

29 April 2014

Kim Ellis
Executive Director
Sydney Parklands and Botanic Gardens
kim.ellis@environment.nsw.gov.au

Dear Kim

Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust Master Plan

Preparation of a master plan is vital to ensure the community's long term vision for the Royal Botanic Gardens and the Domain is achieved and the precinct is protected for future generations.

I am disappointed that my request for a site tour and briefing on the master plan was declined. The limited information available about proposed development is concerning as informed comment should be encouraged.

Constituents who have contacted me about the master plan have raised a number of concerns about impacts on the fundamental purpose of these lands and about increased pressure for commercialisation of vital facilities and resources that government must provide. They have raised concerns about marketing material that does not provide detailed assessment of environmental and social impacts and the design of the online survey severely limiting community comment.

The Botanic Gardens and Domain must be protected, and Government must continue to maintain these unique environs without alienation and commercialisation.

Master Plan Objectives

The Gardens and the Domain play a vital role in providing public open space with green grass and trees at the fringe of the central business district to inner city residents and workers, as well as visitors from the wider metropolitan area and tourists. This role must not be underestimated, with data showing over half a million people visiting the Sydney CBD each weekday.

The inner city is experiencing significant residential growth including in central Sydney and new and existing homes have little or no private open space. Urban consolidation is only sustainable if residents have easy access to adequate green open space. Local residents use the Gardens and the Domain for picnics, walking, and recreation and quiet contemplation and must continue to be able to do this into the future.

Central Sydney workers use the precinct heavily during lunch breaks for respite from their jobs and the city, and to play informal team sports and exercise, which also occurs after work hours. The domain and the Gardens provide an important walking route between work and home for large numbers of workers who live in adjacent areas including Woollahroo, Kings Cross, Darlinghurst and North Sydney.



Opportunities to expand open green space and grassed areas in the inner city are dwindling fast and what is left must be protected and maintained chiefly for recreation.

There is a strong emphasis within the draft master plan on the provision of active and interactive visitor experience and on encouraging commercial activities. The focus needs to shift to passive recreation, green grass and trees.

Providing passive recreation must be the priority for the long term master plan with a commitment to retain current levels of green open space and increased tree canopy. The master plan objectives must be amended to reflect this vital role.

Botanical Science and Landscaping

The Botanic Gardens has long played a major role in scientific botany and I commend the draft master plan's strong focus on plant innovation, biodiversity, habitat protection, ecology and sustainability.

The draft master plan aims to improve landscaping through scientific narrative and themes. I support landscaping at cultural locations including entry points and around the Art Gallery of NSW and strongly welcome renewal of Shakespeare Place, wider footpaths and paved roadway to help reconnect the road – a serious intrusion on the precinct – with the Gardens.

However creating themed Gardens and increasing way-finding signage risks altering the atmosphere of the Gardens so that they become more of a family fun park or theme park. Execution of the plan will need to be sensitive and acknowledge the importance of retaining the Gardens' calm character.

Development within the Gardens and the Domain

There is a strong community view that the precinct should retain a focus on green public space that supports recreation. The draft master plan refers to a number of development proposals that have sparked community alarm, particularly in the Domain.

Permanent sound shell

Diminishing state budgets have encouraged the Royal Botanic Gardens and Domain Trust to lease the Domain for major music festivals such as Homebake, Field Day and Harvest, and for other events. While some are important festivals that benefit the wider community such as the Sydney Festival, most are commercial events that cause noise impacts and damage the grass and soil, and alienate green open space.

In addition to the event days, green open space is alienated during bump-in and bump-out with grass fenced off for weeks as it is regenerated following damage from crowds, particularly if there is rain.

While I agree that permanent installation of a sound shell could reduce the time needed for setting up and dismantling events, it would create a permanent encroachment on grasslands that I cannot support. I am also concerned that a permanent structure would be used to justify and encourage more commercial events in the Domain, which would result in regular and greater alienation of this public space.

The master plan should identify reducing commercialisation as the long term goal for the precinct.

I do not support a permanent sound shell within the Domain.

Should plans go ahead it should be designed with design excellence and in a way that is as little intrusive to the parklands as possible.

Mrs Macquarie's Point viewing platform

It is unclear from the draft master plan how the proposed viewing platform at Mrs Macquarie's Point will look and change the character of the area.

I share widespread community concern that a built structure is inappropriate at this location. Mrs Macquarie's Point should remain as natural as possible and exclude any development. As it is, the site offers ample opportunities for views and these should be kept unstructured and informal.

Material about the master plan identifies that there are not toilets nearby. The construction of toilet facilities should not intrude upon this natural and heritage values of this site, and these facilities should be located nearby in an area that already has buildings.

I do not support construction of a viewing platform at Mrs Macquarie's Point.

New Domain hotel

The proposal for a hotel on the Domain car park along Sir John Young Crescent could improve the amenity of the area given the car park is an unsightly blight. However the proposal will privatise public land into the future preventing any chance of it being returned to the Domain as open space. The site could provide potential for expansion of the public domain and while funds may not be available at this time, this should be a long term goal that is not precluded. Even if the site is not returned as open space, surely other uses should be considered that provide wider public benefit such as expansion of the Art Gallery of NSW.

The Domain should not be developed for private commercial purposes.

Photographs in the draft master plan indicate greening of the area adjacent to the proposed hotel along Sir John Young Crescent. Landscaping of this location is supported and should occur regardless of the future of this site.

Other development

The draft master plan should ensure that there is no net loss of public open space as a result of the building upgrades and extensions proposed. It must ensure that any future retail upgrades remain low key and exist only to support passive activities and the scientific role of the Gardens.

The proposed function centre should be small and sensitive to its surroundings. It should be used for events and activities that are linked to the role of the Gardens rather than commercial events with crime and anti-social behaviour impacts.

Trees

The draft master plan proposes selective pruning of planted islands to enhance waterfront views at entry points, and removal of non-significant trees at the Domain depot to increase views of the Domain and Woolloomooloo Wharf.

Trees go to the heart of the precinct, making it special. They create the 'forest in the city' experience providing a refuge for visitors from the hustle and bustle of the CBD. While views are important, they should not take priority over green space and tree canopy.

Where there is a long term desire to improve sightlines or views, this should only be done when existing trees have reached the end of their life and need to be removed.

No trees should be removed or pruned for views.

The draft master plan should ensure that the number of trees and tree canopy is increased.

Train and Ferry Stations

Both the train station and ferry station could encourage more visitors to use public transport to the precinct, reducing traffic congestion and the need for parking spaces which would also improve pedestrian safety. These facilities could help tourists and visitors access the Gardens and Domain as well as patrons attending events.

The proposed stations could also benefit adjacent Woolloomooloo residents, many whom are elderly or social housing tenants particularly given the area is poorly serviced by buses. Over the last decade the Woolloomooloo population has expanded dramatically with high density developments but no new public transport services have been provided. If stations are built, it is vital that pedestrian access to the sites for Woolloomooloo residents is improved.

However, any new structures or facilities must not intrude into the Gardens and Domain, and should be sensitively designed to be unobtrusive.

I support the ferry station proposed in the draft master plan. The ferry station and services must be accessible to local residents.

While there is broad support for a train station at the proposed location, train stations can be intrusive due to excavation, the need for access points and due to noise impacts. The extent of the damage will need to be determined before many in the community would give support.

The draft master plan is a collection of specific proposals of little detail among buzz words. It is vital that detailed information about proposed development be provided for community comment before any decisions are made on individual proposals and that the core function of the Botanic Gardens and the Domain – to provide green grass, trees, open space and a refuge for recreation to city residents, workers and visitors and to contribute to the body of botanical science – is strengthened in the final plan.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'AG', written in a cursive style.

Alex Greenwich
Member for Sydney