

Notes from the Meeting with the Developer and Consultant for Toondah Harbour Project

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Purpose: The meeting was organised as a result of the developer and consultant for the Toondah Harbour Project wishing to meet with representatives of the Ramsar Secretariat to introduce the Toondah Harbour Project and present their suggestions on how to move ahead with the project by adopting the best possible approaches to minimize the impacts on the Moreton Bay Ramsar Site.

Summary notes:

- After a brief introduction from the participants, the developer began by sharing with the Secretariat the background to the Toondah Harbour Project. They explained that the harbour and port facility development was needed due to the increasing number of people (including tourists) and vehicles using the ferry crossing to North Stradbroke Island. The housing development part of the proposed project was needed to fund the harbour and port improvement. The project is part of the overall development plan for the region, including that for infrastructure and tourism.
- The developer further explained that the project was conceptualised 50 years ago even before the area was designated as a Ramsar Site but the design was never finalized and so the work was not begun. The proposed development area was selected after reviewing the feasibility of different areas for the development, as well as after consultation with various stakeholders. As a result, it would not be an option for the project to be moved elsewhere.
- As a result, the Queensland Government designated the area as a Priority Development Area (PDA) under the Economic Development Act.
- Through a tender process, the Walker Group was hired as the developer of the project. Walker then developed a draft plan for the project (which they said may be subject to change). During the development phase of the project, they became aware of the concerns over the serious impacts that the project will cause to the ecological character of the Ramsar Site.
- The Secretariat confirmed that if the State and the Federal Government were to approve the project in its present form and restrict the boundary of the Ramsar Site under “urgent national interest”, then the case will have to be presented and discussed in front of the other Contracting Parties at the upcoming COP13. Previously, such “urgent national interest” cases have never been discussed at Ramsar COPs. If the proposed Toondah Harbour development were to be presented at COP13, then it would be the first time that such a case will be discussed at a Ramsar COP.
- The developer mentioned that they would not press on with their plan if there were going to be impacts on the Ramsar Site. They asked for alternatives on best possible approaches for the development that works for both the project and the Ramsar Site.
- They said that they could possibly reconfigure their plan so that it follows a sustainable and wise-use approach that substantially minimizes the physical and ecological impacts of the project on the Ramsar Site. This could involve restricting the development to the parts of the PDA that lies outside of the Ramsar Site boundary or to look for other suitable development areas nearby and then to compensate.

- The Secretariat said that the starting point for the proposed project should be to avoid any impacts to the Ramsar Site rather than to cause impact and then compensate afterwards.
- The Secretariat stated that it is difficult to fully understand the possible impacts from the proposed project because the Ramsar Information Sheet (RIS) for the Moreton Bay Ramsar Site has not been updated since 1999 and that an Ecological Character Description (ECD) has not been completed for the Site. It was suggested that the developer could support the updating of the RIS and drafting of the ECD for the Site.
- Furthermore, a management plan should be formulated for the Ramsar Site to help with proper long term conservation and wise use of the Site.
- The Secretariat stated that from their past experience of how to resolve conflicts over proposed developments, it is important as a first step to set up a mechanism (which can be informal), whereby representatives from the developer, government, NGOs and community groups can meet to air their views and to discuss possible options for going forward.
- There was finally discussion on developing an Information Paper or a Draft Resolution for COP13 on “best practices for developments in and around Ramsar Sites”. The Information Paper would contain case studies from around the world of developments that have taken place alongside but outside of Ramsar Sites which have adopted best practices to avoid impacts on the ecological characters of the Ramsar Site.