

# Create a buzz: radical plan to bring Melbourne back to life

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By **ERIC JOHNSTON**, ASSOCIATE EDITOR

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An Apple, Amazon or Tesla; greater input from business; and active marketing of why Melbourne should be the recipient of corporate investment.

These are some of the big ideas Victoria's opposition planning spokesman Ryan Smith has been working on with business leaders to revive the city and its often-maligned [Docklands precinct](#).

Smith, who was finance and trading specialist with National Australia Bank and Commonwealth Bank before entering parliament as a Liberal MP, thinks Victoria and particularly the empty city today is at the same economic low point with the same "rust belt" thinking as the time prior to Jeff Kennett being swept to power in 1992.

This attitude was turned on its head when Kennett unashamedly pushed Melbourne as a destination for corporations while opening up planning to unleash a wave of growth.

The current malaise follows two years of the city being ravaged by the Covid pandemic and put on edge by extended lockdowns.

Business confidence has been sapped, investment has stalled and retailers closed as workers still keep away from the CBD.

Smith is calling for a greater partnership between big business and government, particularly when it comes to long-term vision for Melbourne.

“There’s a lot you can do, particularly post-pandemic, or during what we hope is the tail of the pandemic, and it is going to be this planning portfolio that really sets the framework for where Victoria is going to be over the next five to 25 years.

“And there’s got to be good ideas presented about how to stimulate investment and jobs, which I think our opponents feel are something that can be led by the government only, but I passionately believe this can be led by the corporate and the commercial sector.”

One area to get things moving is the stalled E-Gate site, some 20 hectares of state-owned land just north of Docklands on the fringe of Melbourne’s CBD, where urban renewal remains on hold for at least another three years while Transurban builds the troubled \$10bn West Gate Tunnel Project.

If executed right, there is “the potential to create a buzz” in an underused side of Melbourne’s CBD.

With pedestrian footbridges, it can form the missing link between Docklands and the CBD “that would really bring them closer and bring that vibrancy back to Melbourne”, Smith says.

He stresses that his comments are not a formal policy position of the state Liberal Party – they are ideas the opposition is talking through with business about how to sustainably revitalise Melbourne and the state economy. This would then shape policy going into the state’s November election.

The E-Gate site needs to be anchored by a major tech-focused tenant such as a “Tesla, Apple or Amazon”, which Smith says has the potential to change the area. He notes the likes of Atlassian, SafetyCulture, Google and Canva, which each employ thousands and have put down their corporate or regional headquarters in Sydney in recent years. This momentum is now seeing Melbourne miss the job opportunities and the investment infrastructure that comes with major tech players.

“I would love to see that area (of Docklands) dominated by five very well-designed corporate headquarters ... and build the development around that with all the sort of services and amenities that workers would want to have, with some areas for residential as well. The residential sites have been part of part of a plan for that area for some time,” he says.

This sends a signal to the rest of the country and offshore that “there was something happening there (in Melbourne) again ... and just getting that excitement happening. By extension,

hopefully that would lead to some pride in the CBD as well.

“The message needs to be Melbourne is the place to put your headquarters and the place to put investment and jobs into.”

Despite his banking and finance background, Smith says he requested the planning portfolio in the recent shake-up of the shadow cabinet when Matthew Guy retook the opposition leader’s office last September, given the importance it has for longer term growth.

Smith is firmly of the belief that CBDs and the city office have a future despite the Covid pandemic and lockdowns leaving cities deserted.

“The last two years have shown us there is some flexibility.

“The world’s changing and eight hours a day, five days a week in the office is probably a thing of the past. And many employers will be more flexible.

“However, what’s coming through from business is the people staying at home and coming through the ranks are feeling that there’s a lack of opportunities for mentorship, or lack of opportunities to see how things are done.

“They are feeling that promotion opportunities are just not there, because their work is not being seen by their superiors.”

Younger professionals also love the after-work social lifestyle of the city which can help develop lifelong friendships, he added.

“And if we continue in the way that we have been going forward, that will be detrimental,” he warns.

Smith’s comments come as CEOs over the past week have pushed for a return to the office to help revitalise the empty CBDs of both Melbourne and Sydney.

NAB chief executive Ross McEwan says “getting our two big cities going again” is important for putting Australia back on a path of sustainable growth.

“They are the powerhouses of growth and we need to encourage people to come back to offices, safely, to support CBD businesses,” McEwan says.

Westpac chief Peter King is targeting March 1 for more people to come back into his bank's city offices, where it is safe.

Susan Lloyd-Hurwitz, the head of property development major Mirvac, says she remains a big - believer in people returning to the CBD.

“I think that with the lockdowns there that have gone on, whether they're voluntary or imposed, people are really missing what comes with human connection. I've said for a long time that the office is not dead.

“We're certainly seeing in our negotiations with tenants, we are seeing very little contraction of space, customers are looking for a big footprint, recognising that they need to be together for culture for training, for bringing new people into the business,” Lloyd-Hurwitz says.

As a near-term fix, Smith called on the Andrews government to outline a time frame for the return of the state's thousands of public servants to their Melbourne CBD offices. This would send a strong signal to businesses about reopening the city.

“Government should lead by example, and not giving clarity around this is letting down the retail and hospitality sector and the CBD. We need to start to filter people back into the area.”

**ERIC JOHNSTON, ASSOCIATE EDITOR**

Eric Johnston is an associate editor of The Australian. He joined the masthead in 2014 as business editor, overseeing award-winning business news coverage and investigations. Previously he was the bu... [Read more](#)



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