City overhaul loses fizz, says Carr's planner

By Darren Goodsir, Urban Affairs Editor March 14, 2005

The renowned planning expert hand-picked to reverse decades of inaction and design a blueprint for Sydney is considering his future in the job, fearing the State Government lacks the commitment to push through with urgent changes.

Only hours after the Premier, Bob Carr, tried to reassert his urban planning credentials with a $30 billion capital works announcement yesterday, the chairman of the Metropolitan Strategy's reference panel, Ed Blakely, spoke out.

He said while he remained committed to helping overhaul the city, he was concerned with the Government's timidity.

He questioned delays in releasing crucial sections of the strategy, sold as a master plan to cater for pressing population demands over the next 30 years.

Professor Blakely, who was appointed to the panel in 2003 after he helped rebuild New York in the wake of the September 11 attacks, said long-promised strategies to revive under-performing road and rail corridors and suburban centers were urgently needed.

There was no commitment as yet to establish an independent body to supervise the city's future growth patterns, nor its spending and housing priorities.

It was also vital to devise internationally relevant benchmarks so the Government's progress could be authentically reviewed, but this, too, had not been approved.

"Other cities in the world call on me all the time, and up until now, I have told them that I am working with Sydney, but I don't know how much longer that can last," Professor Blakely said.

"So we've got to the point where you have to wonder, is there a reference panel, and am I on it?"

"I want to keep going, and have a commitment to the task and to the people of Sydney. But I am also concerned about our progress so far - and so are other people in this city."

Professor Blakely aired his concerns after Mr. Carr tried to cast last year's capital works budget announcement as a new $30 billion infrastructure program, using the entrance to the Cross City Tunnel as his backdrop.

Mr. Carr shrugged off claims by the Opposition Leader, John Brogden, that he was "the king of re-announcements". He insisted that the projects, almost all of which had previously been released, were "new money", much of which had not yet been spent.
"This is a strong and detailed plan of the state's capital works - and we have never been in a position to release such planning in detail before," the Premier said.

Professor Blakely told the Herald he was reviewing his involvement with the reference panel and thinking about offers from other cities.

The panel, comprising transport, urban affairs, planning, infrastructure and academic leaders, was formed last March as the Government restarted its attempts to plan for the estimated 1000 new residents arriving each week. But it has met only once this year, Professor Blakely said, and he was not certain if more meetings would be held.

He allowed that important decisions had been made, such as the $8 billion land release program for Sydney's north-west and south-west fringes, where the number of homes built will be limited to 30 per cent of the citywide total.