

Federal cities unit welcomed

Sophie Morris

Property industry groups yesterday welcomed the return of the federal government to setting urban development and infrastructure policy, an area that has been left to the states for the past decade.

Federal Infrastructure and Transport Minister Anthony Albanese yesterday said a high-level taskforce, the Major Cities Unit, based in his department, would cover not just capital cities but also growing regional centres like Townsville, Newcastle, the Gold Coast and Geelong.

"It is unfortunate that for more than a decade the commonwealth has been absent from our cities, a situation that cannot continue if we are serious about securing our national prosperity," he told a conference in Sydney yesterday.

He said the Major Cities Unit would liaise with the federal government's new advisory council, Infrastructure Australia, about priorities for extra investment in urban transport networks and other development projects.

It would also be a centralised contact point for local governments that currently deal with multiple federal departments on economic, social and environmental issues.

The move resurrects a role for the commonwealth in urban development that was introduced under the previous Labor government in 1991 through the Better Cities program but abandoned by the Howard government.

In recent years, federal programs such as the Auslink roads funding have practically stopped on the outskirts of cities, though the



Anthony Albanese says there has been a 10-year hiatus.

Photo: JACKY GHOSSEIN

Howard government presided over community grants schemes for ad-hoc local projects.

Property Council chief executive Peter Verwer welcomed the government's engagement with urban affairs and said he hoped there would be funding for the unit in the federal budget in May.

"Finally we can leave behind the days of federal government policy apathy that resulted in accidental cities," Mr Verwer said.

Mr Albanese said the unit would be properly resourced, though no funding has been announced.

Property developers represented by the Urban Taskforce backed the move, saying it provided hope of real federal-state co-operation on transport and other infrastructure programs.

"Industry and the community have been crying out for a more co-ordinated policy approach to the metropolitan areas," said taskforce chief executive Aaron Gadiel.

"We also welcome the recog-

nition of Newcastle and the Gold Coast as major cities."

Master Builders Australia chief executive Wilhelm Harnisch said the move was "long overdue".

"Australia's major cities are all struggling to cope with their growing populations. Four out of five Australians live in urban areas. Our cities are all being challenged by growing pains. This challenge needs to be met with a nationally co-ordinated approach to our future urban development needs.

"Our major capital cities are crying out for efficient transport systems, water security, and the efficient provision and location of community services like schools, hospitals and child care facilities."

Mr Harnisch said the Major Cities Unit should play "a central leadership role in addressing these significant urban infrastructure challenges, which must also include a major overhaul of development and planning approval processes".