

Submission
No 146

**INQUIRY INTO GOVERNMENT'S MANAGEMENT OF THE
POWERHOUSE MUSEUM AND OTHER MUSEUMS AND
CULTURAL PROJECTS IN NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Community Action for Windsor Bridge

Date Received: 23 June 2020

Dear Chairman Borsak and Committee,

Re: Proposed relocation of Powerhouse Museum.

For the past eight years the Hawkesbury community, supported by thousands of other residents from across NSW and indeed the whole of Australia, have fought against a short-sighted, ill-considered, destructive and expensive plan, which has been relentlessly and inexplicably driven by the NSW Government.

Our fight has strong parallels with the battle to save the Powerhouse Museum at Ultimo from, what is possibly, an even more short-sighted, ill-considered, destructive and expensive plan, also relentlessly and inexplicably driven by the NSW Government.

There are further parallels, the consistency of which point to systemic issues I believe worthy of your attention:

1.) In both cases independent experts have repeatedly warned the government of the catastrophic consequences of pursuing their preferred plan. In both cases high calibre, independent, authoritative, expert advice is being dismissed and disregarded whenever it doesn't align with certain government objectives. This seriously undermines the Government's moral authority and risks bringing the public service into disrepute.

2.) Furthermore, in both cases there is reason to believe the government's actual project objectives are not being explicitly and publicly stated. And in both cases there are excellent reasons to believe those unstated objectives relate, at least in part, to creating commercial opportunities for private entities.

Ignoring the commercial opportunities in Ultimo arising from the proposal, the design brief for the Parramatta proposal advises, "Each of the Presentation Spaces will have degrees of capacity for multiple uses including exhibitions, commercial events, live performance, education, conferences and cinema. This flexibility will support the Powerhouse's entrepreneurial approach to commercial activity through integrating commercial programs across the Precinct." (Emphasis added).

It is not the role of the NSW Government to use public funds to create commercial opportunities or indeed be "entrepreneurial" (with all the inevitable, associated risks to public funds), whether this is being done for the public or private sector. This type of activity by government is not only unethical, it is dangerously close to being corrupt, particularly should any benefit at all flow to the private sector.

3.) Both projects have demonstrable communication problems.

The Powerhouse Parramatta (PP) website promises, "*Powerhouse Parramatta will radically return to its origins ...*" (those origins being science and technology), promising "*new levels of access to (existing, science and technology) Powerhouse Collections*" (this increased access to be achieved in a smaller facility!) and yet the very next paragraph advises, "*Powerhouse Parramatta will reflect the communities and cultures of one of Australia's fastest growing regions. It will hold First Nations culture at its core and set a new national benchmark in culturally diverse programming.*" It would appear PP already has an identity crisis, one which is clouding the messages regarding its identity and purpose.

In Windsor, the bridge project also had identity problems with undeliverable project objectives being forced to morph over time as community research revealed their inadequacies.

Furthermore, just as the Powerhouse Parramatta website promises its EIS outlines “the measures the Project Team will take to mitigate any impacts”, the Hawkesbury community was also promised, endlessly, the “mitigation” of project impacts. What time has revealed in Windsor is, the term “mitigation” is completely meaningless when used by the NSW Government in relation to State Significant projects as "mitigation" invariably delivers more damage.

4.) Both the Windsor Bridge Project and Powerhouse Parramatta are State Significant projects. In NSW the declaration of State Significance removes any possibility of challenging the merit of a project, thereby removing any real accountability for project quality, outcomes and consequences. The constraint on the community’s right to contest the merit of proposed public infrastructure challenges democratic principles. It results in projects and decisions that are not being conceptualised, or carried out in the best interests of the community, but rather, it appears, in the best interests of an unidentified few "people".

It is only through the reinstatement of the right to rigorously test all public infrastructure projects, (if required) through merit appeal that democratic balance has any chance of being restored in this area of government activity.

5.) In the case of both the Windsor Bridge project and the Powerhouse proposal, a better alternative exists and is being inexplicably ignored by the government. For Windsor it is to retain the existing, historic bridge for light and local traffic and construct a by-pass for heavy and through traffic. In the case of the Powerhouse, it is to retain the existing building to house those iconic exhibits, which the Museum was specifically designed to accommodate, (and the government reportedly does not have alternative accommodation for) and instead construct a new, properly resourced museum facility with associated exhibition program for other, more locally relevant content.

It is understood a suggestion has been put forward relating to the creation of a Museum dedicated to First Nation civilisation and first contact. This nationally significant theme has particular relevance in light of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, with associated international resonances.

At Windsor, according to a 2017 RMS document, the Windsor Bridge site contained a deposit of "prodigious archaeological and cultural importance", since it contained "evidence of some of the earliest visitation and occupation of Aboriginal populations to the Sydney Basin (and southeast Australia)". In fact, the Windsor site also demonstrated "continuous occupation through the Last Glacial Maximum, and was likely a refuge for people during a time when Aboriginal populations crashed (Williams et al., 2015) and provides tangible evidence for interactions between Aboriginal people and early European settlers in the early 19th Century.”

Windsor’s excavated archaeological material must be retained in the Hawkesbury. Due to the current lack of accommodation for the thousands of items dug out of the earth in Thompson Square, it is likely these items will be reburied.

The recent Upper House Inquiry into Museums and Galleries made a series of recommendations, including:

“Recommendation 8 - That the NSW Government consider a range of other Western Sydney sites for a cultural centre or precinct.

Recommendation 9 - That the Minister for Arts and Create NSW update the Create in NSW: NSW Arts and Cultural Policy Framework, to expressly include support and capacity building for regional museums and galleries.”

In light of the significance of the discoveries at Windsor (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal), an opportunity exists to commence addressing both these recommendations in a structured, integrated and innovative manner.

- 1.) Construct a genuine Museum of Western Sydney (MWS) at a new, flood-free location and mandate its core accountability to *“First Nations culture”* and first contact - a long overdue, nationally significant initiative.
- 2.) Deliver the *“provision of support and capacity building for regional museums and galleries”* by identifying regional museums with collections or contexts relevant to the core accountability of MWS and developing an integrated, properly resourced research and exhibition program with appropriate infrastructure development capacity. Develop MoUs to facilitate information sharing and inter-museum exhibit loans.
- 3.) Given the scale and importance of the resources at Windsor, initiate a pilot project in Windsor to develop a working model for the research and exhibition program, including models of inter-institution loans and resource sharing. Such a pilot program would enable the government to evaluate feasibility, identify opportunities to enhance and develop the model and refine budget requirements, both capital and recurrent.

In conclusion, it is poor asset management to destroy functional, fit-for-purpose public infrastructure, particularly in the current economic climate. The destruction of the Powerhouse Museum and Windsor Bridge not only destroys viable public infrastructure, writing off assets paid for by previous generations, it also destroys cultural legacies, arguably held in trust, rather than owned, by the government of the day.

In conceptualising the projects in both Windsor and Parramatta the government has failed to recognise the value of both building and bridge as heritage items. They have failed to recognise their social and cultural value, to say nothing of their economic value and the contribution such values make to the wellbeing of the State.

Elections deliver a mandate to govern in the best interests of all residents of NSW. This is not simply a matter of financial considerations. It is about vision, sensitivity, creativity and meaningful solutions to complex challenges: it is not about commercialising public assets, neither is it about selling off public land or destroying public assets with existing, legitimate and highly valued, public functions.

Yours Sincerely,
Harry Terry
President
Community Action for Windsor Bridge