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Submission to the Greater Sydney Commission's

Review of the Planning Framework for the Western Harbour Precinct including the Pyrmont Peninsula

The Better Planning Network Inc. (BPN) is an incorporated, volunteer-based, not-for-profit association established in 2012. Our aim is to advocate for a robust and visionary NSW - one that fosters best practice environmental, heritage, social sustainability and design outcomes and ensures that best practice planning is achieved through a collaborative and authentic community partnership engagement approach.

Introduction

In the terms of reference for the Pymont Planning Review (the Review), the Greater Sydney Commission (GSC) has been asked to undertake an assessment of the current planning standards and controls for the Western Harbour precinct, including the Pymont Peninsula. The Government wants the plans for the area to align with its strategic vision for Pymont and the Western Harbour precinct as a “vibrant residential, entertainment and innovation hub on the fringe of Sydney’s CBD.”

We support the position of the City of Sydney Council, the community organisations, the residents of Pymont and the countless other residents across Sydney. None of them believes that the area needs a “facelift”, as the Premier Gladys Berejiklian suggested in her press release announcing the snap review on 19 August 2019.

Proper plans are already in place to manage the growth of this thriving inner-city hub. Its transformation over the last 30 years from a disused industrial area to a vibrant mixed-use precinct is the result of the successful implementation of the Ultimo-Pymont plan -- a model for how high-density living can be sensitively achieved through intelligent planning.

Snap Review undermines faith in the integrity of the planning system

In its 2012 report, Anti-Corruption Safeguards and the NSW Planning System, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC) recommended six key “corruption prevention safeguards” to promote confidence in the NSW planning system:

- Providing certainty
- Balancing competing public interests
- Ensuring transparency
- Reducing complexity
- Meaningful community participation and consultation
- Expanding the scope of third party merit appeals

Yet, here we are seven years later and nothing seems to have changed.

Only on 19 August 2019 was the GSC advised by the Planning and Public Spaces Minister, Rob Stokes, to conduct a snap review of future plans for the Pymont and Western Harbour precinct, reportedly in response to pressure from The Star Casino about the likely imminent defeat of a development application it had recently lodged. The Review is to be completed by 30 September, leaving little time for the GSC to engage in meaningful community participation and consultation.

This Review is also being called for despite the fact that the District Plan for the area was completed only last year by the GSC. *Understandably, critics have accused the Premier and*

Planning Minister of using ministerial discretion to "spot rezone" the whole of the peninsula. As a [Sydney Morning Herald editorial](#) recently opined, the Review “must not set a dangerous precedent for the already controversial planning process in this crowded city...Jumping in to seemingly favour one project undermines the government’s claim that it is taking a strategic approach to development applications based on regional and local plans developed by councils and the GSC.”

City of Sydney's planning authority should not be usurped

The City of Sydney Council is currently the planning authority for most of Pyrmont. It now faces uncertainty about whether its planning controls will be overturned. As the Mayor of the City, Clover Moore, recently [commented](#), the planning controls contained in the Sydney Local Environment Plan 2012 were developed "after extensive community consultation" and are "consistent with the established low to medium scale development." Residents in Pyrmont, Moore explained, have told her that their suburb is "a successful example of urban renewal."

Economic benefits of rezoning should not be prioritised over projected negative environmental and social impacts

The 2012 ICAC report also noted that “over recent years, a perception has been created that economic considerations, such as job creation, have dominated state government planning decisions.

[Media reports](#) have suggested the Premier has called for a review in response to pressure from big business and influential media outlets. The Star Casino is unhappy that its proposal for a massive residential tower with a hotel on top, more than eight times the maximum building height permitted in the Pyrmont area, was recommended for refusal by the Premier's own Department of Planning.

The Department rejected the 237-metre tall tower for a number of sound reasons including overshadowing, view loss, wind, excessive height, public amenity and urban context. It said that [the development](#) would "symbolise and draw attention" to the casino as a venue for gambling and would not result in the public benefit needed to offset or justify its "negative impacts...[It would] establish a very undesirable precedent which would potentially encourage applications for further tower buildings on nearby waterfront sites."

At the time of the [Report's release](#), Mr Stokes said that the department’s assessment "reflects the consistent and widespread opposition to the scale of this proposal...The report is the result of an exhaustive process and provides some clear advice for the independent decision-maker to consider.” During the [period of public engagement](#), the department received 144 submissions on the proposal, including 117 from the public, 88 of which were objections.

In the press release to announce the snap GSC review, the Premier certainly suggested that the so-called economic benefits of rezoning for taller buildings should take precedence: "I am sending a strong message," she said, "that Pymont is open for business and ready to be taken to the next level. Sydney is Australia's only true global city and we have a unique opportunity before us to transform Pymont and the western Harbour precinct into an iconic destination."

Pymont has already undergone a massive urban transformation over the past 30 years

The past 30 years of development in Pymont has transformed a previously abandoned industrial area into one of the most densely populated suburbs in Australia.

This transformation was largely achieved by limiting building heights limited to around five to eight storeys, and preserving the heritage and character of some of the city's oldest streets.

Today, Pymont is home to the headquarters of several corporations including Vodafone and Google. It is also in the vicinity of a number of higher education facilities and tourist attractions like the Powerhouse Museum, the Australian National Maritime Museum, the Star Casino, the Sydney Fish Markets and Union Square. Unfortunately, however, the Powerhouse Museum looks set to move to Parramatta, which is ironic given the Premier wants a review of the area's planning to ensure that "Pymont area has a bright and exciting future as a key part of the NSW visitor economy."

Dubbed the "innovation corridor" by the GSC, the City of Sydney is working on plans to attract new businesses to the peninsula.

Model for how affordable housing can be integrated into the inner city

The Independent Member for Sydney, Alex Greenwich, recently noted in his address to the Pymont Planning Review that "levies under the Ultimo-Pymont plan have delivered hundreds of affordable homes and this has created diversity and vibrancy. Social housing tenants and affluent residents with harbour views all live in harmony together as a strong cohesive community."

We share the concerns of the resident group Pymont Action Inc that Urban Taskforce's vision for the area, which depicts towers covering most of the peninsula, also shows highrises replacing sites now occupied by the social and affordable housing estates.

Cities all over the world are struggling to attract lower-paid workers to the inner city because the price of accommodation is too prohibitive. In fact, the recent unrest in Hong Kong is

partly attributed to people's unhappiness about prohibitive property prices and lack of access to affordable housing.

Any new plans for Pyrmont's future development must ensure that these housing estates are properly maintained and not sold off to developers.

Pyrmont is already facing pressure from other proposed or planned development

Pyrmont is already plagued by serious traffic congestion and lacks public transport. New development in Darling Harbour has also recently blocked direct walking links to the city.

Residents are understandably worried about the scale of new plans for the Sydney Fish Market at Blackwattle Bay and The Bays Precinct redevelopment. A rushed review of local planning laws is not the appropriate mechanism to determine the right mix and density of these sites.

Essential infrastructure has not kept pace with existing development

In its detailed submission to this review, Pyrmont Action Inc outlined the dearth of essential infrastructure in the area. As well as not being served adequately by public transport, the area lacks adequate childcare facilities, health centres, accessible public and private schools, outdoor play areas, and tennis courts. The popular existing community centres are unlikely to be able to keep up with future demand, and plans are also still not in place for a proposed Sports and Recreation complex at the Maybank site. Local residents are also calling for a police station and cinema.

No new public transport systems are planned for the area

The Premier has hinted that a new metro station may be in the area's future if the planning controls are changed but no promises have yet been made.

Plans to further increase density should not be put in place before such plans are finalised. Pyrmont residents have complained that it can take up to an hour by bus during peak times just to get out of the peninsula and into the CBD.

Development in other parts of the City has accelerated at an unexpected pace

Density in the city and its surrounds has increased at a rapid pace in recent years.

Residential and commercial development at Darling Harbour and Barangaroo, for example, has gone well beyond what was envisaged in the original concept plans. In fact, media reports suggest that The Star Casino is under pressure to redevelop its site into a five-star hotel to compete with Crown Resorts, whose 271m six-star high-roller casino, hotel and apartment building is rising at Barangaroo and due for completion in 2021. Critics have long argued that the city will struggle to support two casinos in such close vicinity to each other, and that the Government should never have accepted Crown's unsolicited proposal for a high-roller casino at Barangaroo.

The state government's acceptance of other unsolicited proposals for new towers at Barangaroo (Crown Casino), Wynyard and Martin Place has led to more unplanned development and increased density in the CBD.

Relatively low rise areas like Pyrmont need to be preserved to retain character in the city

CBD residents need an easy escape to low-rise areas that still have much of their charm and original character in place. Diversity in building types and scale, heritage precincts, generous parks and indoor and outdoor open spaces, and walkable neighbourhoods are the ingredients that make "global" cities attractive destinations for both residents and tourists alike.

Sydney is at risk of becoming an urban, soulless concrete jungle, especially if areas like Pyrmont are allowed to be overdeveloped for the commercial benefit of developers.

Conclusion

After completing a comparative study of the planning systems in 80 international jurisdictions, Leslie Stein, adjunct professor of urban planning at the University of Sydney, [described the NSW planning system](#) as the "least democratic" and "most complicated" in the world.

NSW's complicated planning system is also unduly influenced by the relentless lobbying of powerful vested interests. The situation puts enormous stress on local communities because they feel their interests are not being properly considered or protected by the Government. They also have to live with an unfair degree of uncertainty about whether approved plans for their neighbourhoods will be changed.

While the rushed timing of this important review is unfortunate, it does offer the GSC an opportunity to send a clear signal to the Government that it can't undermine arms-length

planning processes and good planning principles just to appease powerful vested interests. Any zoning changes or proposals in opposition to existing plans should not be considered without real and meaningful community engagement.

Unfortunately, both the Darling Harbour and Barangaroo redevelopments are examples of how original concept plans were changed and the community voice was either shut out or ignored in order to increase developer profits. The results for the community and public at large are less friendly, less attractive and less accessible precincts, which are unlikely to withstand the test of time.

We hope that the GSC's Report will appropriately reassert the importance of retaining the special character and heritage of this unique area by recommending that any future development respects the current height and scale controls and is in keeping with the original, visionary Ultimo-Pyrmont plan.

This submission will be distributed to our large network of members, affiliates and supporters across Sydney and NSW.