

**Submission  
No 321**

**INQUIRY INTO PLANNING PROCESS IN NEWCASTLE  
AND THE BROADER HUNTER REGION**

**Name:** Name suppressed  
**Date received:** 24/10/2014

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*Partially Confidential*

## **Submission to the Legislative Council Select Committee on the Planning Process in Newcastle and the Broader Hunter Region**

Re: Guidelines 2 (a), (b) and (d) of the committee's terms of reference:

*(a) State Environmental Planning Policy (SEPP) Amendment (Newcastle City Centre) 2014*

*(b) the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy*

*(d) DA 2014/323 – Newcastle East End Development*

### **Introduction**

I would like to begin by telling you a little about myself, and the reasons I was spurred to write this submission. I am a 28-year-old professional and resident of Newcastle East. While I'm privileged to have had the opportunity to travel extensively and live in other parts of the world for periods of time, I always return to this beautiful city. I teach at the University of Newcastle and I volunteer at a number of community organisations. I am in the process of completing my PhD and when I finish, I would like to remain here and continue giving back to a community that has provided me so much.

Lots of young professionals like myself end up moving to Sydney or Melbourne to pursue the opportunities that a big city can provide, and that is an option I have considered myself. However, I believe that some of us must stay and do what we can to see Newcastle move into the future. In other words, I do want to see progress occur in Newcastle and I have a vested interest in this being the case as my remaining here is dependent on the continuing creation of rewarding professional opportunities in the region.

I wanted to add my voice to this debate because I believe my story is representative of the many residents who hold uncorrupted, honest and informed concerns regarding the planning process for recent proposed developments in Newcastle. I do not own property in Newcastle. The views from the Newcastle East apartment that I rent are not under threat by the proposed high-rise developments. I am not motivated by the potential for personal financial loss or gain. I am a young professional enthusiastic about the revitalisation of the city I call home. However, this support is tempered by awareness that not all development can be considered progress, in the true sense of the word. Some development does more harm than good. Thus, my support for the revitalisation of the city is on the proviso that all development should be informed by genuine community consultation and planned in the best interests of the city and its residents – neither of which have been the case up to this point.

### **Contravening the Newcastle LEP – insufficient justification**

I am not opposed to high-rise developments in Newcastle but believe that not all areas of the city are suited to such development. I support high-rise residential developments in Newcastle's West End and Wickham, as recommended by the Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy (2012). Also, I do not object to buildings of up to eight stories being constructed in the Newcastle CBD as permitted within the scope of the Newcastle LEP (2012). However, the proposed developments by GPT Group and UrbanGrowth NSW for high-rise towers in Newcastle's CBD far exceed this limit and thus contradict the adopted Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy (NURS).

It has been suggested that the proposed building heights are necessary to ensure the financial viability of the developments, but insufficient evidence has been

provided to support this claim. The Newcastle Herald (24 October 2014) revealed that a July 2014 report from the Urban Design Consultative Group concluded there was “no evidence the project wouldn’t be viable without the new measures” and recommended to Newcastle City Council that changes to height levels not proceed. That report from the Urban Design Consultative Group was not provided to councillors until October 2014. It is also troubling that UrbanGrowth NSW was part of the same department that would be the consent authority for necessary changes to the Newcastle LEP (2012), as required in order to build to the proposed heights. Considering these facts, it does not seem that the planning process has been transparent, nor that there is sufficient reliable evidence to support moves to change the Newcastle LEP (2012).

### **Community consultation – lack of genuine dialogue**

The consultation process for the high-rise towers was insufficient. The public was provided only 16 days to comment on changes to height controls that have been in place for numerous decades. The proposed changes were substantial and transformative as permission was sought for building height changes from 24 metres to 69.5 metres. The gravity of the situation warrants a more lengthy period of community consultation than was undertaken. Busy work schedules – as well as the somewhat complex nature of the relevant material one must be familiar with in order to make an informed submission – restricted opportunity for members of the public to understand and construct an informed opinion on the relevant matters in the time allowed.

The consultation period undertaken appeared to be more of a tick-box exercise than a process undertaken with the time, effort and genuine intention necessary required for proper community consultation. Criticism from eminent architects, urban design experts and members of the public seemed to be brushed over and rushed through by Newcastle City Council, under the leadership of then Lord Mayor Jeff McCloy, who was later forced to resign after becoming embroiled in the ICAC corruption scandal.

Of course, it is difficult to define precisely what counts as proper consultation. However, I would like to emphasise to the Legislative Council Select Committee that considering the significant alterations proposed to state planning instruments – as discussed above – a 16-day window for accepting submissions, and little evidence in the weeks and months after that such submissions had been considered in any meaningful way, cannot be considered genuine consultation or proper planning.

It is timely and relevant to note that NSW Resources and Energy Minister Anthony Roberts earlier this month cited “inadequate community consultation” as his reason for revoking the coal seam gas licences of Leichardt Resources. It is especially interesting to note that the Minister believes this to be the first time a licence of this kind has ever been cancelled. This decision is evidence of the criticality of genuine community consultation and the sheer inappropriateness of a lack thereof. Indeed, such failure is grounds for the reversal of important government decisions.

It is my belief that Newcastle residents have been denied a chance to participate in genuine community consultation about the major changes proposed for our city.

Thank you for considering my submission, and for the opportunity to make it.

Yours sincerely,