

Suburb's charm 'at risk'

Residents to lose voice if DA verdicts are left to independent panels, councillors say

Steven Deare

HUNTERS Hill could lose its suburban character if a State Government-appointed panel is installed to decide on development applications, councillors say.

The council will appeal to Planning Minister and Lane Cove state Liberal MP Anthony Roberts to abandon introducing independent hearing and assessment panels.

The panels, usually comprising four people, would decide complex building DAs. People with planning experience would be appointed as well as a community member.

the council appeal to Mr Roberts.

Hunters Hill will put its concerns to Mr Roberts and support the Local Government Association of NSW's calls to revoke the panels.

However, the resolution included measures to prepare for the panel requested by staff.

They will determine criteria for the panel's community member, a code of conduct, an education campaign for residents and ask the government to financially assist introducing the system.

Mayor Mark Bennett and councillors Elizabeth Krassoi, Justine McLaughlin and Jim Sanderson

The government says removing councillors from planning decisions reduces risk of corruption and cites Independent Commission Against Corruption recommendations.

The panels are to be introduced to all councils in Sydney and Wollongong by March 1.

Yet deputy mayor Ross Williams said the panels carried a threat as significant as the government's recent council amalgamation agenda.

He said residents would lose their voice on what type of buildings went up if councillors were replaced.

Cr Williams successfully moved at a meeting on Monday night that

voted for the motion. Liberal councillors Ben Collins and Zac Miles voted against.

Cr Collins said the resolution was confusing for staff, who needed to prepare for the panel's introduction.

"The reality is it's happening and we need to get ready for it," he said.

"The idea of denying this is happening is not practical."

Cr Miles said staff needed time to call for and assess the best community representative for the panel.

The motion did not effectively allow for this, according to Cr Miles.

The panels have also been controversial at Ryde Council.