

**Submission
No 9**

**INQUIRY INTO ENROLMENT CAPACITY IN INNER CITY
PUBLIC PRIMARY SCHOOLS**

Organisation: Pymont Action Incorporated

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The Hon Natasha Maclaren-Jones, MLC,
Chair,
Inquiry into enrolment capacity in inner city public primary schools,
Parliament House,
Macquarie Street,
SYDNEY. NSW 2000

Dear Ms Maclaren-Jones,

Submission to Inquiry into the redevelopment of Ultimo Public School

Pyrmont Action Inc. was formed in 2003 to work with State and Local Governments, and businesses to protect and enhance the social and physical amenity of Pyrmont. Our members include people with expertise in education (including Early Childhood Education), Physical Education and Land Use Planning. We have long been active in promoting the use of publicly owned sites in Pyrmont to meet the backlog in provision of social and sporting infrastructure, especially for the many families which have moved to this area of high population density, to be closer to their workplace and other benefits of inner city living. Those planning the redevelopment of Pyrmont and Ultimo, over 20 years ago, failed to anticipate the influx of children and young people into the area.

This submission will focus on the terms of reference (c), (e) and (f) in the context of our long-standing campaign to have the City of Sydney initiate the development of the Fig/Wattle Street depot site (owned by the City of Sydney) for public use.

Alternative School Sites – Ultimo Public School

The current school was rebuilt in 2003 to accommodate up to 300 children. The 1-year rebuilding project was deeply unsettling for the children and it took 10 years to re-establish a strong school community. With the influx of new families to the area, the school quickly outgrew its capacity such that the Department of Education has had to reduce the catchment and ban international students. It is now quite difficult for Ultimo residents to enroll their children in their local school and those who miss out are urged to send their children to Fort Street School which is very difficult to access both by public and private transport.

Four years ago, after abandoning a plan to build yet another new school on the current 0.54ha site, with residential apartments above (requiring netting of



outdoor areas to protect children from falling objects), the Government established the Inner City Schools Working Party to look at options for providing a school able to cater for the rapid growth in the school-age population. Murat Dizdar (Department of Education) advised the Working Party that the current school site, then valued at \$49M, could not support the future growth anticipated with the various large urban transformation projects being rolled out by the Government. The Working Party looked at the following alternative sites:

- 21 Harris Street – zoned commercial and undeveloped– deemed too small
- 100 Harris Street – The heritage building was inappropriate and too small for redevelopment as a school
- 63 Harris Street – undeveloped but deemed too small

The Working Party then evaluated the Fig/Wattle Street depot site (1.5ha), a former sandstone quarry which has had several temporary industrial uses, but which has remained undeveloped for a long period of time, and agreed unanimously that this was the only site capable of supporting the future growth in student population.

Negotiations with the City of Sydney concluded with the Government's decision to purchase the property for \$74M and this was announced in December, 2014, prior to the last NSW State election. This discounted price took account of the estimated cost of remediation (\$19M) and the inclusion of an 80-place childcare centre, After School/Vacation Care facilities, sporting and other facilities which would be shared after school hours with local communities (estimated at \$8M). The proposed school was planned to accommodate up to 1,000 students, to take account of the 16,000 new residences estimated by Treasury to be built in the Bays Precinct Urban Renewal project. This also took into account the 4,000 new residents about to move into the Darling Square development at the Haymarket.

The Department mothballed the Working Group, established the Project Reference Group and engaged consultants (McLachlan Lister) to consult with the school and general community about their visions for the new school on the depot site. At least two community workshops were held at which concepts were explored and the level of support (and excitement) was high.

Then came the bombshell announcement in June 2015, 3 months after the Government was re-elected, that it was withdrawing from the agreement to purchase the depot site. The sole ground cited was the high cost of remediation of the site, despite the fact that the Government had been in possession of the consultant's report, with cost estimates when it announced the purchase from the City of Sydney at the agreed price.



Decontamination

Fig/Wattle St Depot Site - Council's estimated cost of remediation of the Fig/Wattle Street depot site to EPA standards (used throughout the City) was \$9.5M. The consultants employed by the Department came up with 3 different estimates, none of which were based on extensive site drilling or examination, but on historical and incomplete data, much of it second hand.

- Basic remediation - \$25M (close to the discounted figure of \$19M taken into account when the purchase price was negotiated with the City of Sydney)
- The estimate recommended by the consultants - \$31M
- The Rolls Royce estimate based on a standard deemed unnecessary by the consultants - \$54M. The Department chose to use this figure as the reason for pulling out of the purchase.

Independent expert, Troy Stratti, Manager of the Barangaroo Reserve Sandstone Landscape, estimates full removal of contaminants at \$20M - \$30M.

At the December, 2015 Council meeting, attended by around 150 parents, children and members of the Pyrmont/Ultimo communities, Councillors considered a motion calling on the Council to rescind the resolution approving the depot sale price, and to renegotiate the sale of the site to the Government, including the price. Whilst this motion was not supported by the ruling majority, the Lord Mayor gave a verbal undertaking that the sale price could be renegotiated. So far, the Government has not seen fit to re-open discussions with the Council on the purchase of the depot site, despite Council's willingness.

Wentworth Park – In proceeding with its current proposal of construction of a temporary school on Wentworth Park, and demolition and rebuilding of a high-rise school on the current site, the Government has revealed that Wentworth Park is also contaminated, with lead, requiring decontamination. It should be noted that due to lack of space on the current school site, the children in grades 2 – 6 are permitted to play in Wentworth Park for 40 minutes x 2 - 3 times per week, so may have been exposed to this lead over the years when, due to lack of space, they have had to use the park site for limited play/exercise opportunities. The Government has announced that it proposes to decontaminate the temporary school site to **EPA standards** – the very standards they rejected for the Fig/Wattle Street depot site. It should be noted that the Government has refused to release any costings associated with the temporary school citing commercial-in-confidence, so it is not possible to compare these with the estimates available for site decontamination and building of a school on the depot site.



Other Options

At least two community workshops have been held on the future of the Fig/Wattle Street depot site in the years leading up to its consideration as a site for a future school. The community strongly supported the use of the depot for provision of social/sporting infrastructure not provided or planned during Pyrmont's urban renewal. This is the last undeveloped, publicly owned site in Pyrmont (with the exception of foreshore land associated with the Bays Precinct). The workshops revealed that the community was not averse to appropriate public/private development of the depot site and, since the Government broke its promise on the school, several options have been proposed which would involve private development as well as construction of the school and associated facilities, taking into account the future needs of the Bays Precinct. These have been put to both the Government and Council.

- In 2015, Urban Growth called for Great Ideas for the Bays Precinct. Pyrmont Action Inc was encouraged to submit a Great Idea for the Fig/Wattle Street depot site, identified as Strategic Land which could create the opportunity for stronger connections to Wentworth Park and the Bays Market District. Our idea proposed the complete excavation of the site, removal and storage of blocks of the valuable yellow block sandstone needed for the continuing restoration of important Sydney heritage buildings, construction of a two-level carpark, with construction of the school above. The commercial carpark could serve both the Sydney Fish Markets and as a commuter park and ride facility associated with the light rail station next to the depot site.
- Former Principal Architect (Schools) and Manager of the Stone Conservation Program, Ron Powell, has also put forward a similar proposal which also includes a land bridge across Wattle Street to Wentworth Park. A residential/commercial building could also be accommodated on the site.

Both proposals would integrate the childcare centre, sporting and other shared facilities, originally promised, in the plans for the school. In incorporating private, commercial development on the site, the costs of building the school and facilities would be considerably reduced and the sale of the sandstone would offset decontamination costs.

Health Impacts

Based on the observed impact on children and staff of the rebuilding of the Ultimo school 13 years ago, it can be anticipated that the Government's current proposal for removal of the children from their current school, their



accommodation in classrooms which are planned to be 27% smaller than those used at present (both in the temporary school and in the proposed high-rise replacement) and their daily observation of the demolition of their much-loved school and its replacement by a high-rise school with even fewer opportunities for play/exercise space, will be detrimental and severe.

The current school site is 0.54ha, exercise time is already rationed, and will be further reduced as up to 800 battery children are accommodated on this very limited site. The benefits of keeping the children in their current school and re-building on the depot site are not only economic, but also involve the children's physical and emotional health and well-being.

It should be noted that, in contrast to children in more suburban areas with backyards to play in, Pyrmont/Ultimo children primarily live in apartments with fewer opportunities for free play. Provision of space to play and exercise, unrationed by time constraints, should be of paramount importance to the Government. The depot site, at 1.5ha can provide such space, even if the site is shared with some private development.

Conclusion

We ask that the Committee forensically explore the comparative costings, not only of the Government's current proposal with the original proposal for the depot site, but also the potential for the options put forward for the public/private development of the depot site to substantially lower the ultimate cost of providing a school fit for the future, and capable of supporting the huge population growth associated with the Bays Precinct Transformation, and the continuing developments occurring in Pyrmont, Ultimo, Glebe and the Haymarket. We also ask that the health and well-being costs of the current Government proposal on the children be thoroughly investigated.

Yours sincerely,

Elizabeth Elenius
Convenor

