

Sample submission to Select Committee on the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust Bill 2021

I strongly oppose the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust Bill.

COVID-19 has demonstrated the importance of open greenspace and parklands for exercise, passive recreation and mental health.

It is disappointing that in response to the pandemic the government is seeking to devise ways to draw a profit from public parks by opening the gates to corporations rather than investing in expanding and improving them. I am not aware of any key stakeholders, apart from the Greater Sydney Parklands agency, who have been pressing to increase commercialisation of public parks.

I note and support the strong concerns and opposition to this bill voiced by the Inner West Council, the Friends of Callan Park, the Alliance for Public Parklands and other community and stakeholder groups.

In particular, I'm concerned that this Greater Sydney Parklands Trust Bill 2021 will:

1. Create no mechanism to guarantee adequate funding from the NSW Government for the maintenance and protection of our parklands.

There is no specific Object regarding funding, instead the Trust will be tasked with 'facilitating business activities and facilities within the GSPT estate to maintain and improve the parklands'. This opens the door to commercialisation and inappropriate development, such as high rise hotels, business hubs and transport infrastructure, on the parklands.

Parks, like hospitals, schools and roads, are a public good and should be funded and serviced by general taxation revenue, it is wrong in principle to require them to be self-funding.

2. Permit the disposal or surrender of public lands and up to 50 year leases

The lease provisions in the Bill allow for effective privatisation of lands and buildings within the five foundation parklands. There should be a general cap on any lease of no more than 10 years.

3. Fail to mandate meaningful community consultation

The community trustee boards in the Act are essentially advisory bodies at the mercy of the GSPT board who appoint the members and can dismiss members or dissolve boards without grounds.

Local control and local engagement have proven crucial for the protection of public open space for the last century. Breaking this link with local communities is part of a broader attack on the ability of local communities to have a say in their neighbourhood and local environment.

The proper alternative is to restore or create Trusts for each of the parklands with accountable local representatives on the Trust boards.

4. Concentrate too much power in the hands of the Minister of the day, leaving our parks vulnerable to politics, lobby groups and associated developers

We need legislation that aims to protect and safeguard these parklands from all sides of politics for future generations.

Any reserve power in the Minister should be subject to the principles and objects of the Bill and subject to a veto power by a local park authority with a super-majority.

5. Seek to remove council authority and development

Councils provide the relevant controls to exclude activities that would or could have negative effects on the parkland, or are incompatible with Council Plans - LEPs, DCPs - which have been developed in consultation with ratepayers and residents.

Ensuring consent via the local council is necessary because it provides some assurance the voice of the local community will be heard.

The Bill assumes that involvement of local councils in park management is harmful but the opposite is true. The danger in terms of planning and excessive commercialization and development is excessive power at a state level.

6. Not conserve or enhance heritage values in the parklands

The Bill lacks any reference to the primacy of the Heritage Act or any requirement for the NSW Heritage Council to have input to development applications or any explication of how this legislation would fit in hierarchical terms with other Acts and Legislation.

While the silence will likely be interpreted as maintaining the role of the Heritage Act when it impacts on the many state-listed heritage items in the Parklands, an express provision to this effect would reduce ambiguity.

Protection for Centennial and Moore Parklands

Amendments passed in the Legislative Assembly have provided some improved protections for Moore Park. These should have been a basic minimum in any draft Act and must be retained. Moore Park has the potential to be much more than a grassed temporary car park and any new Parks law must make this a reality.

I recognise that the amendments made by the Member for Balmain in the Legislative Assembly have removed some of the worst impacts in regards to Callan Park, I am still concerned that this Bill will permit unnecessary commercial activity on Sydney's parklands and effectively privatise many parts of them.

Yours sincerely,

YOUR NAME