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Population Melbourne 'unsustainable'

Coalition to urge people to go bush

■ Farrah Tomazin

Tax breaks, new job zones and geographically targeted visas could be used to encourage more people to move to country towns in a bid to tackle Melbourne's "unsustainable" population boom.

With 16 months before the next election, Opposition Leader Matthew Guy has launched an ambitious bid to address what some in his party believe may be the greatest long-term challenge facing the state: its unprecedented growth.

In an interim report to be released on Monday, the state Liberals have laid the groundwork for a major push to decentralise growth away from Melbourne, where more than two-thirds of Victorians now live.

A number of proposals are on the table, including financial incentives for businesses to relocate (such as stamp duty or land tax concessions); geographically targeted visas (which would require people to work within a designated radius of a regional area); and an aggressive marketing campaign talking up the benefits of country towns (particularly to encourage first home buyers).

The interim report will inform a long-awaited strategy Mr Guy will take to next year's election, based on the work of a population taskforce that has spent six months taking submissions, holding community forums, and hearing suggestions.

According to the report, the city's

growth is unsustainable, and the "business as usual" approach would result in an extra 3.8 million people in Melbourne by 2051 – but only 690,000 people moving, settling or being born in the rest of Victoria.

While many Melburnians told the taskforce they welcomed decentralisation, they also warned that redirecting population growth towards the regions would not work without proper planning and investment.

"Without a comprehensive plan, Melbourne is at risk of becoming Australia's most unliveable city within a decade, and regional Victoria may not share the prosperity that comes with increased population," the report says.

Other community suggestions that are being considered include:

- Special economic zones to attract investment in industry and boost jobs and trade.
- The relocation of more government departments to regional cities.
- Road and rail upgrades, such as a second river crossing in Shepparton, the widening of the Goulburn Valley Highway, and the duplication of the track from South Geelong station to Waurin Ponds station.
- Financial incentives, including the removal of land tax on all residential and commercial properties outside Greater Melbourne.

The nine-member population taskforce was led by parliamentary

secretary Tim Smith, and included population and industry experts – Monash University demographer Bob Birrell, City of Brimbank administrator Jane Nathan and the Property Council's Asher Judah.