



Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association Inc.

Nelson Bay also in Double Trouble with Building Heights

The threats to the ambience of the Double Bay village raised in the Sydney Morning Herald on 27 January, are also playing out in one of the State's iconic coastal towns, Nelson Bay on Port Stephens.

In Double Bay the debate is whether the height limit should be 14.7 metres while in Nelson Bay the council is proposing a doubling of building heights from the current limit of 15 metres to 35 metres with an unconditional option to apply for more.

The President of the Tomaree Ratepayers and Residents Association (TRRA) representing the Nelson Bay community, Geoff Washington, on reading the recent SMH article, immediately recognised a parallel local conflict. He said "we have a similar amphitheatre topography providing magnificent views to the blue waters of Port Stephens which, with sensible planning, can be shared by stepping building heights upwards from the foreshore".

After five years of planning consultants' analyses and extensive consultations with the community, a 2012 Strategy, based on view sharing and protecting the coastal village ambience, was adopted by Port Stephens Council. A five-storey limit was agreed, with some sites identified where buildings of seven stories would be accepted if design excellence and contribution to the public domain could be demonstrated. This strategy did not make it to the revised 2013 Local Environment Plan.

Driven by a significant number of retail vacancies and an absence of development applications in the town centre, in 2017 the Council placed a Review of the 2012 Strategy on exhibition proposing an increase in building heights across the town centre. The Council argued that the higher limits would attract new residential apartment development aimed at permanent residents who would revitalise the commercial precinct.

The Residents Association has drawn attention to the fact that in Nelson Bay most of its high-rise apartments have vacancy rates around 75 percent. A high proportion have absentee owners who have the apartments only for weekends and holiday rentals. TRRA queries whether increased heights will trigger a building boom and whether this will improve year-round retail viability.

Recent local market trends indicate that the preference is for stand-alone dwellings, or demountable estates even in locations remote from the town

centre. High-rise apartments have had a history of financial failure and the highest mortgagee default rate in the State.

Unlike Double Bay, the Council exhibited its Review document in February 2017 resulting in 82 submissions from individuals and community groups. Its latest Implementation and Delivery Programme acknowledges that the “the vast majority of the submissions received was against any significant increase (in building heights)”. Despite this community opposition to lifting the lid on high-rise in their town centre, the latest proposal is for 35 metres or 10 storeys for most of the town and 12 storeys on the southern fringe.

TRRA believes that revitalisation of the town will be achieved by implementation of the 2012 proposals to seriously upgrade the public domain in the town centre including landscaping, parking and traffic management.

The Association also contends that the blanket doubling of height limits would dramatically increase the risk for developers, who could no longer guarantee water views. Most importantly the coastal village character of Nelson Bay could be transformed to that of the Gold Coast.

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