

From the President

Earlier this month one of our members received a response from the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR) to a letter he sent to Diane Beamer seeking an explanation as to why council and government policy does not reflect landowners' and residents' wishes. The response contained the usual platitudes about the need to maintain "the potential for further urban use, agricultural viability and environmental quality", based upon policy in *Shaping Western Sydney*, and does not address the question of why we should have to suffer under policy that none of us support.

However the thing which struck me was the reference to the date that the Council advised DIPNR it was about to commence a Rural Land Study. It was **September 2000**.

Now, 4.5 years on, what is there to show?

As far as we can see, very little. There has clearly been no genuine will among the authorities to progress this issue. We have simply been led on a wild goose chase.

Over the last few weeks there have been some significant changes at the Council, including the departure of both the General Manager and the Director of Planning Services. Let's hope these changes bring with them a renewed commitment to achieving something other than procrastination, and a renewed commitment to bring about the overwhelming wish of the rural community for an end to the unwanted and unnecessary 25 acre limitation on minimum lot sizes.

Alex Davidson, President

Meeting with Council's Planning Services Director

On 2 March our committee met with Michael Watt, the Council's Director of Planning Services (since resigned) to impress upon him the need to incorporate the wishes of the community into the revised draft Rural Plan. In the past, there has been a tendency for the planning department to omit goals of the community on the presumption that they will be rejected by the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR). This is not the correct way to approach the issue, because it makes it difficult for all concerned to identify why the final plan is not in keeping with the aspirations of the community.

Mr Watt responded with "that may very well be the case"- in other words, yes, the planning department was considering putting forward a plan that reflected the will of the com-

munity, rather than one based solely on the strategy put forward in Rural Land Study. He suggested this might be done by way of "test cases", i.e. presenting DIPNR with proposals to re-zone certain areas and see how they respond, before finalising the LEP (Local Environment Plan).

There was also an acknowledgment that "something has to be done with all that land", however that didn't stop the water furphy from coming up for about the hundredth time.

Overall the meeting was worthwhile, because we achieved the goal of impressing upon the planning department that they must incorporate the wish of the community into the draft plan. We left feeling that they are taking our concerns seriously, but there is clearly still work to be done.

A New Challenge—Environmental Management Plan

Since 1997 the council has been working on the preparation of an Environmental Management Plan. Hands up if you have ever heard of it!

The latest draft of this plan, which is to guide development of other plans, was placed on exhibition in February/March. **5 Acres Now** made a submission, (which you can read on our website), as did a number of members.

Our key concern with this draft plan is that like the draft Rural Plan and the Rural Land Study, it does not reflect the views of the majority who will be affected by it. Most are unaware of the existence of the plan, and very few understand its ramifications.

Underpinning the plan is a doctrine called "The Precautionary Principle". Basically this concept says; "If there is any possibility, no matter how remote or lacking in scientific evidence, that an action may have a harmful effect on the environment, then it should be prohibited until such time as it can be proven not harmful".

Determining whether an action is harmful to the environment is a value judgment. If we are to maintain a free society, care must be exercised when applying values to the

lives of others. One person's beautiful tree may be another's ugly eyesore or weed.

Protecting the environment seems a laudable goal; however this goal must be balanced against other concerns,

Council meeting 26th April

A report on the Environmental Management Plan is scheduled to come before the Council at their meeting of **26th April at 7pm**.

We encourage as many as possible to attend, to show the Council that we do not support this plan nor the restrictions over privately-owned property which will flow from it.

particularly personal liberty. One way to achieve this would be to apply the precautionary principle to our freedoms as well: "If there is any possibility that government policy may reduce our reasonable freedoms, no matter how remote or lacking in scientific evidence, then it should be abandoned until such time as it can be proven not to."

Just as importantly, a plan as sweeping as this one should not be introduced unless it has widespread informed agreement—for example signed letters from those affected confirming their understanding and agreement with the restrictions over their activities which will follow from its implementation.

In the meantime, we believe the environmental management plan should be quietly put to one side, until such time as there is a united call for one from the entire community.

In brief...

- ◆ Thanks to all members and supporters who attended the public meeting held at the Castle Grand Community Centre on 16th February. By our count 380 attended (we didn't guess—we actually counted heads) and I know from discussions with councillors that it made a great deal of impact.
- ◆ Members of our committee met last month with Steven Pringle, state MP for Hawkesbury, to formally raise our concerns at the way community concerns were not reflected in the draft Plan.
- ◆ We received a letter from the President of the Sydney

Agricultural, Rural, and Public Lands Trust (SARA), confirming that they are not opposed to the subdivision of large holdings to a 5 acre lot size. This shows that we have widespread support within the community, since their members are primarily not from Baulkham Hills. For more information, visit their website: www.sara.asn.au.

- ◆ Another group we have been keeping in contact with is the North Western Sydney Agribusiness (& Tourism) Alliance. While their goals are not identical to ours, they are also seeking freedom to develop their own properties within reason, and as appropriate. Their contact address is PO Box 250 Galston 2159.

Draft Rural Plan—current status

The council's Working Group is continuing to meet on a regular basis. Council documents show that the final report from the consultants assisting the Working Group has been received, although no details of what this contains are available. It is now up to the Working Group to make its recommendations, which council staff will then incorporate into the revised draft Rural Plan.

Once the revisions have been made, the draft Rural Plan will again be the subject of a report and recommendation to come before a council meeting, where it will be voted on by councillors. In response to a question in the community forum at a recent council meeting, the Mayor advised that this report should be available in 4–6 weeks time. That would suggest the report, which may contain details of the revisions to the draft Rural Plan, should be presented to the council Planning Meeting scheduled for 24 May. We suggest you mark that date on your calendar, as it may be in your interests to attend.

Looking ahead, presuming that the revisions to the draft

Rural Plan are accepted by councillors, it will be submitted to the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR) for issuance of a "section 65" certificate. Once that certificate has been received, the plan will be placed on public exhibition, and submissions invited. Following the exhibition period, submissions will be considered, and further revisions made to the plan where necessary as a result of submissions. Finally, the revised Rural Plan, comprising a LEP and DCP, will come before the council again for approval by councillors.

Naturally everyone wants to know what revisions will be made to the draft Rural Plan. Given the level of community concern—in particular the strong turnouts by you, our members, at important meetings—we believe there will be some relaxation of the current restrictions. To what extent remains to be seen; however now is most definitely the time to be talking to councillors, and give them your suggestions as to what changes should be made, and where.

7(b) Environmental zone—dead and buried?

Well we don't know this for certain, but all the signs are that the unpopular 7(b) environmental zone will not be reappearing in the revised Rural Plan!

Our strongest evidence for this is the dumping of a similar zone from the revised Balmoral Road Release Area plan, which has just gone back on exhibition. Comments in the local newspapers suggest that pressure from the state gov-

ernment was a key reason for the removal of that unnecessary zoning.

It sets a strong precedent—one that cannot be ignored in respect of the revisions to the draft Rural Plan which affects our members' area. It also demonstrates that it is possible for reason to prevail, as long as there are voices loud enough to be heard.

More information ...

The primary aim of **5 Acres Now** is to regain the right, withdrawn some 40 years ago, to subdivide large lots to 5 acres in the so-called "rural" area of the shire of Baulkham Hills. That's why we are called **5 Acres Now**. We believe this

is a very reasonable goal that will benefit the area by restoring a moderate level of growth without unduly impacting upon the environment. To find out more, visit our website: www.5acresnow.com.au, or contact us as detailed below.