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# Motorway madness' named main threat to residents

**Kate Burke**

Sydney is in the grip of “motorway madness” and needs a planning overhaul if the city is to become healthier, experts say.

The government’s “incomprehensible” spending on improving and building roads came under fire at FitNSW this week, a forum for planning and health experts on designing healthy cities.

“We’re actually seeing a return to 1960s motorways, which is absolutely crazy. No other city globally is [being so foolish] ... it’s incomprehensible,” City of Sydney councillor Philip Thalys said in a panel discussion about the effect of the built environment in Sydney.

“We need to really re-orientate the entire framework on post-war planning [towards the public interest]. We’ve been incredibly biased towards the car.

“This motorway madness, this mania ... is the biggest threat the city has had.”

Instead of spending big on roads – which encourage urban sprawl – Mr Thalys said the government should be increasing investment in public transport and infrastructure that improves cycling and the city’s walkability – and consequently the health of Sydney-siders.

Part and parcel of this is boosting density around railway stations, said Peter Newman, a professor of Sustainability at Curtin University.

“Urban sprawl is the basic problem,” Dr Newman said. “We need to bring our cities back in and to build around quality transport, with walkability in those areas the highest agenda.”

Dr Newman, who delivered a keynote address at the conference, said projects like WestConnex were “a big step backwards”.

“More walking is what we desperately need to maintain our health,” he said. “The big threat to

life expectancy in the developed world is a lack of walking and the obesity issues.”

A Transport for NSW spokesperson defended the state government’s spending on infrastructure, stating that more than \$40 billion allocated towards transport “was almost evenly split between roads and public transport”.

He also said that WestConnex was “more than just a motorway”.

“[It] will also deliver more than 18 hectares of open space for local communities in the inner west and around 23 kilometres of new and improved cycleways and walkways.”

As Sydney increasingly moves to higher-density living to house its surging population, the expert panel said it was crucial to increase community spaces and greenery in the public realm.

Just over half of the NSW population meets the recommended level of at least 30 minutes of physical activity on most days of the week.

“As you knock down houses and put up townhouses and apartments, you have fewer backyards and people are more reliant on public spaces, parks and walkways,” Mr Thalys said.

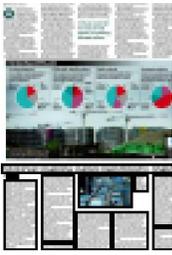
Well-planned environments where people can walk, cycle or enjoy green space can make a big difference to the rates of chronic diseases, and also mental health, said Julie Anne Mitchell, cardiovascular health director at Heart Foundation NSW.

“People who live within 400 metres of public open space are more likely to engage in moderate to vigorous physical activity than those who don’t,” she said.

NSW government architect Peter Poulet said that while Sydney was at a “tipping point”, policies such as Better Placed and Greener Places would encourage

better design outcomes and an increase in the community and green spaces needed for healthier communities.

“Sydney is growing. Let’s make sure it grows well, not just big. To do that we need to offset some of the negative impacts of development with good development.”



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**Crawling in traffic is a common problem for Sydneysiders.**  
Photo: Peter Rae