

13th August 2004

To: The Committee Manager
Standing Committee on Public Works
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

**Re INQUIRY into the JOINT USE and CO-LOCATION of PUBLIC BUILDINGS
SUBMISSION**

ISSUES

- Cost, ownership and management are issues. Councils have limited funds to ACQUIRE government owned or private land. However, it is easier for councils to provide care, control and management.
- State Government and councils already have shared arrangements for the management of playing fields in public ownership. The council may have a twenty years lease for fields in government ownership, and provide maintenance and management for use by sporting groups. The same provisions could extend to facilities.
- Prior to the disposal of government buildings, an assessment should be done of their potential for other public uses.
- Co-location of public buildings can reinforce the role of a Centre. Multiple activities can create a centre or hub within a suburb. A campus approach can create active space for pedestrian activity.
- Many activities, which are beneficial to the community, can only be provided with a lease, which is lower than commercial rates. This provides justification for retaining public land and facilities. If sold off – then the high cost of commercial rates would make many activities less affordable. High fees could also mean a lack of patronage, so that community functions cease to operate.
- Section 94 provides councils with funding to improve or expand services, to cater for increased demand. However, the contribution is fairly small, compared with the price of a new dwelling. In addition, the funding is only associated with new development, not existing dwellings. A funding source to acquire land for facilities can decrease over time, relative to the increase in property prices. In some cases, it would be better to put a deposit on property and rent it out until such time as council can afford to utilise the site for community purposes. Waiting for a few years may mean that property prices are considerably higher and the accumulated funds are worth a lot less.
- Retro fitting or adaptive re-use of existing state and local government public buildings is important. It is wasteful of energy and resources to demolish public buildings no longer suited to one particular function, when they could be adapted for other functions.
- A campus arrangement on a larger site, also provides for traffic free pedestrian access and landscaping between buildings. Public buildings can be leased in part for commercial functions, which are compatible with community functions. For example, a shop or restaurant could be provided within a campus.
- Some suburbs lack an active heart, due to the dispersal or lack of centralised or accessible facilities. When public land or a facility is well situated, particularly if it is located near other public functions, recreational features or in a geographical location that is central, it should be **RETAINED**.
- More emphasis could be given to creating communities with shared space, and the Co-location of multiple facilities within walking or cycling distance of many residences. The Co-location of civic functions and community functions with shared pedestrian space, could have a similar function to the civic square and market place in European villages.

The disposal of surplus government land by individual departments does not ensure consideration of feasible alternative uses for the facility. Instead, a required phase in the process, prior to disposal, should be to investigate alternative uses. It is unfortunate that government policy allows individual departments to sell off public land and assets to fund projects within a particular department. This is a very narrow focus, which allows short-term economics to override medium and long-term benefits associated with retaining a facility. There is little consideration given to the social repercussions of the disposal of assets. Government departments remain focussed on budgetary issues within their own department, and spending priorities on a State-wide basis. They do not take a planning perspective, which takes into account local impacts and various social and economic needs within the community.

One case in point is the disposal of land by the Department of Education and Training (DET) a few years ago. The land was situated next to a government health centre, providing a range of services. At the time space was at premium at the health centre: the occupational therapist occupied a converted double garage on the ground floor. Communication with the Department of Health indicated a possible interest in acquiring the land. However, to do so they would have had to pay MARKET VALUE to DET, and there were higher priorities for expenditure within the budget at the time. As a consequence the land was subdivided and sold for residential development. The opportunity to CONSOLIDATE and expand the health centre was lost.

More recently a group under the responsibility of another State Government department, has been displaced from the premises they have occupied for many years. Ironically, this outcome is due to the department selling the public land, located on a prime site next to Collaroy Beach, to a private health group. The land was donated to the public to be used a children's health facility. The displaced group could have used the former DET site, which was for residential. Instead they are to be relocated near an industrial area.

CASE STUDY: BEACON HILL HIGH SCHOOL

The Beacon Hill High School was closed in 2003. The DET want to sell the site for residential development to fund the refurbishment of a senior high school. However, demographic data indicate that the number of young children in the area is increasing. As a consequence, it is likely that the high school will be needed again in about 10 years time. In the meantime, the facility should be retained and other options considered.

Features, which make this site and facility particularly suitable for JOINT USE or CO-LOCATION:

1. Proximity to adjoining primary school, shared playing fields and community hall.
2. Landscaped grounds, suitable for wheelchair access.
3. Buildings with attractive north facing aspect.
4. Brick fabric of existing buildings.
5. Scarcity of large public sites in the area.
6. The campus environment allows pedestrian activity and access between buildings.

Importantly, the facility could be used for a range of uses, including education for specific age groups and childcare. The site is not 'surplus' to public need, but has a range of potential uses, that would be of benefit to the community. The site may also address social and strategic planning issues identified by the local Council.

As mentioned before, local government does not have funding to acquire large sites of public land. That is why it is particularly important that the State Government consults with the local council and considers community issues prior to disposal of public land.

The State Government should RETAIN the Beacon Hill High School, and not allow its demolition and sale for residential development. There is a real opportunity to look at JOINT use and CO-LOCATION of facilities. The State Government should provide adequate funding for new infrastructure, or seek alternative sources of funding, rather than selling off public assets, which are not replaceable.

In conclusion, I hope that the Inquiry will reveal opportunities to improve the provision of social infrastructure while at the same time reinforcing the role of centres within the community.

Yours sincerely

Ann Sharp