

Submission
No 387

**INQUIRY INTO HEALTH OUTCOMES AND ACCESS TO
HEALTH AND HOSPITAL SERVICES IN RURAL,
REGIONAL AND REMOTE NEW SOUTH WALES**

Organisation: Chamber of Commerce and Industry Lawson

Date Received: 12 December 2020



Chamber of Commerce & Industry Lawson

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12th December, 2020

Portfolio Committee No-2 Health
Legislative Council,
Parliament of NSW,
Macquarie St.,
Sydney. 2000

Dear Sir/Madam,

Your inquiry into health outcomes and access to health and hospital services in rural and regional NSW.

The case for the Blue Mountains to get the promised new hospital and for it be located in the middle town, Lawson

It is with gratitude and some relief that our organisation learnt of this Inquiry by chance last week. This submission addresses particularly the Terms of Reference

- (c), (g), (i) & (j), being barriers of access to health services and the range and quality of those services (oncology, palliate and more); and
- (e) the planning and projections used by NSW Health to meet the needs of residents.

Current Situation.

There is no doubt that there is a need for improved facilities and better health care in the Blue Mountains. We have a growing population with a high percentage of both

older residents and young families. The existing old hospital at Katoomba has been struggling for some time to provide an adequate health care service to the residents of this area.

We believe it is imperative that any hospital in the Blue Mountains should be designated as a “regional” hospital. We understand that Blue Mountains City Council supports this contention.

Katoomba Hospital.

The existing hospital consists of a ramshackle set of buildings on a constrained site with very limited parking.

It is located at some distance from the nearest railway station and whilst there is some off-street parking available, many visitors are forced to park on the street.

Improvements and extensions have been made to the buildings over the years but the result is a conglomeration of outdated buildings with difficult access between them. It is essentially a maze.

The staff work under very difficult circumstances to provide the best possible care but the results are less than optimal.

Many patients have to be transferred to Nepean Hospital to receive appropriate care.

One Hospital Plan of the Blue Mountains

In 2018 the Blue Mountains Gazette¹ reported a single new hospital was proposed to replace the inadequate, aged hospitals in Springwood and Katoomba. The Gazette referred to the still unpublished “*One Hospital Plan of the Blue Mountains*”² and claimed Katoomba and Lawson were in contention as the location for the new 21st century hospital.

The recent budget did not allocate any funds to build this hospital.

Rebuilding on Katoomba site.

The site is located on the top of a hill with limited opportunities for expansion. There is some vacant land across the road in the adjacent showground site but it is steeply

¹ <https://www.bluemountainsgazette.com.au/story/5590020/new-hospital-plan-for-blue-mountains-revealed/> by Peter Hackney, 21 Aug 2018

² Peter Hackney said the report was by NSW Health - Ibid

sloping land. There would be no opportunity to expand the current inadequate parking area.

A multi-storey modern hospital located on the top of this hill would be very obtrusive and probably quite unacceptable. The building would dominate the skyline and could be seen from tourist sites such as Echo Point.

To rebuild the hospital could only be done after the demolition of most of the existing buildings. Many of these buildings probably have heritage value.

How do you continue to operate a hospital while this demolition and rebuilding takes place ?

An analogy can be drawn in relation to a recent decision to re-locate Ryde Hospital to a site some 6 Kms away..

Future Use for Katoomba site.

The old hospital at Katoomba could still be an important part of the range of health care facilities in the Blue Mountains. Many of the buildings could be adapted for use by services such as palliative care, convalescence and rehabilitation.

Advantages of a “greenfield” site.

- A new hospital could be planned without any of the constraints of a limited site and existing buildings.
- A modern multi-storey building could be constructed on the new site while the existing hospital continues to operate.
- It should be more centrally located.

Why Lawson is the better location for the new hospital

The Lawson site is much larger and far less constrained. Any perceived threat from bush fires could be readily mitigated.

Much of the old Lawson Golf Course is relatively flat. It lies at the bottom of a small valley. The site is mostly clear of vegetation on the old fairways. Little land clearing or removal of trees would be necessary.

There is ample land available to provide a suitable building, adequate parking and a helicopter landing pad.

We understand that modern hospitals are designed as multi-storey buildings. A multi-storey building on this site would not be obtrusive.

All patients could have a view from their rooms over bushland. There could be level access to the building for wheelchairs or trolleys.

Add to this the fact that to continue renovating and adding to Katoomba hospital is clearly impractical, it is common sense to build a new hospital at the centre of the mountains.

Katoomba is **NOT** the right place for a 21st century hospital as it is not central to the mountains. Lawson is more acceptable to consultant doctors and offers a large, discrete site with services available where a multi-level hospital could anchor other much-needed community resources

Consultants

Consultant doctors are unwilling to travel to Katoomba. The distance and time needed to travel there deters them. It is important to note that Lawson is at a lower altitude than Katoomba and closer to the plains so would reduce a consultant's commute by about an hour. It is also rarely impacted by fog or snow, unlike Katoomba.

Climate

The climate in Lawson is not nearly as harsh as that of Katoomba. It is much warmer than Katoomba in the winter and far less susceptible to snowfalls and fog.

Access

Direct vehicular access from the Great Western Highway at Lawson is available via Orient Street which could be extended across Honour Avenue to provide access to the site. Alternative access by Wilson Street would be available for use in times of emergency.

There are relatively few houses facing Orient Street and therefore there would be no significant impacts from the noise of ambulances or staff and visitors. The site is closer to the Lawson station than the existing hospital is from Katoomba station.

Available Facilities

The township of Lawson already provides a range of shops and businesses. There is also an extensive industrial area which could provide services and equipment for the hospital. There is a local taxi service which is available for extended hours.

Lawson already has a Community Health Centre providing a number of community health services and employing some 50 people.

Lawson has a high unemployment rate and many much needed jobs would be created during the construction phase.

Blue Mountains City Council

- **Lawson Golf Course**

Council, after a decade of neglect, has developed a sudden interest in positioning the former golf course, oval and BMX Bike Track as having special attributes which make it supposed undevelopable despite being less constrained than Katoomba hospital's site.

The draft Plan of Management passed last month for south Lawson is clearly designed to prevent any meaningful use of this valuable, under-utilised site, which is within walking distance to the town centre and its amenities.

- **Submission to this Inquiry**

At its meeting last month, Council delegated to the Chief Executive Officer the task of preparing a submission to your Inquiry. In their recommendations to councillors, staff suggested³:

“Council identify in the submission, the inadequacies of the current hospital facility, in terms of the age of the infrastructure, inadequate space for redevelopment and expansion of services including inadequate parking on the current site”. (pg 183)

We agree with this statement.

We do not agree with the Council's statement that::

“The (Katoomba) hospital is approximately mid-way between Nepean and Lithgow and is well-located to fill the gap between these two “

Lawson is actually midway between Nepean and Lithgow hospitals.

³ See BMCC Business Paper for the meeting held 24 Nov 2020, item 33 at pg 179 ff.

Urbis⁴ June 2019 report “Visitor Economy Retail and Employment Studies Final Report in the section “Katoomba Employment Study” says at page 109:

“The Western City District Plans targets up to 2,800 additional jobs in Katoomba by 2036”.

Could it be Council fears if the hospital is moved from Katoomba it will fail to meet its target for employment creation? If so, this fear is certainly misplaced as the buildings at Katoomba hospital would surely be repurposed to offer much needed aged-care and disability accommodation which require staff and services to operate.

Is the Blue Mountains a region when it comes to health care?

Residents of the mountains suffer from remoteness to health care much as people living further west. This due to the topography of the mountains, the distance between towns and the location in Kingswood of the only full-service hospital and full range of consultants. Trains from the mountains do not stop in Kingswood and only run hourly between 6am to 10pm to Penrith. Patients unable to drive are severely disadvantaged.

When the Aerotropolis is built at Badgerys Creek the demand of its residents on Nepean Hospital will overwhelm its capacity to the direct disadvantage of Mountains’ residents who will suffer more than most as their travel distance is far larger. Many will be forced to incur the expense of staying overnight in an hotel. The SMH reported last year⁵ :

“The NSW government boasts of “building a city the size of Adelaide” in outer Western Sydney – that is, 1.3 million people in the districts west of the M7 motorway. Adelaide has four public hospitals. Under current planning, the new Western Sydney growth corridor will have none. The 2019 state budget failed to allocate a single cent for construction, or even identify the land on which a new hospital could be built”.

“The Aerotropolis health clinics will service 250,000 people, less than 20 per cent of the population of the new outer-western city”. “This will place enormous pressure on Nepean, Liverpool and Campbelltown hospitals, each of them more than 20 kilometres from Badgerys Creek, each of them already overflowing with patients”.

⁴ Report by Urbis to Council LSPS-

Draft Visitor Economy Retail and Employment Studies Final Report%20(2).pdf

⁵ <https://www.smh.com.au/national/a-city-of-1-3-million-on-sydney-s-fringe-but-no-hospital-20190701-p522y0.html>

Nepean and Blue Mountains Local Health District (LHD)

This LHD covers an area of 9,179 KM² comprised of Penrith, Hawkesbury, Lithgow and the Blue Mountains LGAs⁶. The Blue Mountains differs topographically from the other 3 districts. With 27 towns rising in a string from east to west and separated by wilderness the mountains' towns are roughly grouped by altitude:

- lower mountains: Springwood (has a tiny hospital for recuperating patients)
- mid mountains: Lawson
- upper mountains: Katoomba (has a small hospital offering limited services)

Conclusion

The Blue Mountains is a region by topography and its community will suffer more than most of those when demand on Nepean Hospital from the population of the Aerotropolis at Badgerys Creek overwhelms its capacity.

Blue Mountains residents have had their health care needs neglected for long enough. NSW Health is aware that the Blue Mountains needs to replace Springwood's and Katoomba's hospitals with a single all-service hospital, having prepared a report some years ago recommending this.

The Inquiry is requested to recommend that funding be set aside to build this new hospital in Lawson without delay.

Yours sincerely,

M Neall
Honorary Secretary,
Lawson Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

⁶ See attachment Nepean Blue Mountains Local Health District – extracts

Comparison of locations in contention for new single hospital on the mountains

	Lawson	Katoomba	Comment
Vacant, cleared Crown land? ⁷	Yes	No	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lawson's former golf club, oval and BMX Bike Track 	1,125,255.41 m ²		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Katoomba showground 		48,289 m ²	Katoomba hospital set high above the showground started operations in 1927 and has been added to ever since. The Renal Dialysis building opened recently and was difficult to site owing to the lack of land unconstrained by slope and bushfire risk.
Would a multi-level hospital be a blot on the landscape?	No	Yes	<p>Lawson's site is in a valley between 2 ridges which slopes to the south so offers a discrete location.</p> <p>Katoomba's hospital stands on one of the highest points in the locality so is highly visible to the iconic tourist destinations.</p>
Walking distance to station, shops, school, community centre?	Yes	No	
Road access available?	Yes	Yes	New access points could be added which would have the added advantage of extending the secondary road access between towns thus enabling locals to avoid tourist

⁷ Business Paper 25 Feb 2020, Enclosures 2 & 4 to item 8 pg 52 ff ;
<https://www.bmcc.nsw.gov.au/documents/2020-02-25-council-meeting-business-paper>

			congestion on weekends and diminish the risk during bushfires.
What is the density of population in the immediate area?	Sparce	Dense by local standards	Retirement housing and houses are near to hospital.
Would bush need to be cleared?	Maybe	Maybe	If some bush needed to be thinned along the sides of the Golf Course etc. this would reduce the ability of a bushfire to reach the centre of the town.
What state-run health care services are located in this town?	Lawson Community Health Centre Palliative Care Service deploys around 55 nurses and therapists to do home visits mountain wide	The Anzac Memorial Hospital since 1927	