



Trish Doyle MP

Member for Blue Mountains



02 4751 3298 | bluemountains@parliament.nsw.gov.au | 132 Macquarie Rd Springwood NSW 2777

New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly

Katoomba Airfield

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I thank the members of the Blue Mountains community who have come to Parliament today to listen to the discussion of this petition. The petition brings to the attention of the House plans to develop a new commercial airfield at Medlow Bath in the Blue Mountains. The history of Katoomba airport is an interesting one. A dirt airstrip within bushland at the northern end of the quiet Medlow Bath township, Katoomba Airfield, has been home to small flying clubs and community organisations. For a number of decades it has served as the staging ground for aerial bushfire fighting and rescue activities.

Former leaseholder Rod Hay and his family operated a small, low-impact business at the airfield that provided runway access for low-flying enthusiasts operating light aircraft, as well as access for State Government agencies—such as National Parks and Wildlife—that sometimes required an airstrip for their activities. Furthermore, they provided access to the site for the Royal Australian Air Force, local scouting groups and the amateur astronomy club, among others.

Tragically, Rod Hay died when his aircraft crashed at the end of the Katoomba Airfield runway. Rod's family—particularly his daughter, Amber, and his wife, Chrissie—were keen to take over the lease and continue the low-impact activity at Katoomba Airfield and continue providing access to local community groups and the emergency services. However, through a somewhat opaque process, the New South Wales Government declined to offer them the opportunity to retain their lease at the site. Instead, the Government has allowed an interim licence holder to pursue plans to develop the airstrip and begin commercial activity so as to demonstrate a long-term business plan.

To that end, I acknowledge that I have met with the owners of FLYBLUE, Floyd and Derek Larsen, and listened to their proposal for a new business at Katoomba Airfield. I have also attended the community consultation workshops that the department of lands held. Many attendees at the consultation sessions have not felt listened to; they have not felt that their concerns are being taken seriously.

I share the concerns of many in the Blue Mountains that a radically expanded airport at Medlow Bath may induce a level of flight activity that is unacceptable to the amenity of local residents and that is out of step with the peaceful bushland setting of the Katoomba Airfield.

Many in my community believe the peace and quiet of our World Heritage area is now under threat. Contrary to arguments proffered, the community is concerned that our tourism industry, which is vital to our local economy, may not benefit from the fly-in-fly-out tourism that a freshly redeveloped Katoomba airport would offer, just as many hospitality and

accommodation operators have told me that they get little economic benefit from the large buses and coaches from Sydney that come and go from one village within a matter of hours.

Our tourism industry needs to be supported by government measures that promote overnight stays by visitors so that our hotels, short-term lets, cafes, pubs and restaurants receive year-round patronage. The worried community feels strongly that it will not be achieved by small aircraft or helicopters running relentless flights. Having said that, I do not shy away from the need for something to change at the Medlow Bath site. It has fallen into disrepair and in 2017 it was closed to fixed-wing aircraft landings.

When my office was assisting the Hay family in the aftermath of Rod's death, I formed the view that we should support a small operation at the airstrip that would sustain the airfield, ensure that it remained available to our emergency services and that it could continue to serve as an emergency landing location for passing aircraft. Many in the community have that view, which is supported by the Blue Mountains City Council, local representatives from the RFS, the NSW Police Force, the State Emergency Service and, I understand, National Parks staff.

I thank the signatories of the petition, as well as the Blue Mountains Conservation Society, the Colong Foundation, the Environmental Defenders Office and other concerned members of the community who took the time to make submissions to the lands department's public consultation process. At the very least, our community deserves an open, transparent and fair process as the Government moves towards signing a long-term lease. So far, that has not been forthcoming.

The lesson for the Government through the petition is that there is a broadly held concern amongst the Blue Mountains community about what a new, redeveloped airport at Medlow Bath will mean for residents, bushwalkers and the environment. The petition asks that the community's objections to any commercial lease for the public land be taken seriously, that the land be put into the national park and that the airfield be kept for emergency use only.