

IHAPs equals mishaps

Hills to Hawkesbury

14 October 2017



Mayor of The Hills Shire, Dr Michelle Byrne is asking the NSW Government to exempt Council from adhering to Independent Hearing and Assessment Panels (IHAPs).

Mayor Byrne said she was disappointed Council's good and reliable reputation had been overlooked by the State Government after laws were passed to take development assessment controls away from Councils for developments valued at more than \$5 million.

"IHAPs are useful if they are used voluntarily or when a Council is underperforming and the Minister for Planning needs to put in a structure or a process to restore confidence in the decision-making process on planning matters," Mayor Byrne said.

"The Hills Shire has always worked dutifully and within its legal parameters, and to be tarnished with the corruption brush and for all Councils to be labelled 'dodgy' and doing 'dirty backroom deals' when there's only a handful of Councils doing the wrong thing, is incredibly hurtful.

“We are a strong Council, with an impeccable record of approvals and conduct.

“We are accountable to the community and we work incredibly hard to make sure the right developments are placed in the right locations and create benefits for the entire community,” Mayor Byrne added.

Mayor Byrne said Council has always worked closely with the NSW Government to improve the development and planning system, but allowing IHAPs to assess local developments was a step too far.

“It hasn’t been all sunshine and roses when dealing with planning panels,” Mayor Byrne said.

“We have seen decisions made by members who know little about our region and in return it’s Council who receives the blame for these poor and uninformed decisions.

“Further, planning panels are not really held accountable for development authorisations they make. Whereas Council receives a report, the report is then debated and a decision is made in the full view of the public as part of the normal business of Council Meetings.

“And who is to say these IHAP members don’t have any conflicts of interest? The Minister stated panel members themselves will be subject to statutory rules such as a compulsory code of conduct and operational procedures, but how can we truly know what work the panel members have done in the past for applicants.

“When you look at the types of persons suitable for appointment to IHAPs, they are generally people who have worked with developers.

“The Minister wants to stop corruption, but in a way, these planning panels undermine their true intent.”

In the last financial year, Council dealt with \$2.3 billion worth of built form development.

Just over one per cent of applications had their DAs determined at a meeting of Council.

Less than one per cent of DAs were determined by a Joint Regional Planning Panel and another two per cent of applications were assessed by Council's Development Assessment Unit, which is made up of Council's senior planning staff and meets on a weekly basis.

The remaining 96 per cent of applications were determined under delegation by Council staff.

Mayor Byrne said assessment times and costs would be greatly impacted as a result of IHAPs.

"IHAPs will add considerable delay to the development assessment process and add no demonstrable benefit to the applicant and Council," Mayor Byrne said.

"The cost to run just one IHAP meeting is estimated at \$7,500.

"As a fiscally responsible Council, we don't see the benefits of using rate payers money to fund these meetings, especially since they are doing the same role of Council."

Council sent a letter to the Minister for Planning, Anthony Roberts MP, on 25 August 2017, requesting a meeting to discuss an exemption.

No meeting has been arranged.

<http://hillstohawkesbury.com.au/ihaps-equals-mishaps/>