


**Submission  
No 31**

## **REVIEW OF THE GREATER SYDNEY PARKLANDS TRUST ACT 2022**

**Name:** Name suppressed  
**Date Received:** 31 January 2025

Partially  
Confidential



31 January 2025

## **Re: NSW Parliamentary Review of the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust Act 2022**

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission to the above Review. **I would like my submission to be partially confidential, ie published with my name suppressed and my contact details omitted.**

**I will confine myself to writing about how the above Act operates in relation to the management of Centennial Park only.** In this way I hope that serious defects in the legislation regulating the Sydney Parklands more generally will be revealed.

### **Lack of transparency and inclusiveness in the workings of GSPT**

I regret that my submission relating to the Review of the GSPT Act 2022 may appear very negative. The lack of transparency in its workings means that the GSPT cannot be praised for the way it operates under the current legislation. It is difficult for Parklands users to judge whether the GSPT works for good or ill or is actually irrelevant when it comes to ensuring that Sydney Parklands continue to flourish. We are not included in the decision making process.

As evidence of this, I have just learned from the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the quota for the number of music festivals/concerts that can be held in Centennial Park has not been raised. This is very welcome news for which I and many other regular users of the Park are extremely grateful. The pressure from the music festival promoters for the cap to be raised was relentless.

However local residents do not know how the decision was reached, i.e whether the legislative mechanisms providing advice and advocacy by the GSPT and its community boards came into play or whether it was a 'stand alone' decision made by the Minister, with the GSPT effectively being sidelined. In either instance, one group of stakeholders, the public, was not specifically consulted.

### **Narrow skill set of GSPT board members in relation to parklands management**

According to its own website, the skills of current members of the GSPT Board lie heavily in “urban infrastructure” planning, “place making”; “property management”; “project management” and “funds management.” These are the sorts of skills most relevant for a general business intent on growth and development. All members have been approved and appointed by the Minister in a government intent on exactly that – expanding opportunities for the commercial use of the park for private profit and contributions to government coffers.

Where are the ecologists, scientists, arborists and environmentalists on the Board? Certainly the Board can consult these outside experts but **the legislation does not require them to do**

**so nor to follow any advice that may be given.** There is one board member who can boast of previous experience as a Chief Sustainability Officer – for Westpac!

### **Lack of government accountability enabled by the current legislation**

How under the current legislation can the public hold the appropriate State government Minister accountable for the proper care and management of Centennial Park? The current legislation gives the Minister powers unchecked or balanced by the role of the GSPT. There are at least three State Ministers pushing their own individual agendas onto Centennial Park – the Minister for Planning and the Urban Environment, the Minister for the Night Time Economy and the Minister for Sport and Recreation. If their agendas clash, who will prevail? Can the GSPT have a positive, disinterested role to play in providing an effective check on unlimited Ministerial power if directed to ends harmful to the park and its users? It does not seem so under the current legislation, which does not allow it the independence to do so.

### **Failure of communication between the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust and the wider community**

The most powerful example of the failure to inform and consult the public by the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust is the process by which the review of the current GSPT Act was brought to the attention of the community: *it wasn't brought to their attention*. I learned by accident that a Review was being conducted by happening to subscribe to the Centennial Park online newsletter. If you were in the habit of reading through the 'What's On' segment every time, you would have discovered at the very bottom of a list of various upcoming events an invitation to make a submission to the Review.

Many of the Park's stakeholders would not be subscribers to this newsletter; other older or poorer Park users don't have easy access to digital communication channels at all. The overreliance on digital technology typifies the way the GSPT communicates with the community.

An advertisement publicising the Review of the GSPT Act and inviting submissions could have been placed by the GSPT in the *Sydney Morning Herald* and in the local weekly newspaper, the *Wentworth Courier*. There is a large billboard at the main entrance to Centennial Park on which are advertised upcoming activities or events. It provides high exposure of information to both passing road traffic and many Park users. This could have been utilised to publicise the Review. Flyers could have been distributed through the Park Visitors and Information Office. I think the park cafes would not have objected to sharing in the distribution of flyers by having them available at their counters for customers to take away. The cost of these measures is justified when you consider that the Review is only held once every few years.

One consequence of limiting public notification of the Review to a single narrow digital channel is that it's likely very few submissions from the public will be received. In a self-serving manner, this will be interpreted by the government as either the public's indifference to the way their parklands are being managed or else as complete satisfaction with their management and therefore with the operation of the legislation itself.

### **Legislative limitations on the effectiveness of Community Trustee Boards**

A serious defect of the current legislation in regard to facilitating community engagement and consultation with the GSPT are the rules hobbling the operations of the Community Trustee Boards. The members of these boards are unpaid volunteers approved by the Minister. The

Chairs of these boards are appointed by the Minister and they have no power to vote or make decisions on policy, only to offer advice which the GSPT Board is free to ignore.

It is asserted that

*'the community trustee boards will be characterised by dialogue through deep listening as a fundamental part of effective engagement ...The method for community trustee boards to engage with the wider community will be for individual members to determine as part of an ongoing learning process ... **However it is important to note community trustee board members are not expected to conduct broad community engagement activities but to impart their [own, individual] local experience and knowledge'**.*

*'Greater Sydney Parklands: Consultation and Engagement Framework 2023: How we communicate, engage and advocate', p.18-19*

Under the legislation members are reduced to 'deep listening' and dialogue not with the community but only with each other. The claim that the members are selected apparently to minutely reflect the demographics of the community they represent does not remedy this deficiency in the legislation. As Federal MP Allegra Spender has commented: 'There are a lot of views out there in the community which you won't hear if you're not prepared to go out there and ask for them'. (*Australian Financial Review, 25-27 January, 2025, p.37*). This failure to adequately consult with the community is not the fault of the community trustee board members themselves: they have been left to their own devices. They do not have the resources to properly consult with their wider communities on relevant park issues and the current Act discourages them from even trying to do so.

### **Three examples of how communication by Park management with the community currently contributes to community dissatisfaction with how the Park is managed**

1. I resist sentimentally anthropomorphising animals and refrain from feeding them in their natural habitat. However I find a walk in the Park to be a lesser experience without them.

A couple of years ago I was shocked to discover that two species of waterfowl – the black swan and Pacific black duck – had virtually disappeared from Centennial Park ponds overnight. There had been up to 20 or more swans and an even greater number of black ducks. Both species were a huge draw for the public, who congregated around the locations most frequented by these creatures, especially in the Spring breeding time. A food truck shrewdly positioned itself close by each day and did a roaring trade. No longer. Another consequence is that Spring each year no longer brings abundant new life to the Park, with the geese now constituting the main breeders. I suspect that the educational program offered by the Park would have undergone significant modification, since two of the main species to be observed and reported on by visiting groups of school children had virtually disappeared.

Park management does not seem to share its regular users' concerns or even their curiosity on this issue. I rang the Centennial Park Foundation and they acknowledged but could not account for the marked reduction in numbers. I rang the Rangers Depot and was told that these creatures, having feathers, were inclined to fly away at times but would return in due course. I haven't witnessed this behaviour before, so why now? It did not seem to be part of their regular life cycle.

Other regular Park visitors shared my sense of loss but suggested that the reduction was possibly the outcome of a deliberate cull by rangers carried out secretly at night. If this sounds like a crazy conspiracy theory, keep in mind that it was given credence by an official Park Volunteer – someone closer to park management presumably than local visitors.

2. The following incident is one recognised by other Park regulars who share my view that rangers seem to be indifferent to the welfare of the Park's animal inhabitants. On one occasion I alerted the rangers to the fact that a cygnet seemed to be seriously injured, with markedly impaired mobility, and that this had persisted for days. The ranger replied in a very relaxed tone that they were aware of it and that other people had already drawn it to their attention. I waited to hear him explain what action they were taking but he offered none. I rang WIRES who collected the injured creature the same day. They reported back to me the next morning that the bird had been in a lot of pain and they felt that the only option was to have it put down. They suspected that it had been attacked by an eel. No one expects rangers to do the work of veterinarians, and natural selection and the idea of survival of the fittest need to be given their due. However when you have become this comfortable with the possibility of animals on your watch being in pain and are slow to remedy it, then it's time to find another occupation.

What both these incidents reflect is the poor opinion I and other regular Park users have of the Park's rangers. **The GSPT and its community boards would be oblivious of this because communication is in one direction only – from top to bottom. The way the legislation operates prevents feedback from the wider community.**

3. In late 2024 I learned only from a brief mention in a couple of newspapers – not from the GSP Board itself or from the Community Trustee Board – that in the recent State budget \$9.4 million dollars had been allocated for the construction of new sports and recreational facilities at Centennial and Moore Park, using funds raised by the Trust, as part of \$12.7 million capital investment over ten years. I went online to check the actual budget papers to confirm this.

I emailed the Centennial Park Foundation asking if they could advise me as to what specific recreational facilities and sports infrastructure had been proposed for Centennial Park and the location for them. I received no response, not even an acknowledgement of my email.

On 12 December 2024 I emailed the same enquiry to the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust itself. I had found their contact details *only by accident* through a flyer dropped in my letterbox advising of three upcoming music festivals to be held in Centennial Park between early December 2024 and early March 2025.

The contact details embedded in the footer of the notice did not give an email address, only a phone number, fax number and street and postal address. Believing that I would have to write and post my enquiry to the GSPT by hard copy mail (because post offices no longer offer a fax service to the public), I rang to obtain the name of the CEO to whom I would address it. The staffer taking my call would not give me the name and title of the CEO, telling me that they would ensure that it got to the right person. Why the secrecy, the fear of transparency, I wondered? However I did manage to get what the flyer had not offered – an email address.

I emailed my enquiry on 12 December and received an acknowledgment on the same day advising me that my request had been “forwarded onto the relevant department for further reviewal”. On 31 January - nearly two months later – I received a very brief reply leaving me not much the wiser.

**This is an example of the secrecy and failure to facilitate sufficient prior engagement with all the Park’s stakeholders (not just businesses or government departments).** The community will be caught flatfooted by the time it receives the news of this Budget measure and have little time in which to organise effective opposition to the proposals. This is one of the *intended* outcomes of how the current legislation regarding consultation and engagement with the public works.

The behaviour enabled by the current legislation makes the wider local community feel that **the consultation process is a sham** and that drastic changes to how the Park can be used will in effect be simply imposed upon us.

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### **Recommendations**

#### **Abolition of the GSPT and Restoration of the Centennial Park Trust and individual Trusts for the other parklands.**

All the above failures in communication and community engagement in regard to Centennial Park have been exacerbated by the amalgamation of management of a number of Parks under the 2022 Act into the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust.

Under the 2022 Act, management of Sydney parklands very different in nature and facing different challenges has been centralised under legislation in which ‘one size fits all’. An exception to this approach was the idea of having funds raised from events held in Centennial Park siphoned off to meet the financial needs of Callan Park. I don’t know whether this idea was incorporated into the 2022 Act. If so, you should expect Centennial Park residents to react with the same anger as if it was proposed that part of their rates would be permanently diverted to the management of another LGA. This proposal also promotes greater commercialisation of Centennial Park itself – an undesirable outcome.

Organisations work best when they are located close to the entities they are to protect and the communities they serve. In addition to its lack of transparency and openness, the GSPT is remote from the entities it manages. The way the legislation operates *prevents* feedback from the wider community and I can’t help feeling that this outcome was intended by the legislation. This makes reform or revisions to the legislation very difficult because the Act is working the way it was intended to.

**For these reasons I am recommending that the GSPT be abolished and replaced by individual Trusts for each Park.** For Centennial Park this would be a return to a tried and proven previous arrangement. The individual Trusts should be given a legislative guarantee of enough independence and resources to manage the Parklands effectively and fairly so that the Parks themselves may flourish and the public benefit. Commercialisation should be resisted, even if this means imposing a token entry fee of one dollar on each Park visitor. (Centennial Parklands, including Moore Park and Queen Park, currently hosts more than 30 million visitors

annually and this number is increasing). **If the plan of replacing the GSPT with individual Trusts for each Park is not accepted, then the following measures are recommended.**

### **Rebalancing GSPT Board membership**

If conservation of the Parklands' natural heritage is one of the main 'objects' of the legislation, then the composition of the Board's membership must be rebalanced to include ecologists, scientists, arborists and environmentalists whose power to vote means that they can have genuine involvement in policy and decision making.

### **Empowering Community Trustee Boards to perform their roles**

For reasons given above, the remoteness of the GSPT from the entities they operate has not been offset by community trustee boards for each Park. **The way the legislation operates prevents feedback from the wider community.** Give the CTBs the resources to genuinely consult with and engage the community in their work. Publish a dedicated email address or phone number for each CTB beyond the internet or social media.

### **Genuine commitment to use of a wider variety of channels to communicate with the public**

Recognise that a policy of ramping up digital communication to the exclusion of other communication channels works to exclude major sections of the community from engaging with and being informed about proposed park developments and issues. Use other channels including parkland flyers; traditional media advertisements; in-park signage; promotion through local councils; discussions with key groups.

### **Legislated commitment to openness, transparency and practical community engagement in decision making**

Not just transparency but accountability under the current Act is problematic. You can see how hard it was for me to determine just to whom I should direct my queries. Nowhere is it clearly set out who is responsible for what function or area of park management. If I did guess correctly in the case of Centennial Park, access could be a problem. For example, there are no listed contact details I can find for me to directly contact my local community trustee board. Yet they have been designated under the Act as the body tasked with community engagement and advocacy for each Parkland.

Recognition of the community as stakeholders requiring to be engaged in the consultations leading up to a proposed change to their Park or the way it is used should be mandatory. This means actively engaging us in the decision-making process. Proposals should not be worked out behind closed doors between government and business, leaving the public to accidentally discover from a newspaper afterwards decisions affecting their use of the Park and the Park's ecological survival.

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