

**Submission
No 153**

**INQUIRY INTO SOCIAL, PUBLIC AND AFFORDABLE
HOUSING**

Organisation: Port Stephens Park Residents Association Inc

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Inquiry into Social, Public and Affordable Housing

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Regarding

The Role of Residential Parks

This submission is written from the point of view of park residents

Contact Details:

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I have resided in a Residential Park for some twelve years and for approximately half of that time I have been a volunteer Advocate for park residents. The Port Stephens PRA covers the port Stephens region and has membership across 16 parks, some of which are mixed use parks in that they have a mix of permanent residents and holiday sites. There are two more parks being developed in the area, and recently approval has been sought for yet another residential park. At the present time there are approximately 2,000 residents living in the 16 developed parks.

Prior to forced retirement I was a NSW Sheriff's Officer and as such came into contact on a daily basis with people struggling to exist on a limited income and in many cases living in very poor conditions. Since becoming an Advocate I have had the opportunity to meet many residents who are also, in many cases, struggling to exist on a severely limited income, the one major difference being that the residents in the parks, own their own homes and merely rent the small piece of land it sits on, although there are some parks where the park owner owns some of the houses and rents them out.

I would like to approach this inquiry from the point of view of the residents themselves. I am sure there will be a huge amount of statistical data provided by other worthy submissions, so I would like to put a 'face, or perhaps I should say several faces, to those figures. It is all too easy, when absorbing a large volume of data, to forget that it represents someone's life and that decisions made in the comfort of an office can have far reaching and, in some instances, disastrous effects on the people it is all about.

In the course of my advocacy I have spoken to many residents in various parks and villages. There follows a summation of some their views.

From the discussions I have had with various park residents the most common reasons for their decision to move into a manufactured home or caravan with fixed annex was solely based on affordability and security. The most common response to the question:

“why did you move into a park?”

Was; “it was the cheapest” and “for the security “.

Among the other reasons given were family reasons, friends recommended it, felt isolated in suburbia and loneliness.

This led to the question:

“What are the benefits for you in living in a park?”

Security was again high on the list. This could, in part, be explained by the fact many elderly people appear to feel ‘safer’ living in a close community. For both the young and old, there appears to be a social component that relates to friendships being formed more readily and the social aspect of park living. When added to the common practice in parks of there being limited access to the park by the general public (e.g. boom gates at the entry points), this gives rise to a sense of security and a feeling of safety.

Many of the parks I have been to in the local area, have a social committee who organise functions and outings as well as having Bingo or Hoi nights on a regular basis. This is of particular importance for those who may not have the ability to be able to travel any great distance. To have access to entertainment, recreational activities and socialising all within reach, in the one venue close to their home, gives such residents an added quality of life that may not be available in suburbia.

Another major factor appeared to be the support network each had built up in their village or park and in their local area. A common remark was how reassuring it was to know that if something went wrong or a resident needed help, there was always someone, like the next

door neighbour, who would step in and assist. The willingness of residents to help each other and 'look out' for one another appears to be an important consideration and is evident in all the parks I have had occasion to visit.

Most of the parks have facilities for the residents use such as a swimming pool, community hall and barb-e-que area. These facilities are maintained by the park owner who recoups any outlay for the running costs through site fees. Several residents indicated they would not have facilities such as a swimming pool if they were living in a house in suburbia because they would not be able to afford the purchase or the upkeep.

Whilst it may appear on the surface that the park owner is charitably supplying facilities that would otherwise be unavailable, it must be kept in mind that the park owner is liberally compensated for any outlay. As well as adding to the asset value of the park these amenities are a consideration when setting the site fees.

The site fees are regularly increased, either once or twice yearly according to the site agreement signed at the commencement of the residency. The Residential Parks Act 1998 the existing Act, carries protections for the residents that will be nullified when this Act is repealed and the new controversial Act, The (Land Lease) Communities Bill is enacted later this year.

Under the present Act, park owners are responsible for improvements repairs and any maintenance. Under the RLLC there is provision for a special levy that will allow 75% of residents to vote for an improvement, service or facility and this will then become a debt owed by all the residents, whether they can afford it or not and whether they want it or not. It remains to be seen how this extraordinary inclusion will impact on the park residents, but it can be assumed it could seriously affect a resident who isn't in a financial position to absorb an added debt on top of ever increasing site fees.

When asked the question:

“If site fees continue to rise to extreme levels, (some increases sought are \$30 to \$35 per week), how will it affect you?”

Answers ranged from:

“have to cut down on everything, including food and medicines”; “have to try and move somewhere cheaper” and “go without”

This is a frightening scenario in that we are talking about people who are already on the lower edge of society. How much further can they be expected to fall?

Even if a park resident sells their home, the amount gained would not support them for any great length of time, particularly in the case of the older homes.

Where would these people go? The suburban rental market carries a huge demand for available properties, resulting in high rents for those that are available. The condition of some properties is poor and yet they can dictate exorbitant rents. Neither pensioners nor young families can meet these requirements so their only other option is public housing or homelessness.

Public housing is, apparently, already struggling to meet the demands being made on it and has a very long waiting list. With up to 60,000 residents in residential parks across NSW, if only half that number needed to be housed, the strain put on public housing would almost certainly bring it breaking point.

There would seem then, an undeniable role for residential parks to play in meeting affordable housing requirements. These parks, if kept at an affordable level, could provide an avenue of suitable balance between public housing and homelessness. They allow the people to keep their independence and maintain a reasonable quality of life.

It is my belief that everything possible should be done to keep residential parks as a viable option for affordable housing.

I strongly recommend that the new legislation covering these parks be closely monitored and those drafting the regulations, be mindful of the far reaching effects this Act and Regulations may have. The Residential (Land Lease) Communities Bill is far from being balanced and equal. It demonstrates a blatant disregard for what this legislation will mean for the residents.

Among some of the more astonishing inclusions is the means for 'any variation in the age pension' to be a consideration for rent increases. Does this mean the park owner will only apply an increase equal to the Consumer Price index, the standard by which increases in the pension are applied? I seriously doubt it.

In conclusion I ask the committee to give thought to the manner in which this legislation could forever destroy what is presently an affordable housing option for many people. By providing the means for developers and park owners to lawfully dredge every last cent from the park residents, I believe the Government is listening to a profit driven industry while blindly turning its back on the people it represents. Sadly, this could result in many people being left with nowhere to turn.

I thank the committee for the opportunity to be heard and trust I have in some small part helped to 'put a face' to the statistics and data.

Christina Steel