

Hunters Hill's war on planning panels: Council demands Anthony Roberts face residents

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Hunters Hill has become our first local council to openly oppose the NSW Government's law to remove planning powers from councillors and has challenged Planning Minister and Lane Cove MP Anthony Roberts to front a council meeting and face the wrath of the local community.



Hunters Hill Deputy Mayor Ross Williams Planning Minister Anthony Roberts MP

The new law will come into force from March next year and hands planning powers for developments under five million dollars to council staff while developments above this figure will go to panels chaired by Mr Roberts' appointees and served by two government backed experts and a sole community voice.

The new law will also give the panels the right to seize control of development applications where ten or more residents object to it and where developers offer community cash and other "incentives" as part of voluntary planning agreements.

Hunters Hill Council was told last Monday night that heritage will only be considered if the heritage building is targeted for demolition and the panels also control the development of licenced premises and entertainment venues.

The planning panels will control major developments in Gladesville as well as proposed council developments – such as the Ryde Civic Centre – and major government/civic/private partnerships such as the proposed commuter carpark at Eastwood Oval.

Hunters Hill Council has sent a ten-point letter of objection to Mr Roberts with councillors voting five to two to slam the new laws as the greatest threat to the heritage municipality since the failed forced mergers.

Councillor Zac Miles did not vote in favour of the ten-point objection and stressed that the new law had been developed to stop corruption.

“This is a law passed by both houses of NSW Parliament on recommendations arising from the ICAC,” Cr Miles said.



Phil Jenkyn Save Hunters Hill Municipality



Clr Zac Miles

More experienced fellow-councillors dismissed the notion ICAC’s link to the new law gave it credibility, instead suggesting it was an affront to democracy and would ensure “corruption will flourish”.

Deputy Mayor Ross Williams – who drafted the ten-point objection – rubbished Clr Miles claim.

“They talk about corruption, they talk about ICAC but there’s never been a history of corruption here and you don’t persecute Hunters Hill on this basis,” the Deputy Mayor said.

“This law is reprehensible and this is the most significant issue Hunters Hill has ever faced.

“It is a law that is politically driven by the Minister.

“We only just fought off an attempt to destroy Hunters Hill’s democracy and this is equally devastating.

Councillor Justine McLaughlin also denounced the new law.

“It doesn’t reduce corruption, it internalises it,” Clr McLaughlin said.

“I also find it reprehensible that councillors elected to protect Hunters Hill should be completely shut out of planning decisions and the cost shifting of these panels back on ratepayers is incomprehensible arrogance.”

Save Hunters Hill Municipality spokesman Phil Jenkyn backed Clr McLaughlin.

“Corruption will flourish under this Act because the planning panel members appointed by the Planning Minister will be consultants for property developers and consultants for the government,” he said.

“Councillors don’t bring corruption, they bring an extra dimension to the planning process because they actually live here and can see the impact of a proposed development on the municipality as a whole, including roads and traffic.”



Clr Justine McLaughlin



Clr Jim Sanderson

Newly elected Councillor Jim Sanderson said Mr Roberts has a fight on his hands.

“We can’t submit ourselves to this legislation and we can’t prepare for the worst and so we must fight this legislation, which is wrong.”

The ten-point objection passed by the council calls on Mr Roberts to attend a council meeting and explain how the new panels will improve planning outcomes for Hunters Hill, protect conservation areas and replace planning controls that have protected Hunters Hill for the last 156 years.

Mr Roberts will also be grilled on why the new law was “rushed through” NSW Parliament within days of the forced mergers being scrapped and how the panels will be accountable to Hunters Hill ratepayers.

Hunters Hill has also called on this year’s NSW Local Government Conference in Sydney to vote to revoke the law.

In place of ads in this newspaper calling for interested people to apply for jobs as community representatives on the panels, councillors voted to conduct an education campaign to “inform the community of changes” in the planning determination process.

Of particular concern to councillors is restrictions of community panel members having a “vested interest” in planning decisions.

“The panel chairman is a government appointee, the two experts on the panel are pre-selected by the government and the community representative can’t have a vested interest, such as being a member of the Hunters Hill Trust,” Deputy Mayor Williams said.

“What would four bureaucrats know about responsible planning in Hunters Hill?”

“The community is fed up and we (councillors) must now ensure that our community is protected and our heritage is protected.”

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