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In city's middle-ring burbs, many towers rise

Only one party objected to Frankston's first 14-story high-rise apartment tower. That lone voice of dissent, which was not enough to halt plans for a \$60 million 92-dwelling building at the end of the metropolitan rail line, is in contrast to the fierce opposition multi-storey developments are attracting in the inner city.

The sparkling white façade designed by architects Denton Corker Marshall that will tower over Frankston's double-storey streetscape is a symbol of the transformation taking place in Melbourne's middle-ring suburbs.

No longer are large apartments confined to Docklands, Southbank and the CBD. The past three years has seen a staggering surge of building outside these traditional areas. Now, the proportion of apartments being built in middle-ring suburbs nearly equals those under construction in inner-city suburbs or the CBD.

Despite banks clamping down on developer finance amid the global economic tumult, Melbourne is still growing rapidly. In the city 13,500 apartments will be added in the next two years. Across metropolitan Melbourne, that rises to 30,000, say property analysts Charter Keck Cramer.

"There is an unprecedented level of construction occurring," said CKC research director Robert Papaleo. "We're at a point we have never been before."

This year alone, nearly four times as many apartments are being built than four years ago. However, angry residents are accusing developers of destroying low-rise neighbourhoods. A cohort of resident groups met with Planning Minister Matthew Guy last week to ask him to clamp down on large-scale developments.

Growing pains are being felt from Armadale to Ascot Vale. Moonee Valley racecourse recently released revised plans for its 20-storey, 2000-plus apartment development.

"We're a long way from getting to an agreed position on this proposal," said Moonee Valley City Council chief executive Neville Smith. Informal feedback to the race club had suggested "a lot of people think the development is a bit over the top and can be scaled down a bit," he said.

Armadale locals are still battling Lend Lease to reduce the height of a proposed 16-storey development in the blue-chip neighbourhood 18 months after it was mooted.

Melbourne University planning researcher Dr Kate Shaw said the push towards high-rise development had alarmed and alienated residents. But well-designed medium density "would not only satisfy population imperatives but could also satisfy inner-city and middle suburban residents", Dr Shaw said.

A lot of change between putting a deposit on an apartment and being handed the keys up to four years later, Mr Papaleo said.

Department of Immigration figures show over three years to June overseas student numbers dropped 25 per cent. With population growth easing, vacancy rates rising and first home buyers priced out of the market, there are concerns we are building too much, too fast.

“Market conditions have changed significantly in recent times, which may lead to a stage of oversupply in a couple of years,” Chris Knight from Opteon property group said.

Not everyone is unhappy about the relentless upward pressure. The Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal approved Frankston’s first high-rise housing last week and construction of the Airio tower is expected to begin next June.

“There’s a realisation that in 2011 Frankston is no longer a sleepy seaside town. Out residents tell us they want development,” said Frankston mayor Kris Bolam. “We are hoping this will be a catalyst project.”

