

Mumbai's Development Plan must aim to improve quality of life

While some salient features of the DP 2034 were released on Wednesday, the detailed plan is yet to be made public. Until that happens, it would be unfair to be alarmist

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Hindustan Times



The idea of making Mumbai a 'super city', flush with skyscrapers that play hide and seek with the clouds, by increasing the FSI may be a necessity. (Representational photo)

f The Development Plan (DP, 2034) for Mumbai released by the state government on Wednesday – after months of debate, discussion and dithering – has evoked mixed reactions from different quarters.

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Authorities involved in making the plan (finalized after many months of debate, discussion and revisions) believe they've hit a winning formula. Skeptics, however, argue that while the DP aims for the sky, it ignores ground realities.

This argument may seem caustic, but is also cogent and arises from past experience. Such has been the neglect and apathy in attending to the basics while aiming for the seemingly magnificent that any new proposal justifiably invites disbelief.

Mind you, the idea of making Mumbai a 'super city', flush with skyscrapers that play hide and seek with the clouds, a la New York, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Shanghai, by increasing the FSI to 3 (residential) or 5 (commercial), may be a necessity given the shortage of space, particularly in the island city.

But how useful will these skyscrapers be if most things that hold these up are on shaky ground, as it were?

Population density in a particular area, the availability of everyday facilities, and the ease with which emergency services can function are important factors in determining how viable high-rise structures can be.

As yet, Mumbai's experience with these has been frankly uninspiring. The biggest apprehension most people will harbour of the DP is whether the government's biggest thrust is not to help realtors – under the guise of promoting affordable housing – at great cost to the environment.

This stems largely from the fact that apart from increasing FSI, the government has sought to release 2,100 hectares of hitherto No Development Zone (NDZ) land and approximately 330 hectares of saltpans.



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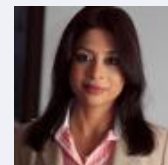
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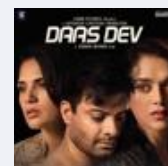


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Compunctions of how these large parcels of land will be used are not unfounded because politico-builder nexus has been the bane of the city. The paucity of land, in South Mumbai in early decades and everywhere now, led to indiscriminate utilisation, dereservation and even usurpation of land.

This saw decades of lopsided and unplanned development that not only defeated the purpose of making housing readily available at reasonable cost to buyers, but also played havoc with the aesthetics of the city.

That said, I won't stretch the misgivings any further. While some salient features of the DP 2034 were released on Wednesday, the detailed plan is yet to be made public. Until that happens, it would be unfair to be alarmist.

Nevertheless, I have my wish list and I hope that most, if not all, of these things have been addressed in the DP. Paramount in this is the need to have more green zones – and maintain them properly.

Globally, environment issues have become first priority. As French president Emmanuel Macron said recently, we have to save this planet, because this is the only one we have. And this must start with our cities.

There must also be emphasis on and improvement in water conservation methods. Most of Mumbai is surrounded by water. The city also has a very healthy monsoon season. Why should water scarcity ever be a worry unless we are foolish?

An increase in the number of playgrounds and parks is also mandatory. Too often in the past, open spaces have been seen as easy pickings by the politic-builder nexus.

Why, only recently, the Priyadarshini Park at Napean Sea Road was just about saved from hostile takeover.



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The DP will hopefully also look more favourably at slum rehabilitation within city limits as much as possible. This will not only be less disruptive, but also ensure readily available labour within the city and boost employment too.

I understand developing the sea fronts in various areas is part of the DP, but this should be in conjunction with increased use of water transport.

It is ridiculous that a city with such a long and beautiful waterfront has been ignored for so long.

Finally, more culture hubs need to be created and encouraged. Apart from natural beauty, the cultural ethos of a city enhances its character, gives it identity and soul.

All these issues – and my list is not exhaustive – are not so much to do with the nitty-gritty of development, rather improving the quality of life of Mumbai. Ultimately, that must be the aim any government.

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