

White Paper- Parklands for People

Submission from the Committee for Sydney

July 2021

About the Committee for Sydney

The Committee for Sydney is an independent think tank and champion for the whole of Sydney, providing thought leadership beyond the electoral cycle. We bring people together to solve the problems of today and tomorrow.

With over 150 member organisations, we work on behalf of Sydney, not the interest of any industry or sector. Our goal is to build on our already strong history of shining a light on critical issues shaping our city and developing a suite of actions for a better future.

A better way to manage... and protect

The Committee welcomes the opportunity to comment on the White Paper and we commend the government for undertaking this important, but difficult reform. Establishing a clear, comprehensive, and more contemporary consultative governance structure to manage the main State owned parklands is both overdue and welcome.

The long term potential of these significant reforms is not lost on the Committee. They offer:

- the potential to expand the estate over time,
- the further development and strengthening of expertise within the organisation that may be available to Local Councils, other government agencies and private landowners, and,
- a governance structure that recognises the need for and facilitates local knowledge,

The Parklands Trust could be the basis for significant reform in how we conceive and manage the public domain.

Options for Legislative reform

We strongly support the preferred option outlined in the White Paper - a legislated umbrella trust - while retaining the existing trusts and Acts.

We support the balance between administrative efficiency and local considerations. A unified administrative structure should result in cost savings and efficiencies which can then be redirected towards improving the Parklands. At the same time, retention of the local trusts should ensure the local considerations are incorporated into the management of specific parklands.

The existing trusts and Acts were the result of hard fought wins by Sydneysiders and their retention will help maintain community confidence in the new Trust.

The Committee believes that the Legislation should also be drafted to ensure that other parklands can easily be incorporated into the governance structure should the opportunity or need arise in the future. Consideration should also be given to requiring Government agencies to consult the Greater Sydney Parklands Trust (GSP Trust) prior to the sale of public land which might be best repurposed for open space or for inclusion in the Parklands.

Governance

The Committee supports the establishment of the GSP Trust and the suggested roles and responsibilities for it as outlined in the White Paper.

Expertise and advocacy

We also welcome the proposal for the GSP Trust to be given a wider role in advocating and providing expertise for parks and open space through the metropolitan-wide strategic planning process. These roles should be made explicit in the objects and functions of the Act.

Community Consultation

The success or otherwise of the GSP Trust is predicated on it achieving and retaining the community's confidence in its operations and deliberations. The key to this is ongoing community engagement and consultation. We support the recommendation that community participation and consultation:

- Be made explicit in the objects and functions of the Act,
- Is both deep and wide, reflecting the views of all Sydneysiders, including indigenous communities and groups, and not just the Parklands' immediate neighbours and users.
- Reflects best practice and is regularly reviewed to ensure it is achieving a wide range of views and opinions.

We also support retention of the Community trustee boards as key mechanism to providing ongoing public input. We also agree that the composition of these Boards should reflect a diversity of experience, backgrounds, and skills.

Funding and finance

Ensuring these Parklands have long-term and secure funding arrangement is critical if the GSP Trust is to be successful.

The Committee supports the idea that the GSP Trust could become less reliant on the public purse, and to explore and develop a variety of income streams to fund its operations. To this end, we support the idea in the White Paper of a wider application of "off-park business hub" or similar which funds the former Western Sydney Parklands.

However, protecting and maintaining these Places requires a stable and adequate funding stream to carry out the functions and meet the objects of the Act. One that is protected from the vagaries of the political or economic cycles.

Therefore, both a commitment to recurrent funding, and the ability to generate and retain any additional income generated by commercial activities should be made explicit in the Act. We support:

- All efficiency gains arising from removing administrative duplication being redirected into park improvements.
- Retention of the existing prohibition on land sales to fund the Parks.
- Only allowing fundraising Commercial activity in parks when it adds to the amenity, and activation of the site and does not impact on the heritage, recreational or environmental values of the park, nor unduly impact public access or use.

Conclusion

The GSP Trust offers the opportunity to create a public sector agency which has a range of unique skills and expertise in managing complex precincts. The collocation in a single agency of expertise in environmental and landscape conservation, heritage protection, place activation, and precinct management will provide a much needed resource for other public lands beyond the existing Parklands. Several Government agencies and Departments own and operate special precincts which would benefit from the skills and resources of the GSP Trust. Skills and expertise these agencies currently lack or are beyond their core service responsibilities.

Likewise, the skills and expertise of the GSP Trust, should help inform the metropolitan planning of Sydney as well as assist Local Councils deliver their Local Strategic Planning Statements and the 'blue and green grid'.

For Sydney to truly become a 'city in a park', the Committee would like to see the GSP Trust become an active participant and leader in the planning for future urban parklands, especially in places experiencing significant growth or where there is currently insufficient or poor quality regional open space.