

Can they make it any more obvious? Skater boys despair

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George Kinahan (left) and Lachlan Scott; (inset) Scott in 2013 when he first asked Woollahra Council to build a skate park. Photo: Janie Barrett

Sydney editor

It has been 10 years since Lachlan Scott and his mother Sarah started a project called Skatercraft to lobby for a skateboarding and recreational facility in eastern Sydney.

On April 8, 2013, an 11-year-old Lachlan stood before a sympathetic Woollahra Council to make his case and present a report compiled by 26 children aged eight to 14 – the “Skaterkids of Paddington”.

Since then, there have been six prime ministers, four state premiers and two Summer Olympics. Novak Djokovic has won 15 grand slams and Taylor Swift has toured the world three times.

But a skate park in eastern Sydney has remained in the toohard basket. For a decade, the idea has been scratched and exhumed, progressed and halted, in a battle involving everyone from activist neighbours to prime ministers.

Now a scaled-down “youth recreation area” in Rushcutters Bay Park is back on the agenda, with Woollahra Council debating whether to apply to Heritage NSW for permission to proceed. It would be located in the “under-utilised” south-west corner of the park, near noisy New South Head Road.

The proposed facility would take up just 1225 square metres of the 54,000 square metres in Woollahra Council’s section of the park. There would be no new lighting as it would close at dusk and a heritage assessment found no significant trees would be affected.

At a committee meeting last week, Liberal councillor Toni Zeltzer lamented that the kids who asked for the facility 10 years ago “have probably got children of their own now”.

Well, not quite, but they have certainly gotten older. The *Herald* tracked down Lachlan Scott, who is turning 21 and in the final semester of an economics degree at the University of Technology, Sydney, and his friend George Kinahan, 20, who was also in Skatercraft.

Though they rarely skate these days, they are disappointed the idea is yet to eventuate. “The backlash we met, it was actually really disheartening for a lot of us,” says Kinahan, who studies agricultural and environmental economics at Sydney University.

“It feels like at this point it’s going to be something for my own kids, not myself. Kids of that age need an outlet to get outside and get away from their computer screens and get among nature.”

Scott says the saddest part is how much the original plan has been watered down to make it palatable for the neighbours. “It’s almost no longer a skate park; it has skating elements.”

Over the years, opponents of the ramp have included former prime minister Malcolm Turnbull, who, while PM and the member for Wentworth in 2017, said skateboarders should go to Bondi Beach instead.

The council’s decision to flirt with the skate ramp again has prompted a new wave of community opposition, led by groups such as the Darling Point Society, whose president Charlotte Feldman addressed last Monday’s meeting.

“We want our green open space to remain as is – a beautiful foreshore parkland,” she said. She was also concerned about the structure’s impact on the aeration of surrounding tree roots.

Another local, Sue Hanley, caused a minor stir in a community Facebook group when she lamented that “a small group of privileged Paddington kids want to cover [the grass] with steel and concrete so they can have a skateboard park”. Hanley, 74, told the *Herald* the criticism she received in the group was “bloodlust”. “It’s just so savage,” she said.

The council meeting once again resulted in a stalemate. Residents First councillor Merrill Witt proposed to defer progress on the skate park until a full conservation management plan of the surrounding area was finished, which would delay the project by at least another two years.

Councillors were split 4-4 on whether to proceed, so the entire proposal will be debated at a full council meeting this month.

