

Media Release

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“Absurd” planning decision fails retirees

[VMCH](#) has labelled a VCAT decision to reject an Ivanhoe East retirement development in the midst of a national housing crisis as “short-sighted” and “nonsensical”.

On 18 May 2023 the Victorian Administrative Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) refused an application by the non-profit organisation for a five-storey, 56-apartment retirement development. It followed a planning permit refusal from Banyule City Council in September last year.

With the design falling within all relevant bylaws and planning requirements, and meeting a huge demand for retirement accommodation across Victoria, VMCH took the case to VCAT.

CEO Sonya Smart says she is “extremely disappointed” by VCAT’s decision, based on height and streetscape concerns.

“We don’t believe there are strong grounds for refusal,” Ms Smart says. “It seems we are victim to interpretations and greyness that surrounds planning merits. Some of VCAT’s findings are frankly absurd and appear to be based on personal perception rather than substantiated by planning controls.

“To be given a blatant ‘no’ from the tribunal with no right to appeal is also ridiculous. We were willing to work with the Tribunal and council and local residents to achieve a result that would have benefited the entire community.”

The population of residents aged 65+ living in Ivanhoe and surrounds is expected to grow from 29,000 to 34,035 by 2032. The State Government’s own [Ageing Well in Victoria Action Plan 2022-2026](#) notes older people want to age in place within their local neighbourhood and community.

“To meet this demand, we need to work collaboratively to plan for the future and deliver age-appropriate housing. Instead, we are dealing with constant roadblocks,” Sonya says.

VMCH uses capital from its retirement living developments to fund its Mission-based projects for some of Victoria’s most vulnerable people. Just last month, it launched [Trinity Lane](#) in nearby Ivanhoe, home to 39 older people on low incomes and people with disabilities. VMCH offers affordable homes to 436 financially disadvantaged people in 21 communities across Victoria. Ninety per cent of its residents are females over 55, the fastest growing cohort of people experiencing homelessness.

“Along with the nearly \$2 million wasted on this process, the cost to those we could have provided with desperately needed affordable housing is immeasurable. Retirement developments also help free up stock for young families struggling to enter the housing market.”

Ms Smart says frustratingly, Banyule City Council had initially been complimentary of the development’s design, as evidenced by its own favorable urban design report, adding its refusal spoke to a wider issue facing retirement developers.

“The State Government is asking independent providers to find solutions to this housing problem, on which we are spending our own funds. But the government itself is not working collaboratively with councils to help make this happen – it doesn’t make sense.

“Responsible building that could change people’s lives is not occurring in some cases due to the objections of a few local neighbours. Yes, everybody must have a voice, but let’s be reasonable and sensible.”

Ms Smart was quick not to tar all councils with the same brush, praising neighbouring Boorondara Council for its collaborative and contemporary approach in the approval of VMCH’s new retirement living precinct, St. Clare, in nearby Kew.

“Boroondara Council understands how important this retirement living precinct is to its community, bringing sustainability and vibrancy to the area, including local businesses.”

The Property Council’s national advocacy group, the [Retirement Living Council \(RLC\)](#), has thrown its support behind VMCH, noting age-friendly retirement communities deliver “significant and increasing benefits to residents and all Australian taxpayers”.

“Research undertaken for the RLC reveals that retirement communities save governments more than \$3.3 billion annually through reduced interaction with state health systems and delayed entry to aged care,” says RLC Executive Director Daniel Gannon.

“We know retirement village occupancy rates increased from 87 per cent in 2019-20 to 90 per cent in 2020-21 (Retirement Living Census), and in many communities there are wait-lists.”

VMCH’s own retirement living occupancy rate sits at 99%, with enquiries exploding for its planned retirement development St. Clare, prior to any formal marketing even taking place.

“Councils should be doing whatever they can to support appropriate development before we get hit with a tidal wave of older people without a home,” says Mr Gannon, adding a recent move by Queensland’s Ipswich City Council to waive development application fees for medium and high-density communities – including retirement villages – presented a new “gold standard”.

“This is what council leadership looks like amidst a national housing crisis, where supply and affordability are under threat and building costs are escalating, and provides an important and stark contrast.”

Ms Smart says VMCH has chosen to share its experience to help educate local and state governments around the greater issue of housing supply and homelessness.

“We will continue to invest in retirement living projects and affordable housing developments to do our bit to ensure our older generation, and off the back of that young families, have access to the housing they want and deserve.”

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About VMCH

Here at VMCH, our services are as diverse as the people we support.

Our values underpin the work we do. As a Catholic, for-purpose organisation, compassion, respect and inclusion aren’t just words to us, they guide us in everything we do.

While we’ve been around for over a century, we’re always moving forward. Always staying true to who we are by supporting people and families to live their best lives; providing a place to call home and spaces to learn and grow.

Our professional and passionate teams are with you on your life journey; helping you with a wide range of support from early learning and therapy, specialist education, disability services, affordable homes, residential aged care, retirement living and at-home aged care.

