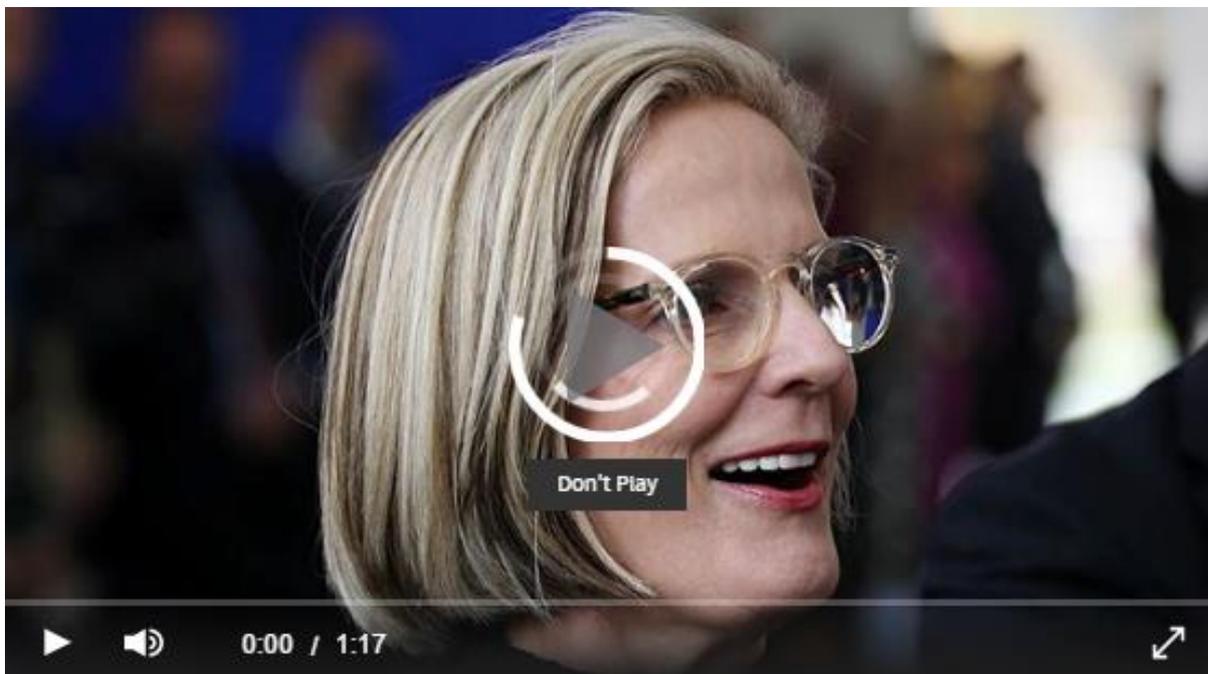


# Mike Baird's concern for WestConnex residents not matched by his actions

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**Richard Capuano received a letter from Roads and Maritime Services this week. It purported to be some good news – finally – for the long-suffering St Peters resident.**

**Capuano has been locked in combat with the state government agency over its plans to build the \$16.8 billion WestConnex motorway.**



*Lucy Turnbull unaware of heritage destruction*

*Greater Sydney Commission chair Lucy Turnbull tells ABC 702 radio she is 'not aware' of the demolition of heritage Haberfield homes for the WestConnex motorway.*

Just like Arthur Dent in *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, Capuano's house is in the way and is being compulsorily acquired to make way for the Sydney version of Douglas Adams' intergalactic bypass.

As Capuano will tell you, he understands the need for the acquisition in the name of infrastructure provision.

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The problem is, like many residents in St Peters, Haberfield and elsewhere in the same situation, he feels the offer made to him by RMS is woefully inadequate.

As Fairfax Media has highlighted, the agency is even forcing him to pay rent for the privilege of staying in what was until recently his own home, while he contemplates a legal appeal. So what was the good news?

"In response to concerns raised, Roads and Maritime Services has changed its policy so that landowners are not financially disadvantaged as a result of their property being acquired," the letter announced.



*Rent reduction: RMS policy change on compulsory acquisition was apparently endorsed by Premier Mike Baird. Photo: Janie Barrett*

But if Capuano's hopes were raised by that sentence, they were dashed by the next, which explained that his rent would not be waived, but reduced.

The new policy is to simply ensure that the amount of rent payable is not more than the interest being earned on the compensation offer being held in escrow by RMS.

In other words, RMS will continue to take interest that is being earned by the homeowner and use it to pay itself rent.

Understandably, Capuano is insulted by this response to his concerns, which amounts to a rent reduction from \$665 to \$509 per week.

The sting remains. It is hard to see it as anything other than a means of financially pressuring owners into settling.



*Richard Capuano must pay rent to the RMS while living in the home he bought 18 years ago. Photo: Kate Geraghty*

It is a classic example of a large government department having a tin ear – or outright disdain - for the plight of individuals caught up in a situation through no fault of their own.

The extraordinary thing is that it was apparently endorsed by Premier Mike Baird after his public mea culpa a couple of months ago.

In June, Baird defended WestConnex but added: "There are personal individual cases where people's homes have been acquired and I think the way we've gone about it hasn't been as careful as it should have been." Then this.

It's even more astounding given that another of Baird's responses to criticism over the compulsory acquisitions was to announce the appointment of the inaugural NSW Customer Service Commissioner, Michael Pratt, to work with the RMS on the way it manages them.

Pratt, a former banker, oversaw the rollout of the government's Service NSW "one-stop shops".

According to Baird, his newly announced role was to "assist RMS with its property acquisition process, and bring the same customer centric approach used to introduce Service NSW, to WestConnex".

"The acquisition process in particular has been very difficult for communities and, as we continue work on the project, I want to make sure we're capturing lessons and making improvements to the way we understand and work those most impacted," Baird said at the time.

So far Capuano has notched up a legal bill of about \$30,000 and is preparing to head to the Land and Environment Court. That is set to cost tens of thousands more.

He is but one of a number of people doing the same. Each of these cases will need to be defended by RMS using its own legal team – and significant taxpayer dollars.

Meanwhile, the government continues to keep confidential a report it commissioned from David Russell, SC, into how to reform the compulsory acquisition system to make it fairer.

It was handed to the government two years ago, amid the ramp up of the massive acquisition program for WestConnex, the CBD light rail and Sydney Metro.

The Premier's rhetoric about the need to look after affected communities is important. But if his words are not being matched with action, they will continue to ring hollow.

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/mike-bairds-concern-for-westconnex-residents-not-matched-by-his-actions-20160818-gqve0a.html>