

RE: SSD 8135 Pemulwuy Project Redfern - New Student Accommodation Building

I write in support of the proposal for the student housing building proposed to precinct 3 of the Pemulwuy Project proposed by the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC).

I have been spokesperson of the local community group REDWatch that has supported Aboriginal Housing on the Block since it was set up in 2004. I have also sat on the Redfern Waterloo Authority's Built Environment Ministerial Advisory Committee and during the fight over planning controls for the block was part of the AHC's Pemulwuy Visioning Taskforce.

For years, I have been involved in trying to see Aboriginal Affordable Housing rebuilt on The Block and watched the AHC's attempts to try to gain funding for the project after the NSW Government withdrew funding when they could not control the redevelopment. In the absence of government, funding to build the housing I understand the AHC has no other alternative than to leverage their landholding adjacent to the Block alongside the railway line to fund the affordable housing component.

Affordable Housing is not market housing and hence its construction is not commercially fundable under the current investment settings. This is particularly so when the land is iconic, like Redfern's Block, and hence subject to sovereign risk for any commercial lender.

Affordable housing in the city of Sydney area is built with contribution funds from developer contributions from Pyrmont Ultimo and Green Square. In the absence of external funding Aboriginal organisations have to find ways to use their land assets to sustainably self-fund socially beneficial projects like Affordable Housing.

I note contrary to the Q&A produced by the DPE that the AHC application was to increase the approved 6-storey building to 16 storeys. The DPE Q&A says that the application from the AHC was for a 24-storey building - this is not correct. This mistake has led some people to misunderstand what the AHC requested and how it became the 24-storey project on exhibition.

The AHC requested a height and floor space roughly in line with the zoning on the other side of the railway line. This approach is in line with current government thinking that density should be placed in close proximity to railway stations like Redfern. UrbanGrowth are proposing significant uplift on the planning controls at North Eveleigh to allow up to 20 storeys a much greater distance by foot from Macdonaldtown station with access to just a single platform. UrbanGrowth have argued that placing such buildings along the railway line can lessen the impact of such large buildings as is seen in the shadow diagrams for this development, which fall predominantly across the railway line in mid-winter.

It is important to understand the context within which the planning controls for both sides of the railway line were set. The Redfern Waterloo Authority (RWA) removed both areas from Council control because the state government considered them state significant. This removed this area from the Darlington conservation area and determined that the area within which the Pemulwuy project was situated would be treated differently to the surrounding area.

While the eastern side was provided 18-storey and 7:1 floor space the controls on the Block were used by the RWA to try to prevent the AHC's Pemulwuy project - residential floor-space was reduced

and commercial floor space increased on land owned by a dedicated housing company. The Government were prepared to fund the project if they controlled the land rather than the AHC. The AHC's rejection of the government's proposal to sign over control The Block for a period saw the government no longer support Aboriginal Housing on The Block. The AHC and the bulk of the Redfern Aboriginal community opposed the transfer of the Block - it was one of the few times I have seen all the key organisations and community leaders in the same room. This struggle between the then Minister for Redfern/Waterloo, Frank Sartor, and the AHC has been well documented on the website of community group REDWatch and in various articles.

Because of this battle over The Block, there is good reason to argue that the zoning produced for the AHC's land by the Minister and the RWA discriminated against the AHC. As the UrbanGrowth, review of North Eveleigh has shown it is also likely a less politicised and more recent rezoning process would allow for much higher zonings on the western side of the railway line in proximity to Redfern Station. It is hence not unreasonable that the AHC should request a variation for that part of the site where that height will have least impact.

Based on this argument the AHC should be able to gain an uplift across the entirety of their site. On that basis, concentrating that potential uplift on the part of the site where it will have least impact should be seen as a reasonable proposal.

I am of the view that the AHC's initial proposal for similar controls to the Gibbons Regent Streets belt is a reasonable request. Do I like the 18 storey buildings on either side? Not really, but if a developer can build them on the eastern side then I see no reason why an aboriginal not for profit developer should not be able to build a similar density on the other side of the railway line.

As the increased height, above the height controls on the eastern side of the lines, has come from the design excellence process I think this has to be dealt with in a different way to how it would be dealt with had that been the initial application. The use of buildings onto Eveleigh Street as a podium improves the presentation and ascetics of the revised proposal and this should be assessed based on the design process set by DPE and the Government Architect.

While the AHC is a not for profit Aboriginal housing provider it is important that this development be assessed purely on its merits. DPE has been undertaking work with Land councils about how they can best leverage their land assets for their communities' advantage. I am aware from one Sydney University forum at which DPE presented, that Aboriginal development projects often attract a higher number of objections than similar non-Aboriginal developments.

This application is even more complex as it is an application for student housing which aims to fund an Aboriginal Affordable Housing project. If this proposal falls over then it puts at risk the Aboriginal housing. There are some within the community who would prefer the Pemulwuy Project not to go ahead and for The Block to remain vacant and stopping this project is potentially a way of killing off the Pemulwuy Project.

It is important to also understand that the Redfern Aboriginal Community is in fact a number of communities with a range of views and historical connections and animosities to organisations, clans, families and individuals.

These differences also come into play in the engagement and exhibition phases of this development.

It should already be apparent from the pre-submission consultation report that the AHC has some very vocal Aboriginal opponents within the community. The pre-submission report makes it clear that at the community meeting, which needed to be shut down, the AHC did not even get as far as presenting the architects report on what was proposed before presenters were shouted down and the meeting ended. Much of this opposition seems aimed at the AHC over historical differences and seems to have little to do with the actual details of Pemulwuy project.

As some of the issues above will come into play in submissions, it is important that the Department deal with the application on its planning merits and not on the level of the noise.

While it would be nice if there was funding that would allow for the entirety of the project to be Aboriginal, sufficient funding has not been found, so it becomes necessary to fund the affordable project with a commercial student housing arrangement. This stepping away from a handout and be controlled mentality should be welcomed. As a consequence Aboriginal organisations need to look to mainstream commercial options to fund projects and leveraging their land to be able to fund projects is one way of doing this - even if it might not suit the purists.

The Block has stood vacant for too long already when it could have been providing affordable housing for Aboriginal people. I support the student-housing proposal for Precinct 3 because student housing is needed for education institutions in the area and because it will fund the delivery of the much-needed affordable housing component of the Pemulwuy Project in Redfern. In addition, I support the project because it is in line with high-rise developments around railway stations and it is consistent with planning controls on the eastern side of the railway line.