

INQUIRY INTO TOURISM IN LOCAL COMMUNITIES

Name: Name suppressed

Date received: 28/06/2013

Partially Confidential

Executive Summary

This short submission focuses on the local tourism policy framework for the Sydney coastal community of Bondi Beach. My thesis is that at the local level there appears to be no coherent integrated approach. The adhoc approach to tourism/visitor related policy choices produces a defacto tourism policy with little accountability.

There is no evidence that the benefits of the visitor/tourism economy flow to local residents. There is strong evidence that the local community bears the costs, both financially through rates and in loss of amenity. Beach visitation is seasonal. The area is already at full capacity during the peak summer season (week before Christmas to end of January and weekends thereafter subject to weather). Out of season marketing efforts compete with the winter weather and are of questionable utility. The area is an alcohol-related assault hotspot yet the alcohol industry is a major beneficiary of the adhoc approach.

With increasing population, increasing growth of casual employment, a planning philosophy that advocates higher density living in surrounding areas, and an economic philosophy that requires growth for stability the pressures on this urban natural treasure will only increase.

Background

Bondi Beach services local, regional, national and international visitors. The park is national heritage-listed as the quintessential Australian beach, the home of surf life-saving. Bondi Beach is an internationally recognised tourist destination. I have heard claims from several sources that there is an unofficial state government 'backpacker' zoning for the area. The park hosts the art-deco Bondi Pavilion and two surf clubs, one of which is being totally rebuilt in a new un-related design. A glass extension to the pavilion has compromised the integrity of the design. Throughout the year the beach park hosts a large number of events including the City to Surf and a large New Years Eve event. Both these events include constructing significant infrastructure on the sand. Many other events are staged outside the pavilion on the grassed areas, undermining the natural open space character. At the south of the beach is the renowned Bondi Icebergs complex.

Adjacent to the beach is a small mixed residential/commercial area that is increasingly dominated by cafes/restaurants/bars typically serving alcohol. Hotels occupy two of the main Campbell Parade corners. Redevelopments of the Swiss Grand hotel and the old Hakoah Club sites are increasing the residential and commercial capacity of the 'town'. The Swiss Grand development recently set a record for Australia's most expensive apartment. The area surrounding the 'town', the Bondi Basin, is overwhelmingly high density residential. There is very good public transport (government bus service and taxis) mainly via Bondi Road and Old South Head Road, although buses are full and patrons sometimes have to wait for the next service at peak and/or busy periods. I have heard that Bondi Beach bus services run at a significant profit subsidising services elsewhere in Sydney. On weekdays there are morning and afternoon peak traffic periods – it can take 30 minutes to travel up Bondi Road. In peak summer visitor numbers can average 25,000 a day. In peak summer and on weekends beach traffic can often approach a gridlock state. There has been a recent revival by the State Government of the proposal to turn Bondi Road into a weekend and summer clearway (12 hour?) which is strongly opposed by the Bondi Road business community. There has also been talk of light rail for Bondi Road.

Current state planning goals mandate increased density for the area which I understand is already Australia's highest density LGA. Open space is at a premium already and so development is generally up and down. The pressure on physical expansion is amplified by the trend for larger living spaces per person.

Observations (in no particular order)

- The LGA strategic plan adopts the 'simple' model where issues are assumed to be one dimensional i.e. either predominantly economic, social, environmental or governance-related. The other model, the 'comprehensive' one, starts from the premise that issues have multiple dimensions. Under the 'simple' model there is no discrete integrated strategy for management of Bondi Beach in the community's peak strategic planning document.
- To my knowledge there is no heritage management plan for the national heritage listed beach and park.
- I am not aware of any destination brand strategy for this local, regional national and international tourist/visitor destination.
- Waverley Council does not appear to have a tourism policy rather it has a 99 word 'Tourism Policy Statement' which provides little detail, lots of wriggle room and little accountability viz:

Visitation and tourism will be managed in Waverley based on the principles of environmental sustainability and destination management, in a way which will:

- Welcome tourists and visitors to its wide range of attractions – from its iconic beaches to its unique shopping precincts and local villages whilst ensuring a balance between visitor/ tourist needs and residents' wellbeing, values and expectations
 - Protect and enhance the coastal environment including its unique natural, cultural and indigenous heritage assets
 - Minimise adverse visitor impacts on the social, economic, natural and built environment
 - Add economic, social and environmental benefits to the community.
- In late 2012 Council commenced a long overdue update of the 1995 Plan of Management for the beach. There have been wide consultations. To my knowledge no draft strategy with agreed outcomes has been produced. Yet an unfunded multi-stage building program has been produced and circulated for comment. The centre piece of the program is an underground carpark replacing the current Queen Elizabeth Drive beachfront parking. A number of supporting studies are claimed to have been done but to my knowledge they are not in the public domain. There is significant local concern about the draft building program, particularly the zero-sum parking strategy. It appears the draft management strategy for the beach will come later in the process. The beach is increasingly seen as a built environment, not as the passive and active nature-based recreation space that is its fundamental feature. Council has produced draft conceptual plans for outputs before identifying the desired strategic outcomes.
 - My understanding is that there is no public financial reporting of costs and revenues (including from parking) associated with maintaining and managing the beach and pavilion. Yet when Council applied to IPART for seven years of rate rises the General Manager noted in his covering

letter that Council's capacity [i.e. ratepayers' capacity] to fund the "enormous resourcing" of the Beach within the then current budget "has been exhausted". I don't recall the cost of maintaining the beach featuring in the 'Services Plus' package put to the community in the rate rise consultation process. I have heard an estimate of around \$10 million a year for the running costs, of similar order to the amount sought in the application.

- I understand that in the mid 90s there was a heritage nomination for Campbell Parade that subsequently lapsed. I am not aware of any integrated architectural-design approach to integrating the art deco of the pavilion with the nearby built environment. I am not aware of any architectural linkage between the new North Bondi Surf Club building design and the art deco of the Pavilion.
- The beach and surrounding area is an alcohol-related assault hotspot (BOCSAR statistics). The beach and surrounding areas are alcohol-prohibited/free zones although breaches are ubiquitous and apart from the Christmas/New Year period compliance enforcement activity is virtually nil. Under NSW planning and liquor laws there is no limit to the number of alcohol outlets that the mixed residential/commercial zone might host. There has been a significant increase in the past few years. The pavilion and surf clubs host liquor licences. Council commissions/hosts/authorises events that will incorporate liquor licences in the park and on the beach sands. There is talk of a new formal late night economy strategy when the statistics already show that the peak period for alcohol related assaults and anti-social behaviour is late night.
- There is ongoing pressure from marketers wishing to leverage the image and reputation of the beach. The alcohol industry is a major player in occupying the space left vacant by the current adhoc approach. There is a 'Bondi' beer. A 'Bondi' experience featured in a marketing campaign by a major beer retailer. An alcohol company was one of the sponsors of last year's New Years Eve event – the event hosts several bars in the middle of the alcohol-free zone. A current campaign for an alcohol product shows the Icebergs pool full of larger than life examples of the product. Ambush marketing threats are not unknown. A few years ago, a Red Bull promotion in the mainstream media resulted in a series of rooftop parties in nearby residential-zoned buildings that involved performances by well-known djs that were sequentially simulcast on radio. There are numerous events sponsored by a wide variety of firms that occur in the public space over the year. Currently the building site for the North Bondi Surf Club, within the national heritage area, hosts 3 storey high billboard advertising that appears to be in contravention of the Waverley signage policy.
- After peak days the beach resembles a large ashtray. Smoking is a common activity. Litter is endemic. Signage is ineffective. The beach rake picks up larger items (typically the morning after) but there are concerns that smaller brittle items are broken into smaller pieces that remain in the sand. Local residents have formed a group that regularly does manual sweeps of the beach to do what Council is unable to finance. My reading of the situation is that the sand is becoming increasing polluted from this debris.
- There is increasing competition for the water space. Surfboard riders dominate. For reasons I don't understand, full-sized hard plastic boards, some with pointed noses, are permitted between the typically relatively small flagged areas. In peak summer the number of people in the water is at a maximum when the surf is flat, the boards are absent and the flags ignored. This suggests that flag policies could be altered to increase the utilisation of safe water spaces by the ordinary swimmer.

- The beach is under threat from climate change driven sea level rise including the forecast 10,000 fold increase in the frequency of high sea-level events (by the end of this century). In the recent LEP template exercise which mandated zoning of roads Council went against NSW Government coastal planning policy and zoned Campbell Parade for the higher intensity mixed use rather than the lower intensity recreational use. The latest draft building program includes construction in locations Council has identified as at risk of inundation and cliff erosion risk. We have seen sand in large quantities blown across the Queen Elizabeth Drive esplanade. In recent years we have seen the [inappropriate] ice-skating rink on the sand closed due to a high sea-level event. I understand the rink will not appear this year. Last year water lapped at the edges of the some corporate tents in the runup to the City to Surf. The children's pool at the northern end of the beach is regularly dredged of sand. Bulldozers shape the sands several times a year, removing sand from the sea wall and pushing it back to the sea in a never ending cycle at ratepayers expense. Yet hundred's (?) of fossil-fuelled café patio heaters line the pavements of Campbell Parade, the modern day equivalent of fiddling while Rome burns
- Events such as the large New Years Eve concert are staged at the peak visitor period. The NYE event setup and takedown takes a week and progressively occupies a majority of the grassed area and a large central section of the sand. This infrastructure, with its wire fences and closed off spaces destroys the fundamental open space environment and visual aesthetic for the up to 175,000 visitors over this week. The event itself lasts 6 hours and caters to a maximum of 15,000. The rationale for the event seems to be a mix of controlling the alcohol fuelled violence and anti-social behaviour (see the 1995 riots ...) and raising revenue for a 'safe summer' campaign. It's a sorry comment on the quality of strategic planning over the decades.
- A 2008 Backpacker Tourism Study, funded by Waverley and several Sydney coastal councils, included a survey of the strength of community feeling on the negative impacts of backpacker tourism. The mood in Waverley was more negative than in the other LGAs. Council's Strategic Plan key performance indicator for the past four years on managing the negative impacts of tourism has been commercial property vacancy rates. Go figure! The Backpacker Tourism Study is on Council's website but the line of questioning hasn't been repeated in subsequent council surveys. The latest draft Strategic Plan simply airbrushes the reference to negative impacts out. However commercial property vacancy rates remain as the KPI for the overall impacts of tourism.
- I have been told that the water supply infrastructure to at least parts of the basin areas are around 100 years old and have had their flows and pressures reduced by Sydney Water to lower maintenance costs. I understand that this lowering impacts on fire safety and that some hydrant installations may no longer meet the required Australian standard. This is a particular concern for backpacker style and other high density accommodation premises.
- Noise pollution is worsening driven by the increased levels of staged activity and the operations of the night time economy. The 'basin' topography seems to reflect and amplify loud noises. Council authorises some of this activity yet is also the local regulatory authority for noise pollution. There is a conflict of interest. There is evidence that Council has a poor understanding of the science. Noise from loud motorcycles, either singly or in groups, is becoming an increasing annoyance day and night. These infringements are a low priority for police who are forced to allocate large resources to dealing with the excesses of the alcohol economy. Police and emergency vehicle sirens seem to occur at increased frequencies during the evening, particularly Friday and Saturday nights when the weather is good and the alcohol

industry is in full cry. Early morning (before 6 am) daily waste/recycling collections 'to clear Campbell Parade' disturb residential amenity in residential zones while collections from Campbell Parade occur throughout the day.

- And of course there is the 'stink' pipe of the *Bondi sewage treatment plant* – Sydney's third largest coastal sewage facility. The prevailing afternoon north easterly can provide air pollution of the odour kind.

ENDS