




COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ADVOCACY
EMPOWERING COMMUNITY VOICES



A Strategic Guide to Community Advocacy in South Australian Planning Law

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1. Introduction: Why Community Advocacy Matters

Property development decisions are not merely technical exercises in land use, they are transformative choices that define the shape, character, and culture of our neighbourhoods.

When a high-rise towers over a schoolyard, or a heritage street is shadowed by commercial expansion, the impact goes beyond architecture. These choices affect our daily lives, our environment, and the legacy we leave for future generations.

Despite this, many communities feel sidelined in the development process. Decisions are too often made with minimal input from the people most affected.

“We’re going through decisions like, ‘Do we pull out? Do we stay? What do we do? We’ve already sold our house.”¹

This guide was created to change that.

It provides individuals and groups with the knowledge, tools, and confidence to become strong, informed advocates for their communities. Whether you’re trying to prevent an overdevelopment, advocate for heritage protection, or improve traffic and amenity outcomes, the strategies contained here will empower you to influence change through lawful, strategic, and effective community engagement.

2. The South Australian Planning System Explained

To engage effectively in community advocacy, it is crucial to understand the structural framework of South Australia’s planning system. At the centre of this framework is the Planning, Development and Infrastructure Act 2016, a piece of legislation that defines the rules, responsibilities, and procedures involved in planning and development across the state.

Under this legislation, planning responsibility is shared between the State Government, local councils, and independent assessment panels. The Minister for Planning sets broad strategic priorities through instruments such as the State Planning Policies and Regional Plans. The State Planning Commission oversees planning reforms and ensures alignment between local and state goals. Local councils and their Assessment Panels are typically responsible for day-to-day decisions on development applications within their area.

PlanSA functions as the public-facing digital interface of the planning system. It is where development applications are lodged, where community members can access plans, codes, and public notices, and where approved projects are registered and tracked.

Applications are assessed using the Planning and Design Code, a comprehensive set of planning rules that apply statewide. Different types of development are subject to different levels of scrutiny. For example, minor changes like fences or pergolas may be “deemed-to-satisfy” and receive near-automatic approval, whereas complex or controversial proposals are “performance-assessed” or “impact-assessed” and may require community input and expert evaluation.

¹ ‘Betrayed’: Developer duped us with 20-storey plan, say families in *The Advertiser* on February 18, 2025

Understanding which category an application falls into helps determine your rights to object or appeal. This knowledge forms the foundation of all effective advocacy.

3. Understanding Community Engagement: Our Goal

Community engagement is often misunderstood as a box-ticking exercise undertaken by government authorities to meet legal requirements. True engagement, however, is about building partnerships between decision-makers and the public to create shared solutions and foster trust.

To distinguish between superficial consultation and meaningful participation, our aim is to increase the importance of local community consultation both through advocacy to all levels of government and, ultimately, through legislation.

Following is our ideal proposal for community consultation for every major property development. We believe it must happen, and to ensure this it needs to be included in legislation.

Inform

The public's influence on the outcome must begin with being informed. Too often the local community is the last to know about a development proposal. Building contacts within government and planning bodies, CDA SA is educating government and organisations regarding the importance of early notification if they want their plans to proceed with minimum opposition.

Consult

This involves asking for feedback, such as through submissions or surveys. The feedback may or may not be incorporated into the final decision, however our position is that it must be included.

The "involve" stage denotes a deeper level of participation where community perspectives are actively integrated into the decision-making process.

Collaborate

At this stage the community works together with planners and authorities throughout the process to shape outcomes collectively. This currently does not occur, and it is our goal to ensure it is a key part of all significant developments.

Empower

At this stage the community is given authority over final decisions. While this is rare in statutory planning, it is an aspirational goal in community-led developments and grassroots planning initiatives.

These models are not just academic but serve as diagnostic tools. When a developer invites the public to a single session without opportunity for follow-up or influence, that just qualifies as consultation, at best. If your council conducts workshops where community proposals are incorporated into revised plans, that is collaboration.

By understanding where your situation sits on these scales, you can more clearly advocate for better engagement.

4. Strategic Advocacy for Local Groups

Effective community advocacy requires more than passion. It requires organisation, planning, and persistence.

Define Your Goal

A successful advocacy campaign begins with a clearly defined goal. It is not enough to say, "We don't want this development." A better goal would be: "We want building heights restricted to three storeys along our main street to preserve local heritage and minimise overshadowing."

Stakeholders

Once the goal is clear, the next step is to identify the key stakeholders. This includes allies within the community, such as neighbours, schools, business owners, and heritage groups, as well as decision-makers like councillors, state MPs, planning panel members, and departmental staff. Each group will respond to different messages, and understanding their interests is key to crafting an effective campaign.

Communication

Advocacy also requires communication. This means developing messaging that is both persuasive and grounded in evidence. For instance, an argument based solely on personal inconvenience may not be persuasive to a planning panel, whereas an argument based on traffic studies, heritage overlays, or overshadowing regulations will carry more weight.

Tactics

Once your messaging is established, choose appropriate tactics. These can range from writing formal submissions and speaking at council meetings to organising public rallies, distributing flyers, launching petitions, writing press releases or holding media events. The most successful campaigns use multiple channels, tailored to different audiences.

Digital tools have become central to grassroots advocacy. Creating a dedicated social media group (Facebook) can rapidly mobilise local residents and keep supporters informed. Email campaigns using platforms like Mailchimp allow you to target councillors, MPs, and stakeholders directly while building a subscriber base for ongoing engagement. Hashtag campaigns, livestreamed town halls, and online petitions (e.g., Change.org) can elevate visibility and build momentum.

Combining digital outreach with face-to-face action ensures your message reaches the broadest possible audience.

Unity & Consistency

Most importantly, community groups must maintain unity and professionalism. Internal disagreements, poorly handled media statements, or confrontational behaviour can undermine public support. Create a clear governance structure, assign roles, and keep internal records. This is particularly important if you are raising funds or making legal submissions.

5. Navigating the Law: Rights and Responsibilities

Under the *Planning, Development and Infrastructure Act 2016*, community consultation is legally required in some, but not all, development scenarios. For performance-assessed developments, the relevant authority may decide whether public notification is needed. Where

notification is required, it usually involves notifying adjacent property owners and placing a notice on the PlanSA portal.

Public Submissions

The legislation allows a standard public submission period of 15 business days. During this time, any interested person may submit written comments, outlining their support or opposition and explaining why the proposal does or does not comply with the Planning and Design Code.

It is critical to understand that general objections such as “we don’t like it” or “it will affect property values” carry little weight. The assessment must be based on the Code. Submissions that reference overshadowing, setbacks, site coverage, building envelope, and interface with existing character are more likely to be considered.

In some cases, representors (those who lodge formal submissions) may gain the right to appear at a hearing or even appeal the decision in the Environment, Resources and Development Court. However, this right depends on the type of development, the level of impact, and whether the representor was involved during the notification period.

The ERD Court provides guidance and self-representation kits, but many community groups also seek support from the Environmental Defenders Office (EDO), which offers factsheets and legal advice.

Knowing your rights - and the limits of your rights - is essential for effective advocacy. Equally important is fulfilling your responsibilities, such as submitting responses on time, using respectful language, and not spreading misinformation.

6. Case Studies: When the Community Changed the Outcome

Real-world examples of community advocacy success demonstrate the power of organised, informed, and persistent action. Two notable cases from South Australia illustrate how local groups can influence development decisions and challenge powerful interests.

The first case involves the Glenside Development Action Group (GDAG), a community-led response to a proposed high-rise residential development in a precinct known for its heritage and natural character. Residents discovered that the development was marketed as respectful of the surrounding environment and heritage values, yet included plans for four 20-storey towers that would radically transform the area. After extensive research, GDAG uncovered promotional materials that contradicted official planning approvals. The group compiled evidence and lodged a formal complaint with the Australian Competition and Consumer Commission (ACCC), alleging misleading and deceptive conduct.

Simultaneously, GDAG pursued a public awareness campaign involving newspaper articles, radio interviews, and meetings with local politicians. They organised forums, engaged legal experts, and leveraged social media to increase pressure. Though the development process continues, their advocacy delayed approvals, triggered media scrutiny, and resulted in policy makers revisiting aspects of the Planning and Design Code affecting building height controls.

A second example is the Magill Matters campaign. This group emerged in response to a proposed zoning change that would have allowed dense townhouse developments along a leafy, heritage-rich corridor. Residents feared the change would erode the area’s identity, increase traffic congestion, and strain local infrastructure.

Rather than simply opposing the proposal, Magill Matters conducted a neighbourhood survey and produced a community vision statement. They met with councillors, held a community expo, and secured local media coverage. Their constructive approach, combining criticism with alternatives, won support. As a result, the zoning amendment was paused pending further consultation.

These examples highlight different advocacy strategies - legal complaints, political lobbying, community visioning - and their effectiveness when coordinated by a dedicated team.

7. The Greater Adelaide Regional Plan: What It Means for You

The Greater Adelaide Regional Plan (GARP) is a high-level document that outlines how South Australia's largest urban area will accommodate population growth, infrastructure needs, and environmental challenges over the next three decades. It is developed by the State Planning Commission and guides local councils and developers in shaping future developments.

The draft plan, released in early 2025, proposed a combination of densification along transit corridors, new greenfield development in fringe suburbs, and creation of so-called "15-minute neighbourhoods" - suburbs where essential services are accessible within a short walk or bike ride.

While these ideas align with modern urban planning trends, the draft plan received mixed reactions. Many communities expressed concern about unchecked high-rise developments, the lack of guaranteed public transport investment, and insufficient protection for trees and open spaces.

The "What We Heard" report summarising community feedback noted over 3,000 submissions. Common themes included frustration at limited consultation periods, calls for heritage protection, demands for better public infrastructure before approving large-scale developments, and requests for greater transparency.

The final Greater Adelaide Regional Plan was subsequently released, with minor amendments.

For community advocates, the GARP is not just a technical document, but a declaration of the government's growth priorities. Understanding its language and policies allows advocates to contextualise local development proposals and argue for alignment (or identify conflicts) with broader planning strategies.

For example, if a proposed project promotes car dependency or threatens green space, an advocate can reference the GARP's goal of "walkable, green, and connected communities" to support their objections. Using state policy language in your advocacy increases credibility and shows awareness of the strategic planning environment.

8. Making a Submission or Appeal

Participating in the planning process involves more than expressing discontent. It requires making clear, structured, and well-reasoned submissions to influence outcomes.

A good submission follows a logical structure. Begin by identifying who you are; a resident, business owner, or concerned citizen. Next, specify the development you are responding to and explain clearly what your position is.

When making an objection, avoid vague or emotive language. Instead of saying, “This development will ruin our suburb,” explain how it conflicts with the Planning and Design Code - for example, by exceeding height limits, increasing overshadowing, or failing to consider traffic impacts. Reference specific Code provisions, which are publicly available via PlanSA.

Support your submission with evidence wherever possible. This could include photographs, traffic data, personal observations, or expert reports. Visual aids such as diagrams or overlays showing how a proposed building will impact the street view can be highly persuasive.

Once lodged, your submission becomes part of the public record. If the development is performance-assessed and your submission meets the required criteria, you may be granted representor status. This entitles you to be notified of the decision and, in some cases, to appear at a public hearing.

If a decision goes against your position and you believe it breaches the law or fails to consider key factors, you may lodge an appeal. Appeals are made to the Environment, Resources and Development (ERD) Court. The court process is formal but accessible, with resources available to help self-represented individuals. It is recommended to consult legal guidance from the Environmental Defenders Office or similar services before proceeding.

9. Tools, Templates and Resources

Successful advocacy campaigns rely on access to accurate, timely, and legally sound resources. Fortunately, a range of tools are available to South Australian residents. The PlanSA website provides open access to zoning maps, development application registers, planning policies, and the Planning and Design Code. Through PlanSA, residents can also track applications, lodge submissions, and read public notices.

Community Development Advocacy SA (CDA SA), through our half-day workshop and website, provide templates for writing press releases, guides on how to read planning documents, and strategies for organising campaigns. The website (for members) includes relevant legislation, policy papers, media contacts, submission and appeal guides.

Legal resources are available through the Environmental Defenders Office, which offers factsheets, free clinics, and policy briefings. For residents preparing appeals, the ERD Court publishes plain-language guides that explain filing procedures, court etiquette, and evidence rules.

In addition, social media platforms - particularly Facebook - can be powerful tools for awareness and mobilisation. Creating a page or group allows quick dissemination of updates and facilitates community discussion. However, care must be taken to moderate content and avoid misinformation, defamation, or personal attacks.

10. Conclusion: The Way Forward

Community advocacy is not an easy path. It demands time, energy, and persistence in the face of entrenched power structures and bureaucratic complexity. But it is also one of the most meaningful ways to shape the places we live in.

This guide has outlined the foundations of planning law in South Australia, the strategies for effective advocacy, and the rights and responsibilities of community members. Whether you

are fighting to save a local park, challenge a tower development, or influence regional planning priorities, your voice is not only relevant - it is essential.

We encourage you to stay informed, stay united, and stay hopeful. Every successful campaign began with someone who said, "Enough is enough." Let that person be you.

As a final step, consider joining or forming a local advocacy group, subscribing to updates from PlanSA and your council, and attending planning meetings. Change is possible, but it starts with participation.

Together, we can build a planning system that is not only efficient and modern but also just, inclusive, and community-led.



CDASA

Please note: This publication was prepared by Community Development Advocacy SA using publicly available legislation, planning documents, and advocacy case studies. It is intended as a guide only and does not constitute legal advice.