this week that found one in five Sydney residents were so sick of traffic and high living costs they were considering moving to another city.

It also comes after Mr Brumby said he would fast-track the release of tens of thousands of new home sites in a bid to tackle housing shortages and affordability.

Melbourne's population has been swelling by an average of 54,550 a year over the five years

to 2006 — far faster than in *Melbourne 2030* projections. Recent figures suggest it is now growing at about 60,000 a year.

The report challenged Mr Brumby's claim that the population of Melbourne would overtake Sydney's by 2028. "Perhaps his intention was to distract from the seriousness of the population challenge by turning it into a competition between the two cities," the authors said.

The report found that 59% of Melbourne's growth between 2001 and 2006 had occurred in outer suburbs — well in excess of the *Melbourne 2030* goal of limiting this share to 31%.

University of Melbourne transport expert Bill Russell warned that the objective of *Melbourne 2030*, urban consolidation, had been undermined by lack of investment in public transport and the construction of freeways, encouraging a reliance on cars. "The Government can't delay much longer some serious investment in public transport," he said.

Meanwhile, a prominent public health expert has warned that in the rush to put up new houses, Victoria risks creating

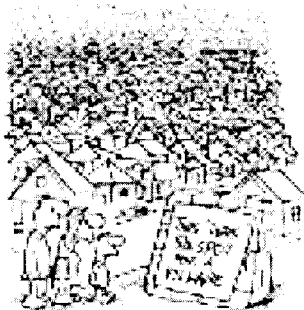
▶ Continued **PAGE 10**

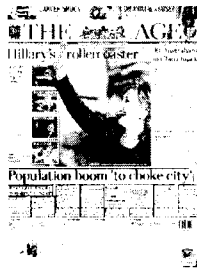
### INSIDE

- ▶ "Culpable cycling" laws loom **PAGE 3**
- ▶ U-turn on tunnel passing ban **PAGE 10**

### OPINION

- ▶ Paul Austin **PAGE 17**
- theage.com.au**
- ▶ Would you leave Melbourne if it outgrew Sydney? Vote at **theage.com.au**





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◀ From PAGE 1

miserable suburbs that promote obesity and depression.

Rob Moodie, former chief of VicHealth, chaired an audit of *Melbourne 2030* that has been submitted to the Government.

A suburb's design can affect the health of its residents, Professor Moodie said, and it was not just a matter of ensuring that infrastructure such as medical centres were in place.

"If you have people in areas that have no footpaths, poor public transport, no community services, then they're more likely to be less active, more overweight and more depressed because they have no one to connect to," Professor Moodie said.

"We don't want huge tracts of state housing with giant shopping malls that you can only get to by car."

Research has connected good mental and physical health with communities whose streets are less busy with traffic and encourage local interaction.

He said Melbourne's growth could be a chance to create a better living environment.

"The services must go in, there must be open spaces, bicycle paths, footpaths, public transport, shopping strips that encourage people to walk along them. And then there must be the cultural and social support to make sure people can get to know each other and use their neighbourhood." With **NICK MILLER**