

'LEGOLAND' ANTICS AT COUNCIL

Sutherland Shire councillors are considering a loophole in State law which allows it to approve a cheap "Legoland" housing estate to replace the Woronora caravan park.

Liberal Party councillors Kent Johns and John Riad (E-Ward) tried to fast-track a decision by invoking Section 68, a part of the Local Government Act which gives Council power that it does not have normally over big developments.

This led to technical jousting at July's meeting, with amendments back and forth, as the ALP councillors wanted more detail on what it all means.

Major developments between \$5million and \$30million are now decided by regional panels of the State Government, not by councils. Two applications are stalled at the panel over "Legoland" – which is to become a prefabricated no-frills housing estate beside Woronora River worth about \$29million (1 Menai Road).

Liberal councillors wanted to bypass the delays using the little-known legal power to intervene, trying to take over the decision using Section 68 and decide it by October. They failed.

"TAKE POLITICS OUT OF PLANNING" -- MINISTER

Eventually, Cr Riad (E-Ward, Liberal) walked out of the Council Chamber after his final amendment was lost 8 votes to 5, and the ALP deferral was about to be approved. He returned one minute later, meaning that his vote was not then recorded either way. Council decided unanimously not to invoke its Section-68 powers just yet, pending more detail on the implications.

Councillors were excluded from approving big developments in 2017 by the Liberal Planning Minister Anthony Roberts to "to take the politics out of planning", and make it more "transparent".

He told Parliament that the new law would "guard against corruption and lead to better local decisions". He expressed concern about "inappropriate" relationships between councils and developers.

THUMBS-UP FOR DEVELOPERS

Weeks later, a briefing session for local residents and councillors learned that one hidden effect of Section 68 was to remove the community's formal right to be informed and to have its say on Legoland, before councillors decide whether to allow the first of 60+ moveable dwellings to be installed.

A positive spin was put on the low-cost, high-profit project by Cr Steve Simpson (E-Ward): "I see it for young families to move into the shire, and for older couples to downsize," he told the meeting, echoing the developers' sales pitch last year. As a former Liberal, he has the deciding vote on a council, split 7-7 out of 15 along party lines.

Resident opposition has been overwhelming in the past, but no further public submissions are allowed under Section 68, so councillors may decide now what they could not even consider before.

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