

# Is Byron Bay Being Loved to Death?

By Jim Beatson

“Everywhere in Byron you’ll find someone ready to tell you how Byron has changed, how it’s ruined and not the town it was in the 60s, 70s, 80s or even last year. But whether you were born here, came with the first wave of surfers or the last wave of sea-changers, Byron is still different from every other town on the east coast,” says Cate Coorey, President of the Byron Residents Group.

“That’s why I came here; to work less and enjoy life more in a town that is known for its progressive, environment-centred values. Now I’m the busiest I’ve been in years, trying to protect it from “growth is good” Tea Party style Councillors and a Sydney-based developer who has been given the go-ahead to build a mega-suburb of cheek-by-jowl houses on a sensitive wetland and to destroy critical koala habitat.”

Cate’s group has enormous popular support, evidenced by the turn-outs at town meetings. The most recent protest, a fortnight ago, attracted over 1000 young people with singers including internationally famous Xavier Rudd and MC’d by Winston McCall, lead singer with metalcore super group, Parkway Drive.

Byron Shire is renowned world-wide for its breathtaking views, eclectic villages, fabulous surf beaches and Marine Park. Where renowned writers, film-makers and artists rub democratic shoulders with Byron’s unemployed and millionaires at local pubs. Where every month a major festival, or two, takes place.

Long time locals, like surfing legend, Rusty Miller, worries: “Its time we do what Byron does so well; change the tide”. Several years ago National Geographic supported Lonely Planet’s view that Byron was at pivotal point: “Developers would cheerfully turn Byron into a Surfers Paradise given the chance...”

That fat chance arrived in three quick steps. With rising commercial rents, many national brands like Sportsgirl and Just Jeans took over Byron’s main street, at the time the M1 Freeway linked Brisbane and the Gold Coast to Byron. Then the GFC cut the number of international and national visitors. A worried Chamber of Commerce, backed by Tourism NSW, threw \$1million on TV advertising at SE Queensland. The message was ‘we are just two hours to *Byron, Naturally*®’. Ballina Airport was re-named Ballina-Byron Airport. Later, ‘Splendour’ and ‘Falls’ festivals, closer to Tweed Heads airport than Byron’s airport, were given ‘Byron Bay’ branding.

Day trippers from the north came in large numbers. And Byron Bay went from 10<sup>th</sup> most violent town in NSW in 2010 to 4<sup>th</sup> in 2013. Despite this by 2014 house values in Byron Bay rose an average 25%, the highest in Australia!

That’s just background noise for the many hundreds of members of Byron Residents’ Group. Their lock-on target is NSW Planning Minister, Pru Goward who, sight unseen, bestowed

urban sprawl on this contained town. Goward is rarely viewed as all media attention is focussed on the charming, perfectly formed Premier, Mike Baird. Neither have visited the site.

Also a target is Sydney-based developer, Tower Holdings, who bought, with a few local minnows, the 108 hectare West Byron site, known locally as 'the Swamp', 2.5 kilometres from Byron Bay and on its Northern entrance, Ewingsdale Rd.

Byron Bay's total homes in the last census was 4,841, of which 1000 are holiday lets. West Byron will add up to another 2000 new homes. All built alongside Ewingsdale Rd, now regularly choked with traffic for stops up to an hour at a time.

West Byron sits atop an acid sulphate soil hot spot which drains into Belongil Estuary, and into the Byron Marine Park. Local ecologist, Mary Gardner, says, "sulphuric acid and heavy metals are released when these soils are disturbed by either excavation or infill."

Essential koala habitat is inside West Byron. Other wildlife also use it as a corridor.

Worryingly, Tower Holdings has a poor reputation over environmental concerns with their Great Keppel Island Resort. Breaches have received wide national media attention.

In the decade before 2004, Byron residents used non-violent action to stop two major development projects (Paterson Hill & Club Med). In 2004 Jan Barham became Byron Shires first directly elected Green Mayor. Her progressive Council refused to develop West Byron's 'swamp' over eight years overcoming National Party influenced Councillors.

2013 saw Barham move to NSW's Upper House, replaced by another Greens' Mayor, Simon Richardson, with the same Green-Progressive 5/4 Councillor majority. Richardson, once a dreadlocked activist at logging sites, later a history teacher at Cape Byron's Steiner School. Now the popular, thoughtful Mayor, describes the West Byron project as "monstrous"

In a bid to end the bickering between NP leaning Councillors, some businesses and the Green/Progressives the Greens chose a Real Estate Agent, Rose Wanchap, to head their 2013 Councillor ticket. Wanchap had spent years campaigning against chemical spraying, was a passionate supporter of Cr Richardson and Bob Brown and had recently won the Shire's Environmentalist of the Year Award.

The bid won. But not in the Greens favour. Wanchap won 31 votes in her own right and received 3,448 Greens preferences. Her love of the Greens and Simon lasted long enough to have her picture taken with a visiting Bob Brown. She switched to voting with Council's National Party leaning group, handing them control.

Suddenly Cr Wanchap was everywhere: opposing a gay marriage site in the Bay proposed by Mayor Richardson; claiming West Byron contained only 2 koalas; calling for a 3 story beachside carpark at Byron's Main Beach; and voting against a community consultation charter motion at Council. She also made regional TV news at a picket outside her office. She lost her temper with 73 yo Maggie Luke who was carrying a placard saying 'Resign Rose'. In front of the camera, she told Luke, "You just be careful or you'll get a slap in the face."

Prominent Byron business advocates supported West Byron, like the Holiday Letting Organisation leader, John Gudgeon. He told forums “For Byron Bay to be sustainable it needs to increase its population.” Cr Wanchap argued West Byron would provide “affordable housing” in the Shire’s above-state-average unemployed and low paid workers, despite Tower Holdings reported plans to charge a minimum \$595,000 for a small house/land package.

Council is at war. For all its mix of millionaire pretention and wild buskers, the town of Byron Bay itself is shabby, poorly designed and overrun by cars.

Mayor Richardson persuaded Councillors unanimously to spend \$250,000 on a Byron Bay CBD Master Plan. But before the Master Planners completed their initial four months of public consultation, the majority five on Council pre-empted the Master Plan. Over the Consultants’ objections, they passed a motion to spend \$206,000 on an ad-hoc plan to widen a 50 metres of Ewingsdale Rd. Community consultation was hastily assembled with a small group of stakeholders given just 12 hours notice. Only six turned up for a session described by one businessman as “bugger all”, adding the Councillors did not consult. They confirmed their decision to proceed their plan “in about one minute”. At Council they gagged Mayor Richardson’s reproaches.

Days later, the Master Planners completed 23 community meetings and over 2000 engagements, via email and net. Contrary to the motion passed by the majority councillors, the proposal garnering most support was to give pedestrians priority over cars. The second one was to remove cars from the CBD.

With days to the State election, Labor and Greens promise to reverse the West Byron decision. With another 18 months before the Council’s Election the question remains. Will the people of Byron Bay stand up against overdevelopment in West Byron? Is non-violent resistance inevitable?

(Jim Beatson is a Byron Bay local, a former regular writer for The Guardian. He was a former member of the Greens Party and is a current member of Byron Residents Group.)