

Submission
No 78

**THE MANAGEMENT AND OPERATIONS OF THE NSW
AMBULANCE SERVICE**

Name: Mr Christopher Cousins

Date received: 25/07/2008

The Director
General Purpose Standing Committee No 2
Parliament House
Macquarie Street
Sydney NSW 2000

I seek the opportunity to contribute to the Committee's inquiry into the management of the Ambulance Service of NSW.

Having been employed as an on road clinician for the past 28 years I believe I am in a position to offer some insight into how an inept management structure adversely impacts on the day to day ability of the ambulance service to respond to community need and how this in turn results in our failure to adequately meet those needs.

In the media release heralding this inquiry the Minister said, "The public need to be confident that this front-line health service is functioning at its very best." This statement is very true indeed – but we fall well short of that ideal.

The Minister wants to see us functioning at our very best but I cite as just one example a situation developing at Nelson Bay in which despite rational argument, management seem determined to build a new station on a site that road staff who have worked in this area for many years KNOW will be unsuitable. The proposed site will lead to an immediate increased response times. Moreover, because the current population is forecast to double in the near future, these slower response times will only compound as the area continues to grow.

Management have asserted that despite inquires no alternative sites have become available yet road staff had no trouble identifying some five sites in far more suitable locations – capable of securing a running time of just 4 – 6 minutes to all of our major population centres. Moreover, informal discussions with the Department of Lands who control these Crown Land sites suggest that unless negotiations are handled in an exceedingly clumsy fashion, these sites should be available to Ambulance on far more favourable terms than the intended site and indeed provide a cash bonanza to Ambulance.

The information set out herein is in essence a copy of the most recent submission to management concerning the proposed new station. This has previously been provided to management in different forms and yet we seem unable to convince them of the need to look elsewhere. It is lengthy and may cover in greater detail some points less relevant to the inquiry. Nevertheless, I think it gives some insight into managements thinking and why Ambulance Service of NSW no longer leads the world. Once we were leaders – setting the standard for the world – but that was a long time ago.

Background

The ambulance station at Nelson Bay is located at the far tip of the Tomaree Peninsular about 65 kilometers north of Newcastle. Currently, the station occupies a site in the western fringe of the Nelson Bay CBD. This site was a reasonable choice in 1967 when the station first opened because the bulk of the population lived at the tip

of the peninsular at Nelson Bay and Shoal Bay. However, it also gave direct access to the two main roads linking the Bay to the small pockets of population to the south and west – i.e. Anna Bay, Corlette, Soldiers Point and Salamander Bay.

Until about 15 years ago the station had just one officer on each shift and he worked from alone from a single ambulance. However, the Tomaree Peninsular has grown rapidly - in just one 5-year period 1996 – 2001 the population swelled by almost 35%¹. The towns at the tip of the peninsular – i.e. Nelson Bay and Shoal Bay are bounded either by the waterways of Port Stephens or National Park so their ability to expand to accommodate that population growth was very limited. This meant the previously small pockets of population at Anna Bay, Corlette, Soldiers Point and Salamander Bay were forced to expand and accommodate that growth and large residential developments occurred in these areas. This expansion has seen the geographic centre of our population shift several kilometers to the west/southwest - away from Nelson Bay. The station is therefore no longer ideally situated to provide a rapid response to emergencies.

This sustained growth demanded a threefold increase in staff over the past 15 years and we now have some 12 officers (plus 3 relief) working from four ambulances attached to the station and it is struggling to cope. Age has also caught up with the station which fell into such disrepair that staff were forced to email digital photos to Work Cover showing amongst other things – light switches with exposed wires, power points oozing green copper laced slime which had set fire to switches and others hanging unsecured from the wall as well as numerous trip and fall risks including unlit stairwells. Work Cover promptly attended and issues several improvement notices. Although the most dangerous issues have been made safe, the station still needs a significant amount of money spent to bring it up to standard. However, continued population growth will soon demand additional staff and cars be housed here but to put it simply – there is no room to accommodate them.

Government has subsequently since allocated around \$1 million for the construction of a new station capable of meeting both current and future staffing and vehicle demands. Population in this area is forecast to at least double in the foreseeable future, therefore a station capable of housing twice the current number of staff and twice the current number of ambulances is being planned. Unfortunately, the site currently occupied has been deemed to small to build such a station so a new site is required.

Management have selected a site near the local hospital owned by NSW Health –but road staff attached to Nelson Bay object to the use of that site because it moves us some 3 –4 kilometers to the east of our present site despite the fact the geographic centre of our response zone has shifted some 5 – 6 kilometers to the west. To move us some 3 –4 kilometers further to the east – i.e. in the opposite direction to current and future growth will result in an immediate increase in response times and is therefore counter productive to the core activities.

The proposed site also raises serious occupational health and safety issues because it

¹<http://www.portstephens.nsw.gov.au/files/64577/File/8.EconomicImpactAssessmentCastlecrestConsultants.pdf>

will place us in a residential area and force us to respond at speed to life threatening emergencies on poorly lit, narrow residential streets speed posted to 50 KPH. Better sites are available on Crown Land closer to the centre of our response zone, and these alternative sites will result in an immediate reduction in response times. Informal discussions between the Department of Lands and road staff have identified these sites and it is expected they will be available on far more attractive financial terms than the proposed site. Therefore to spend around \$1 Million building a station on a site that will result in longer response times and raise serious occupational health and safety issues when more better sites are available on more attractive terms must constitute a gross waste of public monies.

Specific Objections - Response Times

As has already been stated, population growth over the past two decades has already seen the geographic centre of our population moved several kilometers back towards Newcastle. Major residential developments occurred at Boat Harbour, Anna Bay, Corlette and Salamander Bay to accommodate this growth. In turn, this shifted the geographic centre of our response zone some 5 – 6 kilometers back towards Newcastle however, rather than building the new station closer to what is now the geographic centre of our response zone, management seem intent building it 3 – 4 kilometers further away - in the opposite direction!

In 2001 the NSW Auditor General stated² *“Arguably the single most important performance indicator for any ambulance service is how quickly it responds to an incident and places the patient in the care of skilled ambulance officers.”*

While numerous factors can influence the speed with which a patient can be brought under the care of skilled officers one can not deny that proximity of the responding ambulance to the patient at the time of the call must influence response times.

Most stations are old and in many cases population centers have shifted since they were built so that the stations are no longer in the centre of their geographic response zone and therefore no longer in close proximity to the bulk of their patients. Therefore management should strive to ensure wherever possible that when a new station is built, it is built as close to the centre of its response zone as possible.

Road staff object to the site proposed by management because it will add an additional 3 to 4 minutes to response times and staff already believe these are too long. Whereas the alternative sites proposed by road staff will reduce response times and secure a running time of just 4 – 6 minutes to all seven of our key population centres.

While management concede our arguments are worthy and motivated by a genuine desire to serve our patients better, they argue that the proposed site will allow us to reach 50% of life threatening calls within 10 minutes and 95% within 15 minutes and that is all policy requires so it suitable. When one realizes the sites road staff prefer will achieve response times closer to 95% of life threatening calls within 5 – 6 minutes it becomes clear the policy arguments offered by management can only be described as

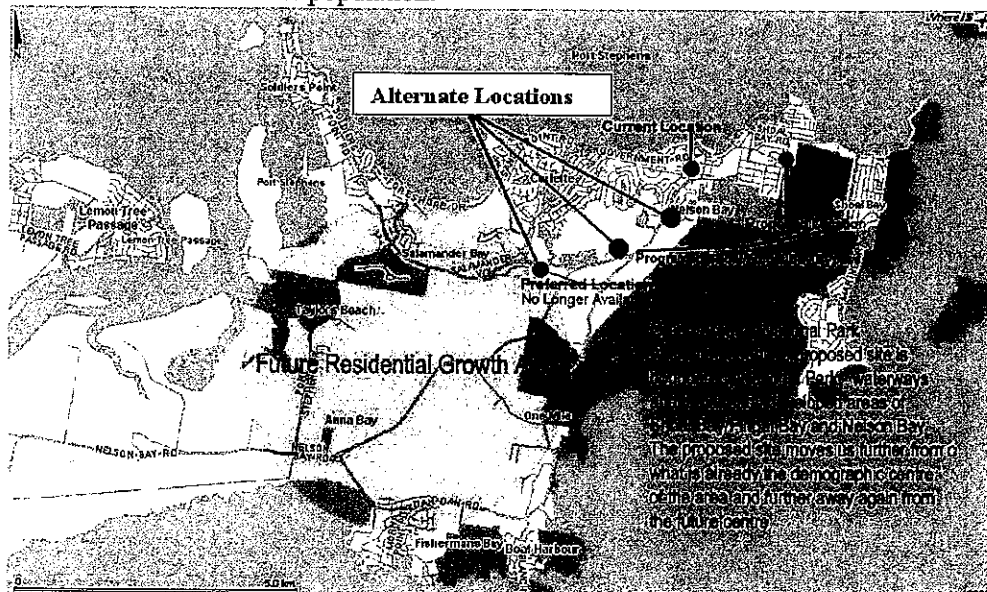
² Performance audit report : Ambulance Service of New South Wales : readiness to respond / [The Audit Office of New South Wales]

utter nonsense from a bureaucracy gone mad.

While various population models exist, and some differ in time projections, all forecasts predict that the population will at least double - probably within the first half of the new station's life expectancy. The only undeveloped land capable of being developed to accommodate the anticipated growth lays even further out towards Newcastle. With this growth the geographic population centre (and therefore response zone) will either be cemented near the intersection of Nelson Bay Rd and Salamander Way or moved slightly further to out again. Either way, the site proposed by management moves us further away from our response zone while the staff preferred sites would move us to the heart of it.

Port Stephens Council is already about to launch a new subdivision in the Taylor's Beach/Salamander Bay area. Other developments at different stages of planning are known to be in the pipeline for Anna Bay, Salamander Bay and the old Gan Gan Army Camp site.

The map below clearly shows the current residential areas of our response zone as well as the only remaining land capable of being developed to accommodate forecast population targets (shaded). It can be plainly seen that the site the station currently occupies (black) is no longer in the best location to meet community needs or expectations with regard to response times. It is also abundantly clear that the site proposed by management (pink) even is further towards the far tip of the peninsular and well away from the bulk of the community we serve. Whereas the sites proposed by road staff (red) are much closer to the heart of our response zone and will far better meet current and forecast population.



Whilst the alternative sites proposed by staff moves the station further away from the population centres of Shoal Bay and Fingal Bay, these communities will not be disadvantaged. Nelson Bay has become so congested with traffic that Council is constructing a bypass to provide direct access from Nelson Bay Rd - to the towns of Shoal Bay and Fingal Bay. This bypass will branch off Nelson Bay Rd near one of the

staff preferred sites and will facilitate a direct and speedy response to Shoal Bay and Fingal Bay. Council is well advanced with pre construction activities and anticipate it will be completed within a few year of the new station being completed.

Some argument has been raised suggesting Ambulance does not look as far out with population growth as we have and that population shift will not be as bad as we suggest. However, most forecasts models – including the one Mr. Michael Lloyd advises Ambulance used are already flawed. This model is available on the Port Stephens Council's website³. It suggested growth to 2006 would be limited to just 25,500 people. However, actual statistics obtained from the 2006 ABS Census for the individual towns that comprise that population shows that by 2006 the population had in fact grown to 29,058.

ABS 2006 Census Data

Total persons (excluding overseas visitors)	2,006
Nelson Bay	8,152
Soldiers Point	1,052
Salamander Bay	4,178
Corlette	5,116
Anna Bay	4,123
Shoal Bay	1,750
Taylor's Beach	161
Fingal Bay	1,473
Boat Harbour	812
Bobs Farm	235

Thus, at the first benchmark population growth had already exceeded forecast growth by 14%. If one extrapolates this flaw by repeating it over the 40-year life of the new station it is clear the population will double much sooner than anticipated.

In summary, it seems apparent that while management accept that the population has exploded on this peninsular – lest we would not have had a threefold increase in staff over the past 15 years or so. It is also clear they expect the population to again double during the life of the new station – lest the current drawings for the new station would not be for one capable of accommodating twice the number of cars and twice the number of staff we currently have. However, while on one hand they accept that past population growth has demanded a threefold increase in staff resulted and that future growth will demand a doubling of staff and vehicles – they seem unwilling to allow the areas where that growth has occurred and will later occur to influence the decision as to where the new station should be built.

Occupational Health and Safety

The streets surrounding the site proposed by management are unsuitable as primary emergency response routes. Many of us who object have worked at Nelson Bay in excess of 15 years so know the area well. All have served as on road officers throughout their whole career – and the average length of service is probably around

³ <http://www.id.com.au/portstephens/forecastid/default.asp?id=263&gid=10&pg=1&bhcp=1>

20 years and this experience leads us to the conclusion that the site is unsuitable from an occupational health and safety perspective. When responding to life-threatening emergency where time is critical we would be required to travel speedily with lights and sirens through the residential area surrounding the site. All streets leading away from the site are 50k zones. They are poorly lit and narrow.

Several licensed premises exit onto these roads and one very dark section in particular is devoid of a footway. Consequently, pedestrians often walk on the roadway itself. Intoxicated pedestrians are often encountered on this stretch of roadway especially after dark and their slowed reaction time will see them pose serious risk to a speeding ambulance forced to use this stretch of road on a frequent basis.

The key population centers on this peninsular are Fingal Bay, Shoal Bay, Nelson Bay, Corlette, Salamander Bay, Anna Bay, Boat Harbour, Soldiers Point and Taylors Beach.

Fingal Bay and Shoal Bay lay roughly to the east of the proposed site while the other seven lay to the west. To access the population centers to the west, officers will be forced to choose one of three routes – none of which are suitable for frequent emergency responses. All of which will require him/her to travel some kilometers on residential roads before reaching an arterial road. The options are

1. Through the CBD.
2. Dowling St CBD bypass..
3. A route that partially bypasses the CBD along Shoal Bay Rd and then Victoria St. along the waterfront

1. The CBD Route

This route would be unacceptably slow unless responding to a location in the CBD. There are too many corners to negotiate and the area is too congested with traffic and pedestrians to allow a speedy response.

2. Dowling St Bypass

This route presents significant issues. To access the bypass from the proposed site officers would need to travel along Austral St. before entering Dowling St.

- Austral Street is narrow and poorly lit. A busy local shopping center is located on Austral St. and can see the roads in the vicinity become quite busy. Elderly drivers use this shopping center frequently, and a concentration of them on a main response route creates obvious issues.
- A kindergarten is located on Austral St. and the street becomes very busy with traffic and pedestrians at pick up and drop off times. A Police Youth Club is also located on this street and regularly holds functions after dark. These often result in young people congregating on and near Austral St. particularly in the poorest lit sections and thus present a particular hazard to emergency responses.
- Dowling Street presents its own unique problems. It was not always a

thoroughfare; it was extended some years ago so that motorists could bypass the congested CBD. As well as being poorly lit and narrow it contains a blind crest and is arguably poorly designed. Two licensed premises have their main entry and exists on this street. A golf club has its driveway at the top of the blind crest while a bowling club has its driveway in the trough of the road at the bottom of the crest.

While it is illegal to drink and drive, as we well know, reality is – some people do drive while intoxicated. If the station is relocated to the proposed site we will be forced to travel on this road under emergency conditions far more frequently than at present and thereby over time, greatly increase our chances of colliding with someone exiting either of these clubs either in a sober or intoxicated state – especially on the blind crest.

Intoxicated pedestrians often use this route to walk home after leaving one of the clubs located on the route. There is no footpath along this stretch of road and pedestrians tend to walk on the roadway during the day. Intoxicated pedestrians think nothing of walking on the roadway at night and the lack of adequate street lighting can make it particularly difficult to see them.

4. Shoal Bay Rd/Victoria St.

This route also presents serious problems.

- During daylight hours the road along the waterfront becomes very congested - particularly during the warmer months, long weekends and school holidays and other crowd drawing events such as game fish weigh in. At peak times it can become impassable.
- The largest licensed club in the area – Nelson Bay Diggers, is located on Shoal Bay Rd. The club is busy and often frequented by elderly drivers.
- Intoxicated pedestrians are encountered on the roadway most nights. When required to use this road to access Shoal Bay/Fingal Bay, it is not uncommon for drunks to jump in front of us or even lay down on the roadway in front of us – just for fun! Thankfully we only use this route under emergency response conditions when accessing the two towns lying to the east.
- This road is very narrow and very poorly lit. Moreover, the club turns its floodlights off after close in an effort to encourage patrons to disperse.

Staff attached to Nelson Bay have learned to treat this section of road very carefully and would not look forward to traveling on it after dark in emergency conditions more than we already do.

Gross Waste of Public Monies

It is expected the Ambulance will do a “land swap” where in exchange for the site the station currently occupies we will be given the unsuitable land owned by Health, near the hospital.

According to the last Valuer General’s assessment, for rating purposes, the Donald St site on which the station is currently located is valued conservatively at \$648,000 but

would likely fetch considerably more on the open market. In fact a block is for sale in the same street with an asking price of \$980,000⁴.

In essence Ambulance is doing a land swap with NSW Health whereby they are handing over a block of land probably worth somewhere between \$700,000 and \$1,000,000 for a block not even worth a quarter of that. Thus they are not getting value for money. This is a scandalous financial arrangement, which, if done by a businessperson involved in real estate would probably land them in gaol. The site the station currently occupies is worth somewhere between \$650,000 and \$1 million – to swap it for land worth maybe a quarter that is disgraceful – particularly when it is known that other Crown Land sites capable of meeting or exceed operational requirements and community expectations towards service delivery are available and unless negotiations are handled in an exceedingly clumsy fashion, should be available on far more favorable financial terms.

Informal discussions suggest the Department of Lands would be interested in acquiring the Donald St site we currently occupy in exchange for the land we require at a more suitable location. It is anticipated a land swap plus cash in favour of Ambulance would be the end result of negotiations.

Moreover, they are planning to build a station at a cost of \$1,000,000 – and building it in a location that does not offer value for money because it is being built too far from the community we serve. The NSW Auditor General has already looked closely and critically at Ambulance response times and his criticism saw the Service focus hard to try to reduce response times. This saw response times become a hot topic amongst management – at least for a time. Unfortunately, management seem to have a rather short attention span and now intend building the new station on a site that will lead to longer response times.

It is clear to the Auditor General, road officers and the wider community that the value of an ambulance is directly related to how swiftly it is available in a crisis – and yet, despite population modeling showing the population on this peninsular will double in the foreseeable future (and certainly in the life of the new station) Ambulance seem intent on building the new station some 8 – 10 kilometers away from the center of our response zone. To hand over a block of land worth anything from \$700,000 - \$1,000,000 for a block worth maybe a ¼ of that and build a station at a cost of a further \$1,000,000 in a location that will not best serve the community must surely constitute a gross waste of public money.

Summary of Alternative Staff Preferred Sites

Management have themselves admitted that a site around the intersection of Nelson Bay Rd and Salamander Way would be the ideal site for a new station. Staff agree with this position and believe that locating the new station in that area would result in a running time of just 5 to 6 minutes to all key response zones. The Service has claimed that despite inquiries no land has become available for us in that area.

⁴ <http://www.realestate.com.au/cgi-bin/rsearch?a=o&id=2207221&f=70&p=10&t=lan&ty=&fint=&header=&cc=&c=2350934&s=nsw&nf=rbs&tm=1212770209>

At a consultative meeting with staff over the new station it was agreed that if local officers could find land in that general area – the Service would consider availing itself of the land.

Road staff identified an ideal parcel of land at 186 – 196 Salamander Way Salamander Bay – believed to be located on DP 734433 or DP 822120. It is located about 500 meters of the said intersection of Nelson Bay Rd and Salamander Way. Informal inquiries seeking the assistance of the Minister for Lands revealed the Dept of Lands held this parcel of land as Crown Land. Subsequent (informal) inquiries to the relevant authority revealed that the land is now subject to a claim by the local Worimi people. Had the Service acted earlier when a new station was first proposed it would probably have been able to acquire this land so a meeting with the Lands Dept was arranged to look at other options.

This meeting identified potentially 5 blocks of land including the one still subject to a claim by the Worimi people because there remains the potential for the Service to negotiate with the Worimi people rather than the Dept of Lands were a similar land swap plus cash has the potential to be negotiated as it may be an advantage to the Worimi people to have a headquarters in the Nelson bay CBD but no approach has been made by road staff to this group. Alternately, ambulance could put a submission asking the Minister for Lands consider our needs as well as those of the Worimi.

While 186 – 196 Salamander Way remains the ideal site and may be open to negotiation with either the Minister for Lands or the Worimi people two other sites lend themselves very well to our needs. The next preferred site is located on Nelson Bay Rd - approximately 850 meters east north east of the Salamander roundabout near where a helicopter joy flight service operates. The 2000 sqm we require can be divided off Lot 374 of DP 1035055. This site would suit our needs very well indeed. It is capable of providing direct access to Nelson Bay Rd but also has the ability to make use of a service road to enter and exit the main road. It is very close to where the intended Fingal Bay/Shoal Bay bypass will off take from Nelson Bay Rd and can be set up for dual access either directly to the main road or via a service road located behind the site. The next two sites in order of preference are probably about equal in comparison – but because one is directly across the road to the ideal Salamander Way site it might be better placed. This site is located between the local high school at Salamander Bay and the tennis courts and nearby swimming pool on Lot 530 DP 822120. This site can however become congested during the schools peak drop off and pick up times but is nevertheless worthy of consideration because it is across the road from the most preferred site so is otherwise well located and would again be better than the site proposed by management. The third site, which is a close runner up to the school site, is behind land owned by Energy Australia where it intends building a substation to meet population growth demands. The land required can be carved off Lot 3542 – DP 1044499 to tuck us in behind the substation. This is less ideal because it is somewhat closer to Nelson Bay but would be more suitable than the site proposed by management.

The final site is near the intersection of Frost Rd and Nelson Bay Rd. This may be a bit far out but is worth considering because the land we require can be carved off Lot 337 DP 753204

In order of preference the following sites should be investigated -- in most cases the lots are much larger than our needs and it is anticipated we would simply arrange for the 2000 square meters we require for the new station to be carved off to leave the remainder to the Lands Department:

- 186 – 196 Salamander Way Salamander Bay – believed to be located on DP 734433 or DP 822120.
- Lot 374 of DP 1035055.
- Lot 530 DP 822120.
- Lot 3542 – DP 1044499
- Lot 337 DP 753204

Christopher Cousins

24/6/2008