

# NSW Planning Minister launched pro-developer group headed by his friend



*NSW Planning Minister Anthony Roberts. Picture: AAP*

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Andrew Clennell  
NSW Political Editor

At a time when the NSW government is under fire on the issue of “overdevelopment”, NSW Planning Minister Anthony Roberts launched a new pro-developers group headed by his friend and former campaign manager Bill Pickering, featuring developers set to benefit from the government’s new “priority precincts”.

About six months ago, Mr Roberts launched the Housing Supply Association, whose interim chief executive is the head of PR firm Hugo Halliday, Bill Pickering, who was Ryde mayor at the time. Mr Pickering used to employ one of Mr Roberts’s staffers, Nathaniel Smith, son of former attorney-general Greg Smith, at his PR firm.

Also speaking at the launch was Mr Smith’s brother Jerome.

The head of the board of the “not for profit” HSA is Ghassy Bayni, a developer and former nightclub owner.

Mr Bayni was once described by businessman Rodney Adler as his “eyes and ears” until the pair fell out.

Mr Bayni said yesterday he was approached by his lawyers, Madison Marcus — who have two board members on the association — to chair the organisation and that it was about helping ensure there was more affordable housing in developments. He also pointed out that Malcolm Turnbull, in his former life as a merchant banker, could be described as having dealings with Mr Adler.

The vice-chairman of the HSA is Joseph Chiha, the head of Showground Corporation, responsible for a planned development causing controversy with local MPs David Elliott and Ray Williams in northwest Sydney.

Last month, a new plan was issued by the planning department for that site.

The creation of the association has raised eyebrows with some of Mr Roberts's colleagues.

Mr Pickering defended it yesterday as an "altruistic" organisation that would not benefit developers.

He said he was not paid as interim CEO, although his firm received funds for marketing the association. "The problem we have out there is everyone looks at developers and they're demonised to a certain extent."

He said the organisation was about making sure there was enough apartments for first-home buyers and essential-service workers in developments and ensuring government policy settings let that happen.

Mr Bayni later said in a statement: "I got involved as I recognised the difficulties young people and key workers have finding affordable housing. I became aware of the association being established through my lawyers.

"The HSA's role is to review, assess and put forward policy options to government regarding affordable housing. Some comments have been made on government policy initiatives, but we are yet to present a policy paper. HSA does not lobby government on individual developments."

At the launch of the organisation, Mr Roberts said he wanted to acknowledge "my dear friend Bill Pickering ... and I see many, many friendly faces, people I've known for many years."

"I welcome the HSA as a new and important voice at the table for housing affordability," he said.

"The HSA have ability to have direct intervention on supply issues.

"The people in the room here are the ones building homes for families and first-home buyers. This government has a good record on supply and I'm looking to ramp that up.

"As a minister ... I'm ... committed to removing the red tape to ensure quality buildings get built faster across Sydney and NSW."

A spokesman for Mr Roberts yesterday denied any conflict over his relationship with Mr Pickering.

"The minister has always been, and continues to be, compliant with his obligations as a minister and member of parliament."

<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/state-politics/nsw-planning-minister-launched-prodeveloper-group-headed-by-his-friend/news-story/d2d11dc86ff7d63d8ef92382562df58f>