

THE BAYS PRECINCT COMMUNITY CONSULTATIONS: Some preliminary thoughts from a community perspective.

Over the next week we have a rare opportunity to have a say in the future of the Bays Precinct through the Government's Bays Precinct Taskforce community consultations. This is a very special and strategic harbour site encompassing Blackwattle Bay, Rozelle Bay, White Bay, Glebe Island and a huge foreshore area **still largely in public ownership**

To have influence, we must be there and we must use the opportunity to get some united community views heard.

This report gives a brief update on the Taskforce and identifies some strategic messages the community needs to communicate loudly in these consultations.

We have just one representative on the Taskforce - Jane Marceau, who was a member of the previous Bays Precinct Community Representative Group. (I am her alternate representative and have been able to attend meetings). Jane has set up a support group from both sides of the Bays to help her liaise with community groups and is doing her best to gain a hearing for their views inside the Taskforce.

This has not gone well.

Whose Bays? The agencies and the community

It appears likely that the NSW Government is genuinely seeking new ideas for the future of the Bays Precinct. The community certainly is- and is again engaging in intensive activity. But, at this stage, there is little reason to be confident that the Taskforce will deliver for either the Government or the community.

The main problem is the same old problem. The agencies (Ports, Maritime, Transport) give little indication of willingness to respond to community priorities- which they insist on calling 'aspirations' - except at the very margins. Their priorities for the Bays -all of which are unchallengeable NEEDS - are not open to negotiation. This leaves little room for community priorities in the short or even the long term.

They are reluctant to share information needed to make sound assessments about options and timescales for sites. We have struggled to get basic information about leases on publicly owned lands in the Bays. Numbers of community groups have been trying to access this and it was an early request from our representative to the Taskforce. It has taken months to extract limited and confusing (and possibly misleading) information. Lease data is of obvious importance. We need to know when current leases expire- even if in some cases there are good reasons for renewing the lease. Future uses of publicly owned sites should be subject to consultation and reasoned discussion. We have plenty of frustrating history of 'non transparent' processes where the community discovers- retrospectively - that a publicly owned foreshore site has been locked up for 30/50 years , with no consultation, for private benefit –effectively pre-empting alternative uses for decades.

It has been difficult to get community perspectives into the formal documentation of 'opportunities' for the Bays because they conflict with agency priorities. The analyses supporting the agency positions are all generated by the agencies themselves. There are no independent analyses of options available to the community through the TF.

There is room for both community and agency priorities within the Bays –if decision making was more open and collaborative.

The community is not opposed to a continuation of a working harbour with ongoing ports activity. Many in the community support aspects of what the agencies want to do. BUT we are not prepared to allow them to make pre-emptive decisions and to lock up future options for 30/50 or even 90 years. We do insist on being a serious party in planning for short and longer term uses: what kind of harbour and port activity? where? for how long will these be the priority? what kind of community access can accompany these activities?

We should use the consultation to insist on change in the attitude of the agencies to the community. We need them to understand what meaningful consultation involves. We need them to be open with information. We need them to stop patronising the community.

Most of all - we need them to begin to think about negotiating with us. We are after significant trade-offs to meet community needs now, and openness to the possibility of a very different set of activities in this inner city harbour site in the longer term.

The Importance of Core Principles

The community has numbers of specific priorities for the Bays. Jane – and our Council representatives -will fight for those priorities to get a fair presentation in the TF report. However, as things stand, most of those community priorities will be resisted by the agencies.

Our best line of defence is to fight for Government acceptance of strong principles to govern planning and development in the Bays. If we don't, we will be ignored, project by project.

We should use the consultation process to demand again that there be no more one off, ad hoc planning decisions by State Government or other planning authorities. All future planning and development decisions to be on the basis of agreed Principles and an integrated strategic plan for the whole Precinct. A strong set of principles was developed by the Bays Precinct CRG in 2009/10. Similar principles have been endorsed by the Councils. Some of the most important of these principles and the ones most likely to be ignored if we are not loud and vigilant are:

1. No more one off, ad hoc planning decisions – or new leases. All future decisions to be on the basis of agreed principles and a strategic plan for the short and longer term.
2. Establish public good, not private benefit as the overriding driver. No sale of public land or harbour. No long term leases (over 20yrs) unless including substantial public use .
The restoration of headlands and heads of bays for public use as opportunities arise
3. Create continuous public access to the foreshore except where precluded by health, safety or security issues. The setback of any development fronting the Bays with a building line of not less than 20 metres from the foreshore
4. NO new activities or developments without simultaneous provision for the necessary transport infrastructure- including public transport. Prohibit approval of long term activities that will result in increased traffic congestion within the surrounding suburbs.
5. Recognise the Bays maritime and industrial history and conserve and adaptively reuse structures where feasible
6. Given the high residential density of surrounding areas ensure planning decisions have minimum possible adverse impact on existing residents and businesses.

We should seize the opportunity provided by this consultation process to make a concerted push for these principles. They provide a strong framework within which we have more opportunity of getting some of our specific priorities for the immediate and longer term seriously considered.

We will provide a further update in the next Glebe Society journal and look at some of the specific priorities that have been identified by community groups across Glebe, Pyrmont/Ultimo, Balmain, Rozelle and Annandale.

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