Independent Planning Commission

Level 3, 201 Elizabeth St

Sydney 2000

**SSD 7172 and SSD 7171 – Second referral**

Dear Commissioners,

I wish to express my opposition to Hume Coal’s applications (SSD 7172 and SSD 7171). The mine proposal continues to represent a real threat to the future of the Southern Highlands and to the residents of the Southern Highlands and as well as those of Sydney. The proposal presents a direct threat to the economy and residents of Berrima in particular.

As you are well aware, this issue has been hanging over the heads of the area residents for over 10 years, unresolved. The lack of certainty, which currently still leaves the potential for a mine approval, has created significant angst amongst area residents and adversely impacts the decisions of people who might otherwise invest in businesses suitable for the area, such as viticulture, agriculture or equestrian. There are many businesses of these types in the area and who are looking to develop them further, to the benefit of the community. However, the potential prospect of a coal mine with its physical and visual impact on the region has retarded many development decisions. It is time that a decision is made. Further delay cannot be warranted.

When the IPC last called for comments in 2018, as a resident and home owner in Berrima, I submitted a lengthy submission outlining my objections on the grounds of its adverse economic and community impacts. I note that since that time, Berrima has recently been awarded the NSW ‘Best Town under 5000’ people award. This award reflects the increasing popularity of Berrima as a tourist destination, including as a wedding destination. This popularity is based on recognition of the unique heritage attributes of Berrima and the bucolic atmosphere of the surrounding area. The introduction of the coal mine as planned will destroy that atmosphere, turn off tourists, and adversely impact an economy that is only just recovering.

I note that all the advice from NSW Government entities is that the mine should not proceed for a number of significant reasons. I agree those assessments. I will not regurgitate my original submission, but agree the advice to the NSW Government and note:

The project fails on a number of fronts and this has not changed.

* Hume’s position on groundwater modelling has not changed. The estimated 118 bores that have been calculated by Hume to be impacted over life of the mine are sufficient for the refusal of the project. The impact on existing farms etc would be devastating. The proposed ‘make good’ arrangements for depleted bores were declared unacceptable and unworkable in the DPIE Preliminary assessment. Hume has tried to make the argument that other mining projects had similar groundwater impacts, but this claim is not based in fact. Tahmoor cannot be seen as a parallel to Hume due to differences in geology, depth of mine (350 m at Tahmoor vs 120 m average at Hume) and the fact that the forecast impacts at Tahmoor are small and the long history of mining in the Tahmoor area provides some confidence in the forecasts.
Hume’s plans involve the financial compensation to landowners in the event that ‘make good’ becomes unworkable, amounting to the confiscation of landowner water entitlements. This is totally unacceptable.
* Water NSW are not convinced that all of the water produced in the mine can be stored underground in a timely manner. In this event the mine water dam may overflow into catchment waterways, the water being untreated due to the project cancelling an earlier plan to have water treatment on site. The Wingecarribee River is only now starting to recover from the impact of leeching from the long-closed Medway mine. A similar occurrence cannot be allowed to occur.
Water NSW consider the lack of a contingency plan for water treatment facilities to be an unacceptable risk, given the cost of the plant (around $100m) and the length of time it would take to install such facilities.
* Mine design issues: Hume has stated they have no interest in changing their defective mine plan. The DPIE advisors on mine design and subsidence have taken a strong position on the risks associated with the current mine plan. The risk of failure of the web pillars is significant and could have serious implications for the safety of mine workers and related environmental and economic impacts. The DPIE advisors particularly point to impact on groundwater assumptions in this event.
* The potential for the mine to impact the Sydney water supply reserve is well documented.
* The Resources Regulator has reinforced its concerns on the viability of the mine plan, particularly the impact of the mine on critical infrastructure, the Hume Motorway, the Sydney Moomba gas pipeline and major communication cables. The agency considers that the current plans to avoid catastrophic damage to this infrastructure by mining are inadequate due to uncertainty surrounding Hume’s subsidence predictions and the shallow depth of the mine.
* Economics of the project: The DPIE and Hume have agreed on a figure for the expected financial benefits from the project, higher than in the original assessment from the department, but lower than might have been expected from a similar project. They note however, that the benefits of the project may be overstated if uncertainties are taken into account, and in any event are offset by the negative impacts of the project on the community.
* Associated railway operations. The proposal includes a new rail line and coal loading facility. Congestion on NSW coastal rail lines means that the majority of Hume Coal operations would necessarily be at night, with attendant industrial and train noise. The volumes of coal predicted necessitating up to 8 trains per day through what currently are rural communities. Hume Coal’s contention that their trains will be the quietest in the world and will not allow any dust to escape is risible.
* Hume Coal offers no evidence to support its contention that it would provide significant employment for Southern Highlands locals. Mining is a specialised business. Any construction of the mining infrastructure predominantly would necessarily be by specialist companies already existing within the industry. Similarly, ongoing operations would be by trained personnel imported into the area for the task. Any jobs for locals would be in administrative or minor support or catering posts. It is highly unlikely that the number of those positions would exceed the number of local jobs that would be lost in the rural and tourism sectors if the mine proceeded.
* Direct impact on Berrima town. The mine, in particular the planned above-ground coal storage and rail loading facility, present direct threats to Berrima town. The wind data and effect on the above-ground coal storage at the loading facility as presented to the last IPC by Hume Coal was comprehensively shown to be false. Berrima is regularly subject to significant (8okph +) winds, particularly in August, from the south west, the direction of the mine from the town. There is significant potential, as demonstrated by dust blown onto town from the mine area, for coal dust to be spread over the town. The town also will be directly impacted by the proposed number of coal trains and associated noise and night light pollution.
* The lack of social license for this project is absolutely clear. Two successful petitions (15,000 signatures 2017 and 13,000 signatures 2018 ) to the NSW Parliament that forced debate on the moratorium of coal mining in the Southern Highlands and an Upper House enquiry. Over 12,000 opposing submissions to the Planning Dept in response to The Hume EIS, with approximately 5,000 from the Local Government Area. There were 4,000 submissions to the first IPC hearing, with an overwhelming percentage opposing the project - 97%. Independent research conducted by Galaxy Poll in the WSC LGA showed a majority were against the proposals. Community opposition to this project will not go away and the community remains very strongly opposed.

Hume’s standard response to the management of the identified uncertainties is to say that the project should be approved and operations ‘adapted’ to manage any issues as they occur, which is inconsistent with the precautionary principle. All evidence is that the unproved proposed operations will not work.

In any deliberations, there is a principle that natural justice must be afforded to all parties. I contend that over the past several years, Hume Coal has been provided what might be regarded as a surfeit of natural justice, as evidenced by this second IPC. The weight of evidence provides enough issues of concern for the IPC to rule this project out entirely and for the residents of the Southern Highlands to finally be given certainty as to the future of the area.

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