

NORTH PARRAMATTA RESIDENTS ACTION GROUP INC.

Opening Statement to the Public Works Committee

Parliamentary Inquiry – Hearing 6 August, 2018

Thank you for the opportunity to appear today.

Before reading our Opening Statement, I would like to apologise for Dr Stephen Brancatisano who is unable to appear today, as a result of work commitments at Westmead Children's Hospital.

For those who are not familiar with our group, North Parramatta Residents Action Group Inc. was formed in 2015 in response to the government's plans for the Parramatta North Urban Renewal. To visualize the precinct, this includes the largely held public land from Parramatta Gaol to the former Parramatta Stadium on O'Connell Street – and specifically includes the historic Fleet Street/Cumberland Hospital precinct as well as the former Parramatta War Memorial Pool.

NPRAG as we are known, is committed to promoting the preservation of Parramatta's publicly owned parklands and public landscapes in order to enhance the historical, cultural, economic and social capital of our city, while showcasing it to the world.

Our vision is for the historic Fleet Street/Cumberland Hospital precinct to become an international tourist destination of world standing showcasing Australia's indigenous and colonial past – and achieving a World Heritage Listing status.

However, today, we are concerned that the opportunity to achieve a World Heritage Listing may be jeopardy as a result of the introduction of the much bigger and new Western Sydney Stadium.

We have also lost our historic War Memorial Pool and now face the prospect of a Light Rail route destroying the heritage precinct.

To this end, this statement will highlight the key challenges as we see them in terms of the Stadium Strategy, and make three recommendations.

The key challenges are:

The divestment of public assets, e.g. Parramatta Park as a result of the new Western Sydney Stadium.

In 1857, Parramatta Park was gazetted as the People's Park, with 240 acres set aside.

Since then, the public land has been divested over successive governments – e.g. Parramatta High School, the heavy rail line from Parramatta to Westmead, the RSL, the Eels Football Club and adjoining carpark, Parramatta Stadium, the golf course and War Memorial Pool.

While these resources are all welcome, the loss of parklands, and passive recreational space, is now wearing thin on a community that faces a 65% population growth by 2036.

Critically, while we recognise that land swaps were included in 'Western Sydney Stadium Deal' this included small parcels of land that were already accessible public assets, such as bridges over the river in Parramatta Park.

To this end, it is pertinent that public land not only be protected and preserved, but the opportunity to acquire parklands form an inherent part of the current and any government's strategy for the region.

The loss of Community Assets

The new Western Sydney Stadium saw the demolition and loss of the historic Parramatta War Memorial Pool. The pool facility included a 10 lane Olympic standard pool, a dive tower and water slides, water polo pool, a children's pool and paddle pool and other facilities as you expect for a population of 230,000 city.

However the decision saw not only the loss of the pool but associated lands. This directly impacted the local community; e.g:

- 35 swimming carnivals
- 14 primary school learn to swim programs
- 5 high school learn to swim programs
- Home to the Parramatta Water Polo Club and Memorial Swim Club
- 3,300 Learn to Swim Enrolments

In total 160,000 visitations a year.

Yet, a year later, the City of Parramatta remains without a pool, and with a potential community debt to fund the state government's folly.

Perhaps the most telling part of the government's decision to demolish the War Memorial Pools and build the new Western Sydney Stadium is the commercialization of the precinct.

This was identified in the Department of Planning's assessment report, which stated "the new expanded stadium will provide sporting franchisees with the ability to generate greater commercial returns" yet the Social Impact Assessment stated that the 'Temporary loss of aquatic facilities would have a negative impact on the local community....'.

In short, the key challenge for our local communities, is the price that communities pay, in terms of the loss of not only historic and much loved facilities as such as this, but the loss of public assets, which are not properly identified and economically measured, yet provide such an important contribution to the social and environmental well-being of communities.

Community Consultation

One of the key challenges today is the public discontent by the failure for communities to be properly consulted and projects properly planned before the announcement of infrastructure projects. In other words, there is an absence of genuine and authentic

consultation prior to announcements, as was highlighted by the case for the War Memorial Pool, which announcement was a foregone conclusion.

Here, despite the need to meet the Department's Secretary's Environment Assessment Requirements (SEARs) , which specifically required consultation with community groups during the course of the preparation of the Environment Impact Statement (i.e. before the application is lodged); the proponent only consulted with "Fan groups' of the NRL teams, e.g the Bulldogs, West Tigers and Parramatta Eels and Western Sydney Wanderers, leaving the community in the dark.

To highlight, in this case, the EIS went on exhibition on the 21 July 2016. In response we immediately contacted the Department of Planning Secretary and Minister for Planning to raise our concerns. And whilst our concerns were acknowledged there was no action taken to address the core issue – ie consult with the public prior to the EIS being finalised. Rather at 5pm, we were told to attend the train stations pop-ups the next morning at 7am to provide our feedback – a 2 to 5 minute PR exercise which fails to properly consult.

Like many community campaigns, local community communities often become 'the experts' by the sheer will power to see better outcomes. In our case we identified the shortcomings with the government's proposal early on in terms of attendance figures, and rationale for additional seating, and the visual impact on the UNESCO world heritage area.

In response we raised funds to commission the original award winning architect to review and plans and identify if there were opportunities for alternatives to the government's plans whereby the existing pool and new stadium could co-exist in an inclusive sports precinct. The plans were presented and well received by the community and experts alike. Yet despite the plans being delivered to the Minister, there was no response. In other words the decision was a foregone conclusion highlighting the challenges communities face. Another challenge was the state government appointed Administrator who took the key decisions in relation to the future plans for the Parramatta. This saw the Council without community representation and a decision making body of one.

In response to these challenges, we urge the Committee to consider and make the following recommendations in its report:

1. Investment in Parklands, specifically Parramatta Park

The Cumberland Hospital East Campus (also known as the Fleet Street Heritage Precinct) be acquired by the Parramatta Park Trust, and consequently remain in public hands.

2. The State Government to fully fund the replacement of Parramatta Aquatic Centre

18 months after the loss of our Olympic Sized Pool and facilities, we are yet to have a commitment to fully fund the replacement of the War Memorial Pool and necessary infrastructure, ie like for like. This must be a priority.

3. Community Representation on NSW Park Trusts

All park Trusts in NSW should have equal representation of community on the Trustee board, with full voting power to ensure better governance and the protection of public and Crown lands.

In the case of the Parramatta Park Trust, one position should be permanently available for the National Trust of NSW.

In conclusion it is clear that the rationale for the construction of the Western Sydney Stadium, the associate demolition of Parramatta War Memorial Pool, the failure of community consultation, and the failure to take into account alternative concepts ought to be subject to rigorous scrutiny.

Thank you again for the opportunity to appear today. I am happy to take your questions.

Suzette Meade

North Parramatta Residents Action Group