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Heritage halts skatepark

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Opinion by ANDREW WOODHOUSE

Champagne corks are popping across Elizabeth Bay, Rushcutters Bay and Darling Point. The NSW heritage office previously recommended that the much-cherished Rushcutters Bay Park on its eastern side and Yarranabbe Park, both under the control of Woollahra Council, be state heritage-listed.

And last week the Minister signed off on the proposal putting the listing into effect as L-A-W. The parks will be officially gazetted next week.

But what does this actually mean on the ground?

It means that no development can occur without the NSW Heritage Council giving it their tick of approval. This is in addition to Woollahra Council's approval, which is in itself problematic.

So it's now a two-stage process which puts council in a difficult position. After seven years it still insists its scheme is warranted in this particular location, although it has only produced a sketchy artist's impression with no heritage impact report, no development application, no structural engineer's report or even accurate costings.

In any event, the \$1.1 million originally allocated for it by council has now put back into their consolidated revenue account.

The recently-approved heritage listing refers four times to open space as a key characteristic of Rushcutters Bay Park so attempts to reduce unhindered access to its open space or introduce structures such as a skateboard rink or basketball court will be frowned upon from a great height.

Undoubtedly, locals are pleased.

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The state heritage listing now provides increased clarity, certainty and consistency, the three Cs of good town planning.

But it has been war. And a lot of hard work. The campaign involved a large state parliamentary petition, another major petition with over two thousand signatures, hundreds of letters to council and various detailed submissions pointing out that the project is a prohibited development according to council's own Plan of Management for the park.

Council has not been indolent either. It has launched three surveys about open spaces and crown land and recreational needs which surreptitiously attempt to illustrate how much a skateboard park is needed and desired. None has succeeded yet.

And this dyslexic council has seen fit to pour its vitriolic venom over ratepaying residents and ridiculed them for daring to disagree with council's high priests of planning.

Death-wish comments from council such as "the objectors are old people with nothing else to do with their time who will be dead in ten years anyway" and "hysterical comments from [objectors] do nothing to help anyone" and "the park is hardly ever used anyway" or "the objectors are half dead" only riled locals. Do councillors really get paid for this? Needless to say, this juvenile verbal ping pong has only spurred objectors on. They are saving up their return fire cannons for the 2021 September local council elections.

Cr Marano is reported as saying a skate park would not threaten the beauty or heritage of the park noting that "we hope that, despite some opposing voices, we will be able to progress our idea." His hopes may be dashed. Councillor Harriet Price agreed that council would now have to seek approval under heritage laws to build any skateboard structure.

And in the meantime, locals have re-energised themselves and have now escalated the issue by applying for National Heritage Listing for the park and its inclusion on the Register of the National Estate. This will help ensure normal planning processes occur and stop council rushing through any skateboard structure in this sensitive, harbour-side park in the leadup to the next council election in September 2021.

Upton applied the first brakes

Ms Gabrielle Upton MP, Member for Vacluse, has played a pivotal role. She was the state heritage minister when the heritage office granted a rare Interim Heritage Order last year, effectively putting the brakes on council's zany ambitious scheme. She said last week: "We love our local green open spaces so it's fantastic to announce that our local Rushcutters Bay and Yarranabbe Park have been approved for listing on the State Heritage Register.

The State Heritage Listing acknowledges the cultural and historical significance of the parks – Yarranabbe Park’s well-known naval history and Rushcutters Bay’s design representing an early example of land reclaimed for public recreation. Congratulations to our local residents for their advocacy on this important issue.

For over 150 years this has been a place of respite from city life and an opportunity to enjoy sweeping views of our magnificent harbour. I know that the local community wanted to have the parks’ beauty and history acknowledged and with both parks now state heritage-listed they will be protected for future generations to come.” Former Prime Minister and local park dog walker, Malcolm Turnbull, has said that “Rushcutters Bay is a fantastic open space that is used not only by local residents, but also the entire Wentworth area. It is a treasured park in an increasingly urban area that is densely populated ... Access is a key part of local live-ability and quality of life, and I believe it would be best kept as open green space that can be used by everyone in the community.”

Dave Sharma MP, current Federal Member for Wentworth, has said, “I welcomed the Interim Heritage Order that was placed on the site in February 2019, and I expressed the view at the time that better locations for the skate park could be found. That remains my view, and I have conveyed this to Woollahra Councillors, and will continue to urge them to pay heed to legitimate community concerns about this project. Let me also take the opportunity to condemn remarks attributed to one councillor.”

John Walton AM, a long-time local resident welcomes the park’s upgrade to state heritage significance saying, “It’s wonderful the state government has adopted the Heritage Office’s recommendations after listening to a groundswell of community concern. I can’t understand why council wants to despoil open space and the Sydney Harbour foreshore. There are ten other preferable alternative locations available for a skateboard structure which council should now seriously consider.”

Dixie Coulton, a resident for over three decades with her family, also fully supports the heritage listing saying, “it’s a great victory for public open space in this harbour-side city. After all, parks are the lungs of our urban environment.” She also supports calls for Woollahra Council to instal heritage plaques within the park so everyone can appreciate their significance.

Meanwhile, council has said it wants to amend its Plan of Management, perhaps to align community views with their own, to allow for a skateboard structure and prolong this vexed issue but which may cost it the election next year.

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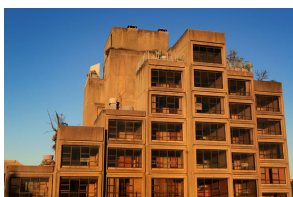
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