

PRESIDENT'S REPORT 2010 THE GLEBE SOCIETY AGM

29 August 2010

The last year has been a particularly challenging one for the Glebe Society. We have been grappling with a number of major issues in a generally depressing political context. It is a good thing that last year we were able to build our energy reserves through our 'year of celebration' as we have had much need of energy, skill and optimism this year.

As I flagged at last year's AGM, this year has been dominated by major planning issues around which the Glebe Society took on very active community leadership roles.

Planning

At the State level it has again not been a happy or constructive year. We can repeat the concerns I expressed at our last AGM about the trend to undermine community input to planning processes. We currently await the outcome of an unexpected State Government review of the Central Sydney Planning Committee with some apprehension. Experience suggests that it is unlikely to be motivated by any intention of increasing community influence or local government influence.

While the short lived but expensive Metro is off the agenda, we have had one big win in public transport with the extension of the light rail to Circular Quay and to Dulwich Hill. This has been a longstanding Glebe Society campaign.

Harold Park Rezoning

Of immediate importance to our community has been the progress around the rezoning of the Harold Park and Tramsheds site in preparation for its sale and redevelopment. This has run all through the year and will continue as a major issue for us throughout the next year at least.

The process began well with the State Government's decision mid-2009 to refuse the Harness Pacing Club's request for it to take over the process under Part Three of the Planning Act. Minister Keneally's decision on this was in line with submissions from the Glebe Society and the City of Sydney Council. The fact that the process has been managed over the last year by the City of Sydney Council (Council) has allowed us and the community a great many opportunities for input and, I believe, a genuine opportunity to influence the outcomes. This would not have been possible had the Government taken it over as a Part Three process.

As soon as the Pacing Club announced its intention of seeking a rezoning of the site, we set up a Harold Park Working Party convened by Neil Macindoe with representatives from the Glebe, Forest Lodge and Annandale areas to identify the planning parameters we wanted to guide the rezoning and future development. These preliminary parameters were discussed with Council staff and forwarded formally to Council early in the process. In December 2009?? the Council held the first of its public consultations at a very crowded meeting of over 200 residents at Saint Scholastica's School. This was to provide information about the process, timeline and the broader political and planning context in which the Council had to work. The meeting was well organised and community feedback was generally positive. Importantly, the large turnout for a preliminary briefing sent a clear message about the strength of community interest in the future of the site.

In February 2010, the Council held its second public consultation at which we gained our first indications as to the thinking of the Council's consultants and, most importantly, the ideas of the Government Architects Office (GAO) who had been commissioned to draw up a preliminary urban design for the site. This meeting sent a major alarm throughout the community. There were major concerns with the preferred option put forward by the GAO and we were hindered in our analysis by the fact that the critical technical studies were not available.

There were positives: the draft urban design did make a conscious effort to respond to the major issues raised by at the previous consultation, including the preservation and adaptation of the heritage tram sheds and proposals for pedestrian and cycle paths. The concerns related to the population density, height of buildings (up to 8 stories and rising above the cliff face), inadequate (only 26% of the site) and poorly distributed public open space, increased transport congestion, silence on parking solutions and loss of public views. There was also widespread disappointment at what seemed to be a lost opportunity for more creative design options.

Following this meeting, the Glebe Society determined it essential to take a more public and inclusive leadership role with both our members and the wider community to develop a strong community consensus on the future of the site.

Throughout March and April we worked to develop our preliminary advice to Council into a more comprehensive set of planning principles. These were discussed and amended in discussions with over 400 residents at public meetings in April. On the 23rd April I forwarded to the Council the resulting community resolution that: *"This public meeting of Annandale, Forest Lodge and Glebe residents rejects the proposal put forward by the Government Architect's Office on 17 and 20 February, 2010, and requests a complete review of the controls for Harold Park implied in that proposal so that it includes the following objectives and related planning principles"*.

The resolution set out four core Objectives for the site supported by 15 planning principles – these can be read in full on the Glebe Society website. Our core determination was to: limit the height of buildings to cliff level at any point and, at the perimeter of the site, to the height of adjacent buildings; to allocate at least 35% of the site to public open space and to ensure that its location was more appropriate; ensure commercial/retail uses in the restored tramsheds are small scale and in harmony with uses in Annandale and Glebe shopping strips; incorporate affordable housing and ensure traffic implications are properly studied and impacts minimised.

Of central importance to our argument throughout has been our view – very widely supported in the community – that the Pacing Club, while entitled to a reasonable market based profit on the parts of the site it originally purchased, should not be entitled to a development windfall on the Tramsheds part of the site. This is a pivotal factor because obviously the expected profit margin is a major driver of arguments for increased density, and less public open space.

The Club acquired the publicly owned Tramsheds site largely with public money so they could build a sporting facility – urgently needed stables. This never eventuated and instead the Club has made a number of attempts to commercially develop the site- all of which have been previously refused by the Leichhardt Council. It is therefore reasonable that the Pacing Club should get an appropriate reimbursement for the sum they 'paid' – rather than a windfall development profit for the Tramsheds site. This is not an argument about legal title – it is about appropriate, fair and reasonable protection of the public interest.

These principles have provided us with a widely supported fighting platform and a clear framework for assessing the draft planning controls when they came up for consideration by Council and the Central Sydney Planning Committee (CSPC) in July.

The draft planning controls were a mixed bag and brought us to one of the critical stages in the overall rezoning process. For the process to continue draft planning controls had to be agreed by both Council and the CSPC AND by the Pacing Club. Only then will they proceed to go to the Minister for approval to be exhibited for public comment.

The major community wins in the draft planning controls were: 35% of the site dedicated as continuous open space to include a full sized sporting field; continued heritage status and adaptive restoration of the Tramsheds with 500 square metres to be under Council control for community uses and land for 50 units of public housing.

The major shortfalls in the proposals were: the height of the buildings at the perimeters of the site; the location of much of the public space along the cliff; the potential for the inclusion of large scale commercial/retail activity on the site and the failure to adequately respond to the traffic implications for the surrounding areas.

It was our expectation that the Pacing Club would oppose some of these positives and seek increased density and more development. It was, therefore, of great importance that the community position was strongly visible at the Council and the CSPC meetings to consider these controls. We called on members to attend these meetings and the response – particularly at the all important CSPC meeting on the 22nd July – was impressive, filling the chamber and overflowing into the gallery. All community speakers supported the Glebe Society's principles. The Glebe Society had three formal speakers at both the Council Planning Committee meeting and the CSPC meeting supporting the positives and arguing for movement on the shortfalls.

There was some movement from the Council in response to the community concerns. There will be further consideration of the location of the public open space and large scale block retail/commercial activities will be prohibited. We got no movement on the height of the buildings, although Council argued that the impact and visibility could be minimized by good design. We also argued that the amount of space allocated for community use in the restored Tramsheds should be increased from 500 to 1000 square metres. This is reasonable given the overall floor space of 7500 square metres but at this stage we have no indication that this will be incorporated.

Given all the pressures and the broad political context, it was a relief that both the Council and the CSPC endorsed the draft planning controls. They do go a considerable way towards protecting the public interest and constraining the drive for maximum windfall private profit from the site.

We have moved through an important, but preliminary and non-binding, stage of the rezoning process. However there is no certainty as to the eventual outcome. Before the draft controls can go to the Minister for approval to move to the next stage, the Pacing Club has to agree with the proposals.

At this point they have refused to do this. They have argued for less open space, greater density and for the inclusion of the land required for affordable housing into the open space allocation. They have the option of going directly to the Minister for Planning and asking him to intervene. The Minister has the option of agreeing to intervene on behalf of the Club or of declining.

At the point of writing, we do not know what decision will be made by the Pacing Club or the outcome of any further negotiations between Council/CSPC and the Pacing Club. Hopefully, if no voluntary agreement is reached, the current Minister will respect the Council/CSPC processes and the very strong community opposition to Ministerial intervention – as Kristina Keneally did when she was asked to take control of the process last year.

The best outcome for the community is that Pacing Club accepts the draft controls so the process can proceed under the aegis of the Council and the CSPC. In that case we could expect the public exhibition of the planning controls to be in September.

What we can be certain of is that there is a long way to go yet. If the next stage proceeds as we hope, we will have to gear up for a further defence of the positives in the proposals and a further attempt to address the building height and traffic issues. And then, one day in the future, after the sale of the site there will be a whole new round of debate around a development application. We will have done well if that DA has to comply with strong controls protecting the public interest in the site.

The Bays Precinct Community Reference Group

The other major planning issue throughout the year has been our participation in the ongoing Bays Precinct community consultation process.

At last year's AGM I reported that the viability of the recently established Bays Precinct Community Reference Group (CRG) hung in the balance and that the Glebe Society had written to the then Minister for Planning Kristina Keneally, indicating that if she wanted community participation, she needed to take urgent action to salvage the process. The Minister did respond positively and attended the next meeting of the CRG. The immediate issues were addressed and the CRG continued to meet with its last formal meeting being held on 1st March 2010.

Despite its very shaky start and ongoing tensions generated by the Government's determination to proceed with the relocation of the Passenger Terminal as a one off, non-negotiable decision, the CRG moved into a productive mode and eventually produced a Bays Precinct report including a strong set of Planning Principles and related recommendations for Government. These were made widely available through a printed Executive Summary and through both the SHFA and Glebe Society websites.

The CRG objectives for the Bays include: ending the long history of ad hoc decision making; reaffirmation of the primacy of the 'public good' over private benefit as the driver for future decision making; protection of the remaining publicly owned harbour and foreshores from further alienation; much greater access for the community to the foreshores- including continuous access except where precluded by safety or security reasons; restoration of headlands and heads of bays to the community as opportunity arises; safe access for passive water based recreation (rowing etc); recognition of our maritime and industrial history and conservation of heritage items; prohibition of major planning decisions without simultaneous provision for necessary transport infrastructure; exclusion of future private housing from direct foreshore frontage; maintenance of a contemporary 'working harbour' character; provision of major public art and cultural activities and of course best practice sustainability principles to be the new norm.

In addition the CRG recommended that the State Government establish a dedicated Bays Precinct Authority to overcome the current fragmentation of responsibility and proceed with its promised stage 2 of the consultation process with effective community participation.

There has been a lengthy silence from the Government since we submitted our report in March. The community members of the CRG have, however, continued to campaign to lift awareness of the significance of the Bays Precinct site and to publicise the CRG Planning Principles. The Glebe Society has played a leading role in this ongoing campaign. Meetings have been held with Sydney City Councillors, senior state public servants and government and opposition politicians.

A public meeting was held on the evening of 7th July to gain wider community support for the ongoing campaign to protect the Bays and foreshores from further ad hoc development and to defend the public interest in this harbour precinct.

This meeting was notable for the alliance of key local community groups as joint sponsors: the Glebe Society, Pyrmont Action, Pyrmont Progress, Blackwattle Cove Coalition, The Balmain Association, The Annandale Association, Sydney University Women's Rowing and the White Bay Joint Steering Committee.

Around 130-40 locals turned out and unanimously endorsed a resolution calling for Government adoption of the CRG principles and their related recommendations. The meeting also called on Premier Kristina Keneally and relevant Ministers and the Leader of the Opposition and relevant shadow Ministers to meet with the CRG members to discuss the CRG advice and the way forward.

While time is running out for the current State Government to deliver on its promised stage 2, we continue to work with other community groups, including the BCC, to protect the Bays Precinct from further poor planning decisions. Immediate priorities for our community are the planned refurbishment of the Fish Markets, the development of the nearby B1 and B2 wharves, the extension of the foreshores walk and the relocation of the Australian Heritage Fleet to the Bank Street part of Blackwattle Bay.

While our major point of coordination will continue to be through the BCC, one of the major outcomes of the Bays Precinct CRG process has been the stronger collaboration between the community groups around the Bays area. It is clear that such collaboration is essential if we are to have the capacity to ensure the public interest is properly represented in the future planning of the Bays Precinct.

Not surprisingly, there is a common purpose emerging between the CRG campaign and the Barangaroo campaign – after all if the CRG's proposed planning principles for the Bays Precinct had been in play for the Barangaroo site much of the current contentious proposal – including the excision of part of the harbour for a private hotel- would not have got off the ground.

As with Harold Park, we can be certain that issues in relation to the future of this extraordinary and strategic site will continue to be a major priority for the Glebe Society over the next year and beyond.

Other Issues

The level of interest in biodiversity issues in general and the activities of the Blue Wren Working Group has grown considerably throughout the year. There have been delays in Council responding to the Working Groups report and one unfortunate incident in which native plants were inadvertently removed from Paddy Gray Park in January. However, one of the positives has been the renewal of the very productive relationship with Council around this important and emerging area. The high level of participation –from afar as well as local- in the recent

community planting day at Paddy Gray Park is a clear indicator of strong interest in and support for our ongoing focus on a widening range of biodiversity issues.

We have maintained our active relationships with FLAG, COGG and local activities such as the Mitchell St fete (sadly cancelled because of rain this year) and will continue to strengthen our community development activities.

The Glebe Society has reiterated its support for public art activities including continued support for the Earth Sky art work around the fig trees at the end of Glebe Point Road.

We also took a very active role in supporting the Council's successful application for a DA to allow a low impact café seating 30 inside and 30 outside in Bellevue House on Blackwattle Bay. The controls have addressed reasonable concerns of immediate neighbours as to noise and parking and the hours, for at least the first year, will be a little shorter than had originally been proposed. This is a long awaited and widely supported decision to make use of the restored cottage. Council has recently advertised seeking expressions of interest to set up the café.

As is clear from the Treasurer's Report the Society continues in good financial health. Our administrative processes continue to be in good shape, but this has not been without effort. We have spent most of the year without a Secretary and Public Officer. Members of the Management Committee have, with their usual good will and professionalism, shared the tasks. This was greatly facilitated by the detailed and highly professional manual of procedures and records bequeathed to us by our last Secretary, Liz Simpson-Booker. As will be discussed at this AGM, we are proposing that the role, at least temporarily be split to provide for a Minutes Secretary and a Secretary/Public officer.

The management committee has dedicated considerable time and effort considering options for improved communication with members and the community. The public meetings around Harold Park and the Bays Precinct were in part an outcome of these discussions. The Bulletin continues to be our central publication and Edwina has maintained its quality and the diversity for another year. The development of the website has continued and has drawn positive comments from outsiders- including journalists- for its accessibility and relevance.

Relationships with Sydney City Council and our local Member of Parliament Verity Firth have continued to be strong and productive.

As seems to have been the general experience of my predecessors in the role, I have greatly enjoyed my two years as President of the Glebe Society and look forward to supporting my successor.

Lesley Lynch

President

The Glebe Society Inc

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