

Byron – mad, bad suburbia.

Byron Bay is full of self indulgent, superfood-munching wankers. I might even be one of those people. I moved to the Bay three years ago; I've wanted to come for thirty. It's changed – not as many ferals on the streets – but enough remains of an eighteen-year-old's memories about Byron that still mark it as different from every other town on the east coast.

The price of this town's difference is eternal vigilance and, despite the sybaritic stereotype, it's fierce and vigilant locals who have fought sand mining, loggers, high-rise development, Club Med, KFC, topless bars and chain-store liquor barns. Now the NSW Department of Planning and Environment (DoPE) is the new bully in town.

The biggest development to ever hit Byron has landed with an ugly thud on drained wetland on the edge of town. A mega suburb like you never thought you'd see here is soon to be built. The West Byron subdivision delivers 1500 plus houses on lots as small as 150sqm. This one development adds upwards of 3,000 people to a population of less than 10,000

This is no harmless holiday village, it's social engineering done remotely by people who won't be around to see the truly awful results – a poisoned estuary, dead koalas and a gridlocked town.

Only political will can fix this mess. The seat of Ballina is now marginal and both the Greens and Labor candidates have vowed to overturn the West Byron zoning decision. Cynics will say that they are angling for votes – they are, but that's the point. The people don't want West Byron and the people vote.

The West Byron developers rejected the evidence of Council's expert investigations and the will of the community and took their devilish plan to the then Labor state government as a potential State Significant Site under Part 3A of the Planning Act, the "developers friend". A change of government removed this notoriously corrupt provision and that should have been the end of this grubby business.

Besting the corrupt planning practices of her predecessors, the Minister for Planning, Pru Goward, and her Department went all out to approve West Byron, disregarding even the basic parameters of environmental and social impacts to make sure it went ahead. The unrestrained power at the Minister's fingertips allows her to rent this black hole into the green fabric of our shire.

The 108 hectare site is on an estuary and is a wildlife corridor for Byron's shrinking koala population. The original consultants' report of significant koala habitation never saw the light of day. No report; no koala problem. Byron Bay, the enviro-capital of Australia, might lose its koala population in a few years.

The classic image of a poisoned waterway is the fish kill; belly up fish in dirty water. At West Byron more than half the site is acid-sulfate soil which, when disturbed by development, would generate sulphuric acid and send toxic concentrations of heavy metals into Belongil Creek, part of Cape Byron Marine Park. When the project was first on exhibition the acid-sulfate soil assessment report was intentionally suppressed and the Department of Planning allowed the developers to get away with it. The public never knew and now we do it's too late.

The road into Byron is the Gordian knot of traffic problems. Locals and visitors fume in their hot cars waiting for up to an hour to get to the beach where they can't find a park. For locals the road is a daily cross to bear, an urban-style problem the sea-changers sought to escape.

The West Byron development sits on this slow road and will feed even more cars onto it. The developers, like second-rate street magicians, are distracting the audience by waving a bit of cash and promising a "traffic solution". The real sleight of hand is that there is no solution. There is only one road in and one road out, the town is surrounded by swamp and there is no place to put a new road that would make any real difference.

Planning Minister Pru Goward, having never been to Byron Bay, with a stroke of her pen committed to destroy the very thing that brings 1.5 million visitors annually to the town. The world-famous laid back vibe will be a memory as, choked by traffic and flanked by cheek by jowl suburban subdivisions, we will see dusk settle on the town that once heralded the age of Aquarius.

How spectacularly stupid it would be if, in a few years' time, world famous Byron Bay was just another ugly town, ruined because some property speculators bought swampy land, were stymied by an annoying bunch of greenies and so went to the NSW Government to help them flog it for a fortune?

We must persuade the Minister that killing the golden goose of Byron Bay is a dumb idea. We want her to rezone her rezoning. If that doesn't work we will be standing on the shoulders of all those fabulous hairy protesting hippies of recent past – joined by the Arakwal people who have been an uninterrupted presence here for centuries – and we will defend their hard-won piece of paradise.

You can't build an ugly mega-suburb here for god's sake -- it's Byron!

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