

10.11.Pro-Active Community Education Quarterly Report

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ENDORSED BY: Joseph Hill Director, City Strategy.

ATTACHMENTS: Nil

PURPOSE:

Council, at its meeting of 8 August 2022, resolved that a quarterly report be provided to update Council on the progress of the return to proactive community education regarding the planning process, including specific tasks undertaken.

This report gives an overview of the progress of Council's planning advisory service to the return to pre-COVID service levels with regards to community engagement and expansion of engagement through Council's existing Planning Advisor role.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Council, at its meeting of 23 May 2022, recognised the significant and growing community concern about the sentiment of overdevelopment in the North Sydney Council local government area. Council further recognised that community members find it difficult to understand the New South Wales (NSW) planning system and their rights against often well-resourced property developers.

On 8 August 2022 a report to Council addressed the complexity of the planning process in NSW and how Council would address community engagement through the existing resource of the planning advisory service.

On 14 November 2022 a further report to Council outlined out the how Council's Planning Advisory service would seek to engage with the community. This report provides an update of how the community engagement work is progressing.

Prior to the next quarterly report to Council a Councillor workshop is proposed to be arranged, to establish a clear understanding of the objectives and expectations Councillors wish to achieve under this initiative. The results of that workshop will inform the content of what is reported to Council in the future.

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS:

No additional financial implications are envisaged.

RECOMMENDATION:

1. THAT the report be received.

2. THAT a Councillor workshop be held to inform the ongoing objectives and expectations of this initiative and the subsequent reporting requirements.

LINK TO COMMUNITY STRATEGIC PLAN

The relationship with the Community Strategic Plan is as follows:

5. Our Civic Leadership

5.1 Council leads the strategic direction of North Sydney
5.2 Council is well governed, and customer focused

5.3 Community is informed and Consulted

BACKGROUND

Council, at its meeting of 23 May 2022, resolved that a report be provided outlining how Council could better support community understanding of the planning process.

At Council's meeting on 8 August 2022, the Manager of Development Services reported on the current community engagement undertaken by City Strategy (CIS) staff and set out some of the challenges presented by the NSW planning system and a return to a more proactive community engagement post the COVID pandemic. Council resolved:

THAT there be a quarterly report to update Council on the progress of the return to proactive education of the community by current staff including specific tasks undertaken, with the first report presented to Council before the end of the current calendar year.

At Council's Meeting of 14 November 2022, the first quarterly report was submitted. This is the second quarterly update.

CONSULTATION REQUIREMENTS

Community engagement is not required.

DETAIL

Changes in the Planning System and Council Processes

The NSW planning system underwent significant change during Covid, including the introduction of a wholly electronic, state-operated application process (NSW Planning Portal), and the expansion of both exempt and complying development by the NSW government continues to impact on the operation of Council's planning division.

The introduction of the portal has changed the way applications are received and processed by Council. Council adopted an effective processing system during COVID, however given the significance of the changes, a complete review of the process is being undertaken which is likely to go live in the first quarter of 2023. The new process has been driven by Council's

Planning Advisory Team, with the expectation that it will result in a more effective initial review of applications, and less back and forth between applicants and Council for additional information, reducing frustration for applicants.

Website Update

Council's Planning Advisory Team have undertaken training re Council's new website, giving staff the ability to update information on the website in real time. It will also allow officers the ability to create new forms, a welcome prospect as this will assist in engaging with Council's Advisory Team.

Community Engagement and Education

Planning Advice Meetings

Since the recommencement of planning advice meetings in late 2022, there has been an increased take-up of these meetings by the community. The meetings are held in person and electronically; currently, the meetings are held at mutually convenient times during work hours to allow flexibility, and to acknowledge that the pre-covid meeting times did not meet community expectation, being limited to just two mornings per week.

Planning Enquiries (Written and Telephone)

Council's Planning Advisory Team continues to receive an increasing volume of telephone and written enquiries following the Holiday Season. The Team are also reviewing the online enquiry form which is inadequate in its current format.

Engagement with Community Groups

Precinct Committees and Public Forums

Pre Covid, Council's Planning staff provided panel members and speakers to communicate the planning process (both in NSW and in North Sydney) in general terms, and to discuss specific issues and applications. It is envisaged that this service will recommence in 2023/24.

Council's Planning Advisory Team is liaising with the Community Engagement Team on how best to engage with Precinct Committees, as speakers are by invitation only. The Planning Advisory Team has prepared a memo for the Precincts, advising that it will hold talks about planning and the planning process, however it will not be a forum to discuss specific development applications.

School Groups

Council's Planning Advisory Team has given talks to local high school geography students to discuss planning relating to the built environment and liveability, the role of planning, and the role that Council plays in this area. These talks recommenced late 2022 and will continue.

University and TAFE Groups

Pre Covid, Council's Planning Advisory Team also gave talks to university groups at the University of Technology Sydney), providing a case study relating to the amount of development in North Sydney CBD, and the tensions between Sydney Metro, corporate and

residential property owners, from the perspective of local government. Similar talks have been given to the planning module of the NSW TAFE property valuation course. These opportunities are limited by the tertiary institutions' demand for engagement.

Liaising with other Divisions within Council

Council's Planning Advisory Team provides planning advice to all areas of Council re lodgement of development applications, preparation of planning documents for review, and/or assisting in determining whether works may be exempt from requiring consent.

Beyond the remit of the Planning Advisory Team, the following departments of Council provide invaluable assistance and education to the community regarding matters directly:

North Sydney Council Heritage Centre

The North Sydney Heritage Centre provides a high level of education and resources to the public, in both social/cultural heritage and the built environment.

Strategic Planning

Council's Strategic Planning Team address community forums and groups, and provides videos relating to policy development, exhibition, and planning proposals. The team also provides advice re developer contribution fees.

Corporate Planning and Engagement

The Corporate Planning and Engagement Team engages with Council's Precinct Committees, where planning and development are the principal matters raised. Council's Planning Advisory Team often assists with clarification and explanations around planning matters.

Customer Service

Council's Customer Service Team provides an initial point of contact both in person and on the telephone to field enquiries, and often provides initial advice prior to an inquiry being forwarded to Council's Planning Advisory Team.

Council's Desired Outcomes Relating to Community Engagement.

Prior to the next quarterly report to Council, a Councillor workshop is proposed to be arranged, to establish a clear understanding of the objectives and expectations Councillors wish to achieve under this initiative. The results of this meeting will inform the content of what is reported to Council in the future.

Conclusion

The Planning Advisory Team has a central role in (i) changing Council's approach to the NSW Planning Portal and (ii) Council's in-house review and processing of development applications. The aim of the review is to improve efficiency and outcomes in lodged applications for both applicants and Council. Additionally, the ability for the information to be updated and improved by the Planning Advisory Team on Council's website will lead to more responsive information which will be beneficial to the North Sydney Community.

Since the return of planning advice meetings there has been an increase in uptake both by professionals and members of the public, and it is expected that demand will increase following the holiday season. It is also expected that there will be an uptake of planning talks by Council's Precincts over the next quarter.

In the next quarter, Planning staff will meet with Councillors to inform what type of community engagement is expected by Council, so that the Planning Advisory Team can provide focused community engagement in line with Council's expectations.