

**Submission
No 436**

**INQUIRY INTO MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC LAND IN
NEW SOUTH WALES**

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Submission to Inquiry Into the Management of Public Land in NSW

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Introduction

This submission concerns the use, management and development of public land in urban areas and is based on the presumption that these resources should be managed so as to provide optimal benefits for the population of Sydney and New South Wales generally. It advocates political efforts to devise new management approaches that will produce innovations in the use of public parklands with the objective of enhancing substantially the benefits derived from parklands by the public generally. Such new management processes may entail according lower priority to vested local interests than has been the case hitherto.

The submission is focused primarily on non-monetary benefits, notably the enjoyment derived by Sydney people and visitors from contemplating the city's extensive parklands, including their forests and other natural features (e.g. waterways, elevated viewing points). It is informed by evidence mainly from the lower north shore, the part of Sydney with which I am most familiar. I do not advocate converting little-used publicly owned land to residential or commercial uses, except where commercial facilities such as restaurants or coffee shops would complement and enhance people's enjoyment of parkland. Also, there may be cases for converting small tracts of little-used public land to sites for hospitals, schools, clubs, retirement villages, sportsfields, etc. which are considered to be consistent with enhancing the interests of the public generally. There are numerous precedents from the 1940s and 1950s for this.

The case

I submit that much publicly owned land in Sydney delivers suboptimal benefits for the public generally. Some examples:

- much of the state-owned Reserve bushland bordering the harbour and further inland is used little, if at all, except by a relatively few walkers (who doubtless derive worthwhile personal benefits from it).
- some bowling club facilities on council controlled parklands in scenic locations (e.g. Henley, Waverton) are now almost obsolete but could be redeveloped to provide service facilities which would deliver far greater benefits, including benefits for the community extending beyond local residents.
- land owned by the Commonwealth Government (400 x 50 metres approx) with a magnificent view up the Parramatta River to the Gladesville Bridge is used as an unsightly storage site and carpark for HMAS Waterhen.

More broadly, much parkland in the lower north shore has, at best, minimal facilities intended to attract people to make it use of it, other than people living in close proximity.

I further submit that the benefits derived by the people of Sydney and NSW from much publicly owned land in urban areas could be greatly enhanced by for example:

- provision of more or improved amenities within or near parklands offering leisurely enjoyment of the beauty of the harbour and surrounds (e.g. coffee shops, restaurants and bars located to provide harbour city views);
- provision of facilities aimed at increasing people's awareness of the beauty of the Australian bushland by drawing attention to its composition and structure (e.g. botanical gardens of Australian species; treetop walkways; etc.).

There are doubtless many other *imaginative/innovative* ways of developing parkland to attract more people to them.

Perspective on potential benefits

Perspective on the potential for increasing the aggregate benefits derived by the people of NSW from little-used publicly owned land can be gained by reflecting on the benefits of successfully developed parkland in NSW and elsewhere.

- Arts, eating and other facilities developed in recent years in the George's Heights part of Sydney Harbour National Park have become very popular. By contrast, along the roughly 10 kilometres of harbour-front parkland westward from Luna Park to Figtree Bridge there are very few (perhaps only two or three) facilities where a leisurely meal or a cup of coffee can be consumed while contemplating the spectacular views and flourishing vegetation characteristic of those parklands.
- The popularity of Centennial Park and venues such as the Cronulla RSL Club and the Harbord Diggers club are also strong testimony to the benefits that people, especially those living at distance from water views, can derive from provision of appropriate facilities within public parklands.
- Continuing development of facilities in Perth's Kings Park in WA has attracted thousands of visitors each year to enjoy views of the Swan River from restaurants and coffee shops on Mt Eliza and of bushland from the recently developed Zamia coffee shop/restaurant and playground precinct at the Nedlands end of the park. Attractions include: cultivated botanic gardens of West Australian species; a treetop walkway; a Boab tree transplanted from the Kimberley; a huge Karri tree log transported from Pemberton. And still there remain very large areas for bushwalkers to escape into native bushland (albeit contaminated by unwanted introduced species).

It is noteworthy that some of King Park's attractions have been financed by corporate and other philanthropic donations. Also, large numbers of volunteers guide visitors through park features and contribute in other ways to the functioning, maintenance and attractiveness of the parkland.

- Over recent years mangrove shorelines in parts of Queensland's coastal towns have been cleared and developed into attractive beachfront parklands offering a variety of eating and exercise facilities.

Reforming approaches to control and management of parklands.

History shows that with the cooperation and goodwill of people and organizations facilities can be introduced into parkland sites to the great benefit of large numbers of people. Venues such as the Cronulla RSL Club; Kareena Golf Clubhouse; Rose Bay RSL Club and numerous bowling clubs were developed after World War II and *continue to give masses of people opportunities* for leisurely contemplation of ocean, harbour and bushland views.

There are many parklands that have potential for development to provide similar increases in benefits for the wider community. Under existing control and management arrangements there has been little attempt to develop amenities in much of the parkland that I am familiar with in the lower north shore area. Some children's playgrounds have been upgraded and a few new barbecues and picnic tables may have been installed. Exceptions are the former BP Site and the former Coal loader in the Berrys Bay/Balls head. However, to date these costly developments appear to have been far less patronized (especially by non-local residents) than, say, the new facilities on George's Heights.

Conclusion

The challenge of developing parklands to make them more attractive to Sydney residents and visitors but without significantly detracting from their natural beauty will not be easy and will require the cooperation and goodwill of many people and organisations. Developments appropriate for each park will inevitably be unique because they will entail taking adequate account of a park's distinctive features and location. In my view successful development will require the State Government in consultation with councils to depart radically from existing institutional arrangements for parkland management. New organizations and arrangements mobilizing imagination, creativity and practical skills from throughout the community are needed to produce innovative parkland facilities which will attract a wide range of people into them.

General Purpose Standing Committee No 5 has an opportunity to influence strongly the aggregate benefits Sydney residents and visitors derive from the city's parklands and, importantly, the distribution of those benefits across the population. There are some broad guidelines on how and how not to proceed. Imaginative, innovative approach: our externally magnificent opera house which attracts multitudes was the result of a

design competition with a very substantial prize for the winner. Unimaginative innovative approach: invite competitive bids to develop Berrys Bay as a commercial site. Conservative approach: existing institutions have been used to develop the Balls Head/Berry's Bay area with for me, so far disappointing results relative to what could have been done. The Committee's deliberations have the potential to shape the enjoyment people derive from our parklands for decades, even centuries to come.