

Frank and open plan

EXCLUSIVE

By CLARE MASTERS

MASSIVE developments once given the green light by the State Government will now be assessed by an independent umpire in a planning law overhaul.

The brainchild of Planning Minister Frank Sartor, the formation of a Planning Assessment Commission will be one of the key recommendations outlined in the upcoming planning reform discussion paper.

Currently the government takes control of projects deemed of state significance — large or complex schemes such as shopping centres, land releases or buildings on sensitive sites.

But under Mr Sartor's proposal such developments will instead go to the Planning Assessment Commission.

Sartor's independent developments review

The commission will be headed by a chairperson and consist of nine experts divided into three panels of three — allowing multiple projects to be evaluated simultaneously.

"We've been using the [current] system for 2½ years and I'm satisfied I can delegate that to another body and it is not something I have to do myself," Mr Sartor said yesterday.

While the minister will deal with key state infrastructure projects, the commission will take on more than 300 development proposals that the planning office evaluates each year.

Mr Sartor said the commission will

have, along with a full-time chairperson, a number of part-time members with a mix of skills.

The expert panels will be appointed to different projects depending on their background.

"It means you can appoint a commission with a variety of skills. If you have a sensitive coastal site then at least one of those people will have environment skills," he said.

"It would create another independent body that stands in the shoes of the minister.

"[Large developments] are weighty and complex issues and it puts more

administrative burden on the minister. There is some sense in having an independent body with three commissions deal with that."

The commission will take about 80 per cent of projects of state significance from the Government, and is likely to deal with outstanding Local Environmental Plans as well as providing advice to the planning minister.

Meanwhile, industry stakeholders yesterday welcomed the change of federal government in the hope of planning reform from a federal level.

NSW Urban Taskforce chief executive Aaron Gadiel said co-operative state and federal governments should pave the way for more affordable housing across the state and better planning decisions.

"They have been elected on a firm commitment to tackle housing affordability and get involved in our cities and urban areas," he said.