



Red Hill Preservation Society

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Greed versus Green - Renewed threat to Sydney's urban bushland

The Red Hill Preservation Society urges Northern Beaches residents to protest to the state government about recent changes to State Environmental Planning Policies (SEPP) that threaten the remaining non-urban land in the region. The biggest threat is from the reincarnation of SEPP 5 - now called Seniors Living 2004 - which is promoted as a means of providing *affordable* housing for the aged but, in reality, has been used as a mechanism for converting bushland into profit.

The staggering proposal for a 750 unit development at semi-rural Oxford Falls is an example of the type of scheme that developers think they can get away with under this policy. The policy was reviewed last year and, despite widespread criticism, it retains the provision for intensive development of land that "adjoins land zoned primarily for urban purposes". This is the clause that has resulted in numerous retirement villages being built on the edge of bushland throughout Sydney. Land that - for good reason - was zoned for non-urban use. The folly of this policy was highlighted in the 1994 bushfire emergency, when many retirement villages had to be evacuated and access roads were blocked.

Much of the remaining undeveloped land in Warringah is in the catchment of Narrabeen Lagoon. In the 1970s the state government imposed severe restrictions on development within the catchment to address concerns about deteriorating water quality in the Lagoon.

In 2001 the National Parks Association of NSW conducted a comprehensive biodiversity survey of the Wheeler Creek Valley (between Red Hill and Cromer Heights). This confirmed the importance of remaining bushland as a wildlife habitat and for the health of the creeks and lagoon.

The Red Hill Preservation Society, along with the Narrabeen Lagoon Committee, has campaigned to protect the catchment for more than 15 years, spurred on by the state government's Regional Environment Plan 21 that rezoned land at Red Hill, Oxford Heights and Cromer Heights for housing.

The Society acknowledges that some development of non-urban land is inevitable due to Sydney's housing pressures. It supports permanent preservation of environmentally important areas in return for partial development of less sensitive areas. Warringah's unfinished Non-Urban Lands Study went some of the way to addressing this issue and provisionally identified land that needed permanent protection. The present situation of piece-meal development that takes advantage of state government policies and lapses in Council vigilance is untenable. There are examples of the threat of SEPP 5 being used to push through sub-divisions of non-urban land and this tactic can be expected to be used again under the latest policy.

During the 1990s Warringah Council created a Community Advisory Committee (CAC) to assist in formulating an innovative Local Environment Plan (LEP). The CAC developed a set of objectives that included protection of the natural environment (see link below for a list of all objectives):

- To protect the visual qualities of the natural features of Warringah from inappropriate development and landscaping.
- To protect the streams, creeks, estuaries, foreshores and oceans of Warringah and enhance water quality in the various catchments within Warringah.
- To protect flora and fauna habitats and wildlife corridors.

The resulting Warringah LEP 2000 contained a balance between protecting the natural environment and the provision of a range of housing styles to suit the changing needs of the community. In particular, following lengthy negotiations with state government representatives, it incorporated many of the provisions of SEPP 5 and Warringah was therefore exempted from that policy. However, under Senior Living 204, Warringah is singled out as *not* being exempt. A government FACT SHEET states "*Warringah is covered by this SEPP. [Other local government] Areas already exempted from SEPP 5 continue to be exempted to the same extent*".

Why was Warringah singled out? Probably because the Council has successfully defended appeals in the Land and Environment Court against refusals to approve SEPP 5 developments on non-urban land. In these cases the Court acknowledged the innovative statements of Desired Future Character (DFC) in Warringah LEP 2000. These set out in descriptive terms, the types of development that are desirable in a locality. In the case of non-urban land, most styles of retirement village clearly do not meet the DFC. These Court decisions evidently irritated some people within the building industry who had their eyes (if not wallets) on much of Warringah's non-urban land. The Ministerial advisory committee that reviewed SEPP 5 was heavily pro-development and it appears that the Warringah situation was not tolerated.

The revamped SEPP was proclaimed in March 2004 - around the time of the Local Government elections which saw a massive voter backlash against the amount of development in Sydney. Maybe if the review had taken place this year the Planning Minister might have ensured that his advisory committee was more representative of community and local government.

In some respects the Oxford Falls proposal is a test case for the new SEPP. If the developer does successfully use the SEPP to over-ride the clearly stated wishes of Council and the community (as set out in the DFC) then other non-urban land within Warringah will be vulnerable to this type of grandiose development.

The Catholic Church owns large tracts of land at the top of Red Hill. A year ago the Church lodged a development application for the first stages of a retirement village on the site. The Church subsequently withdrew the application without explanation. There is concern that the new SEPP will permit much more intensive development on the site - particularly as a stated aim is to encourage "vertical villages" (high rise).

The Red Hill Preservation Society calls on Planning Minister Craig Knowles to immediately exempt Warringah from the SEPP and to remove the clause that allows the Policy to be applied to land that adjoins urban zoning.

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http://www4.tpg.com.au/users/mpaine/rhps/red_hill.html