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Coalition in push to stop Melbourne becoming 'Australia's most unliveable city'

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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 metropolitan Melbourne – where more than two-thirds of Victorian residents now live – and into regional cities and towns.

In order to do that, 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 pave the way for a long-awaited strategy that Mr Guy will take to next year's election, based on the work of a population taskforce that has spent the past six months taking submissions, holding community forums, and hearing suggestions from groups and individuals across the state.

According to the report, the city's growth is unsustainable, and continuing with the current "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 commensurate investment in infrastructure and services.

"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 – so-called enclaves of reduced regulatory requirements, taxes or holidays — to attract investment in industry and boost jobs and trade.
- The relocation of more government departments to regional cities: for instance, VicRoads' head office from Kew to Ballarat.
- 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 Waurn Ponds station.
- Financial incentives, including payroll tax on all commercial operations outside defined metropolitan areas, and 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 also included population and industry experts such Monash University demographer Bob Birrell, City of Brimbank administrator Jane Nathan and former Property Council deputy executive director Asher Judah.

Its interim report comes as the population debate heats up ahead of the election, with the consequences of Melbourne's boom – traffic congestion, inadequate services in the outer suburbs, cost of living pressures – emerging as key battlegrounds.

"Victorians deserve better than being squashed on a train, stuck in traffic for hours and paying more for electricity," Mr Smith said. "The Liberal Nationals have a positive plan to manage population growth by decentralising our state, by taking the pressure off Melbourne and growing regional Victoria."

A final report with recommended policies will be delivered at the end of the year.

This story was found at: <http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/coalition-in-push-to-stop-melbourne-becoming-australias-most-unliveable-city-20170618-gwtgra.html>