

Mr Robert Domm
CEO, Redfern-Waterloo Authority
PO Box 3332
Redfern NSW 2016

18 April 2006
Ref: 0406_4174kk

Dear Mr Domm

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Redfern-Waterloo Authority's draft Built Environment Plan (Stage One).

As you would be aware, the electorate of Heffron currently covers the suburb of Waterloo and parts of Eveleigh. Following the redistribution of state electoral boundaries in 2007, the Heffron electorate will also include the suburb of Redfern bounded by the railway line to the west, Cleveland Street to the north, and South Dowling Street to the east.

As such, I will comment mainly on those geographic areas in the draft Built Environment Plan (BEP) that are within the state seat of Heffron.

I do note, however, that there has been much discussion publicly regarding the future of the area known as 'the Block', which is owned by the Aboriginal Housing Company. The Block is currently in the state seat of Bligh, and will be redistributed to the state seat of Marrickville at the 2007 election.

Whilst this area is just outside of Heffron, I do recognise that issues don't stop at electoral boundaries and the level of community debate means that residents within Heffron may be interested in the future of the Block. As such, I will also comment on the Plan's proposed zoning for this area.

I would be happy to discuss any of these comments more fully with the Redfern-Waterloo Authority:

1. Re Proposed Land Use Zones

Prior to the release of the draft Built Environment Plan there had been concern in the community – most of it created by the media without much basis – that the State Government's intention was to use the RWA to create high-density residential development on the 8 RWA strategic sites.

The draft BEP shows that the State Government's intent is to use the RWA to create employment and educational opportunities for residents in the local community.

In fact, the draft BEP demonstrates that vast majority of the sites – 7 of the 8 – will be primarily used for community and employment purposes.

2. Criticisms of the draft BEP

I have been disappointed that many of the critics of the draft BEP – especially in the Sydney media and the Lord Mayor – have failed to engage comprehensively with the previous draft plans put out by the RWA: the Human Services Plan and the Enterprise and Employment Plan. By viewing the draft BEP as a stand alone document – that is, by not reading it in context of the other plans for the area – its critics often miss the mark by not understanding the outcomes the RWA is trying to achieve.

For example, I have read criticism that the business zones the RWA proposes to create on its strategic sites will not create employment opportunities for local people. However, this is a mistaken observation made by not reading the draft BEP in conjunction with Enterprise and Employment Plan, which details the education, training and employment opportunities the RWA looks to create on its sites.

That is not to say that all criticism of the draft BEP is invalid. Many residents have contacted me to express their views on the future of the reserve at Marian Street, which the draft BEP designates for an 18-storey building.

I do accept the residents' concerns that open space is a valued commodity in the inner city, and their sadness at the potential loss of this reserve. However, I am less certain that the current use of the reserve at Marian Street is the most appropriate, given the economic and social challenges in the area. But I would urge the RWA to ensure that the draft BEP reflects residents' desires to have access to appropriate open space within Redfern and Waterloo and in particular in the Marian Street area.

3. Redevelopment of Redfern Railway Station

I wholeheartedly welcome the re-zoning of the Redfern Railway Station insofar as it encourages redevelopment of the Station. Since my election as the Member for Heffron in 2003 I have received many representations from residents about the

amenity, safety, accessibility, and capacity of the Redfern Railway Station. I am certain that a redeveloped Redfern Station, which was flagged by the Minister for Transport earlier this month in the Parliament, will provide a strong incentive for the economic and social regeneration that the RWA seeks to achieve.

4. Redfern Public School site

I am most excited by the proposed re-zoning of the Redfern Public School site. For the past 4 years I have advocated that the Redfern Public School site should remain available for community use. The sale of the site in 2005 to the Indigenous Land Corporation for a national Aboriginal youth sports and development centre ensures that the site serves as an educational and training facility for both local indigenous young people and their counterparts across Australia.

The zoning of the site, particularly where heritage of the school buildings is preserved, provides the community with the confidence that the character and use of Redfern Public School site will not alter significantly – with the exception of enhanced access and open space provisions.

5. Eveleigh Street and the Block

Critics of the draft BEP seem to suggest that the Aboriginal Housing Company (AHC) should, as owners of the Block, have the right to build whatever they wish on their land without being subject to zoning controls in the Plan.

One of the strongest advocates of this point of view is Ms Elizabeth Farrelly. Ms Farrelly has written in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the draft BEP is a “calculated removal of the city’s oldest continuous Aboriginal population from its own land” and “entails replacing virtually all its housing with commercial development.”

In fact, the draft BEP proposes zoning for 30 residential dwellings, which gives the AHC certainty that it can *increase* the residential component of its land from the 19 dwellings currently standing on the Block.

In addition, the Minister has repeatedly offered to support the AHC’s goal of attaining 62 residential dwellings throughout the suburbs of Redfern and Waterloo.

Given the terrible way in which Aboriginal people were dispossessed of their land, and their long and courageous fight for native title rights, I can see why the argument that Government shouldn’t impose zoning restrictions on the AHC has emotional appeal.

But ultimately it’s a racist argument to claim that Aboriginal people are so victimised that the rules don’t apply to them. It sets Aboriginal people apart and means they are neither accountable for their actions nor able to participate fully in Australian society.

The Government applies zoning restrictions on all landowners in NSW, and if it were to refuse to do so on the Block it would be pandering to “white-flight conscience salve” (to use Ms Farrelly’s words) – that is, to those who advocate the Government should permit the AHC to develop unsustainable and inappropriate density on its site.

The key to revitalising Redfern and Waterloo lies in creating jobs and opportunities – that is, economic activity that local in which local people can participate – not just building more residential development.

It is remarkable that the critics of the draft BEP condemn any suggestion that the RWA increase residential development and/or density sites owned by the State Government but are happy to advocate increased residential density on a site owned by the AHC.

What is also notable is that the AHC and its supporters have a track record of trying to publicly ridicule those people who criticise their plans. A Project Director at the AHC, Mr Peter Valilis, sent me an email in which he made an insulting comment about certain groups of people of Aboriginal background, and then asked me to distribute the email to my mailing list. I have not done so as I believe the email is at least an undeserved attack on these people and at most defamatory. Ms Farrelly has also used her column in the SHM to pass judgment on the critics of the AHC, rather than to debate the criticisms they raise.

I make this point to demonstrate that some within the AHC and their supporters have quite possibly succeeded in a campaign of intimidation to silence those people who raise concerns about the AHC’s proposed plans for the Block. As the state member I am aware of organisations and residents, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, who do not support the AHC and its current plans for the Block. However, I am also aware that most will not say so publicly – quite possibly because they fear the reprisals that may follow.

I think it is important to contrast this approach with that of the Minister for Redfern and Waterloo and the RWA. I acknowledge that the Minister made a notable mistake in his dealings with the AHC – as has he, and he has repeatedly apologised. He has also continuously kept the door open to the AHC and asked them to work with the Government towards a sustainable future for the Block. The RWA has put all three of its plans out for public comment, encouraging local groups and residents – whether they agree or not with the plans – to make submissions, to participate in focus groups, and to provide feedback in a variety of ways to the plans.

6. Stage II of the Draft BEP

I note that Stage II of the draft BEP will examine the future of public and affordable housing in the Redfern and Waterloo area – crucial factors in the revitalisation of the area.

I also note and welcome that the RWA has already re-stated the Government's commitment to public housing, including the commitments that all public housing tenancies are secure, that current residents will not be disadvantaged and that there will be no cuts to the amount of public housing.

Kind regards

Kristina Keneally MP
MEMBER FOR HEFFRON