**Double Bay Residents’ Association**

**Protecting Sydney’s Stylish Bayside Village**

PRESIDENT’S REPORT AGM 2023

Last year’s annual general meeting was held on 12th April. Our principal focus then was the Council’s draft Double Bay Centre Planning and Urban Design Strategy on which residents’ comments had been invited. Bruce Forster gave a presentation illustrating the impact of six-storey buildings throughout the centre which the strategy proposed. During the following six weeks, we distributed 8,000 flyers encouraging residents of Double Bay and surrounding areas to consider the strategy carefully and, if they disagreed with it, to submit an objection to the Council.

After the survey ended, we were told it would take a few months to analyse submissions and prepare a report. Later, we were told the report would be available by Christmas. Now we understand that councillors will be briefed on the survey’s results at the end of this month – but, as mere residents who have most to lose through a decision to increase Double Bay’s height limit, we are not trusted to know them yet. This delay has fuelled suspicions that the Council will approve six storeys throughout Double Bay. We hope this is not the case.

Meanwhile, the Double Bay centre looks as if it has been blitzed. The Council’s vision of ‘Sydney’s stylish bayside village’ has been abandoned. Developers, whose sole aim is to maximise  profit and who have no long-term interest in maintaining the village’s character and charm, have been allowed to control Double Bay’s future. The Council seems to have surrendered.

We appreciate that the Council was stripped of many of its planning powers by the previous state government and thank the Mayor for criticising the current undemocratic system on several occasions – but the Council could do more to protect what is left of the ambience which attracted us to live here.

The development application for 55 Bay Street is just one example of what we are up against. At the beginning of December 2021, the present applicant appealed to the Land and Environment Court against the Council’s refusal for a six and seven-storey development on this very small site. Following a conciliation conference, the applicant amended its plans to five storeys which complied with the height development standard, and the court granted approval. Now, nearly 18 months later, it is seeking to re-agitate the same issues.

Two weeks ago, the Woollahra Local Planning Panel rejected another application to increase the height following objections by several residents and your association. Extraordinarily, the Council had sided with the developer, despite the fact it had rejected an application for the next door building on grounds which it ignored for 55 Bay Street. On whose side is the Council? Last week, the developer appealed yet again to the Land and Environment Court and we are awaiting the Court’s decision. DBRA committee members spoke at both hearings this month.

This is one of 15 development applications we have challenged during the past year. I don’t intend to name them, but we all are aware of the massive developments taking place at 19-27 Bay Street and the north-west corner of Bay Street and New South Head Road.

Malcolm Young has spoken against both on several occasions and we had a small victory in January when the Land and Environment Court dismissed an appeal by the developer of 19-27 Bay Street. Unfortunately the developer is now asking for an additional underground level of parking which would involve more excavation, increasing the risk of flooding. The surge of development applications never ends.

Last week, the Land and Environment Court approved a five-storey commercial development the other side of the street at 294-298 New South Head Road and 2-10 Bay Street.

New South Wales’ convoluted, undemocratic planning process places considerable strain on residents associations such as the DBRA. It also forces councils to incur substantial legal costs which we, as ratepayers, pay.

It would be good to think that, with the change of government, there would be a less autocratic approach to planning – but that, I fear, would be wishful thinking. As you may have read in last Saturday's Sydney Morning Herald, the new premier, who previously has spoken out against high rise development, is now proposing greater density. A problem for us in the eastern suburbs is the lack of infrastructure – roads, public transport, parking, public schools, etc. We will have many more battles to fight.

We thank members who have sent submissions on DAs and other issues to the Council or have spoken at hearings during the year. If you are unhappy with a proposal, it’s very important that you say so, however briefly, as otherwise it may be approved by default.

In addition to development applications, your committee has written submissions on the following issues which are mainly under the Council’s control:

* Plans of Management for Crown Lands Reserves
* Active Transport Strategy
* Enhancement of the north end of Bay Street
* The Council’s enforcement policy
* The Rushcutters Bay skate park
* Rezoning of the Double Bay Bowling Club
* A developer’s levy to fund local infrastructure
* The need for changes to the Council’s excavation controls
* Proposed controls for residential development
* Pedestrianisation of Knox Street
* Late night noise from a Bay Street bar
* The Council’s plan to fund a ‘Yes’ campaign for the Voice
* And of course the Double Bay Centre and Urban Design Strategy which proposed six-storey buildings throughout the centre

In many of these cases, we were responding to one of the Council’s Your Say surveys. We are pleased that the Council is asking residents’ views on so many matters and encourage you to respond on issues which concern you. We wonder, however, how many  Council decisions reflect the feedback it receives. When a Council decision doesn’t, it would be good to hear the reasons.

We continue to monitor the Cross Street car park situation. While the Council has released some information, we remain concerned that residents’ opinions on the proposed development are not being taken into account. We understand the present plan is for seven storeys above ground and five storeys of parking below. The former would take some residents’ harbour views; the latter would ignore the flooding caused by excavation in Double Bay. Water is seeping into nearby basements which are only one floor below ground, so five storeys of excavation would be of great concern.

We also are concerned that a valuable public asset is being divested, effectively in perpetuity, for the benefit of a property developer without any input from residents.

Two other major issues have preoccupied us during the past year.

The first was the plan to convert Knox Street into a pedestrian plaza. This was a contentious proposal, and eventually the Council decided the cost was too great. The funds which had been allocated to the project by the state government have been diverted to enhancing the northern end of Bay Street where it meets the jetty.

The owner of 27-37 Knox Street is applying to build a six-storey wall of buildings on the street’s north side, which would deprive the street of light and sun, as well as interrupting some residents’ views. I’m pleased to report that the Council has opposed the application and it was rejected by the Woollahra Local Planning Panel last week. The developer has now appealed to the Land and Environment Court and we hope that abandonment of the planned plaza isn’t used as an excuse by the Court to approve it.

The second major issue was the state election in March. We were fortunate to have four candidates who empathised with residents and, if elected, were prepared to represent our interests in Macquarie Street. We thank them all for devoting time and energy to highlight the issues which concern us.

For the first time, the DBRA combined with the Darling Point Society and the Queen Street and West Woollahra Association to organise a candidate forum at the Double Bay Bowling Club, kindly chaired by Peter King. This attracted more than 100 residents and Kellie Sloane, the successful Liberal candidate, wrote afterwards that it had been ‘the most professionally conducted debate of the campaign’.

We hope this forum may open up increased cooperation with the other two associations, and ideally with groups from other parts of Woollahra. While we have different priorities, we share some major concerns and could have more influence through working together on these issues.

Increased population density without additional infrastructure is not just an issue in Woollahra. Karen Freyer is exploring the possibility of organising a Sydney-wide forum to try to influence the new government’s planning policies. We’ll keep members posted.

I would also like to mention a series of heritage walks which the Woollahra History and Heritage Society is arranging. The first is around Point Piper on Thursday this week and if you are interested in learning more about Point Piper’s history you will be very welcome; details are at the registration desk. Later in the year, the DBRA will be working with the Society on a similar walk around Double Bay.

Before we open up the meeting for members’ comments and questions, there’s one important message I’d like to leave with you. Your committee is swamped frequently with submissions which need to be drafted and hearings at which we need to speak. We would appreciate offers of help from members. If you are prepared to assist – even with a single issue – please give your name to Charlotte or another committee member. It will be difficult for us to advocate on the increasing number of issues which are concerning residents without more help from members.

**President, Double Bay Residents’ Association**

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