

NEWPORT and its FUTURE as a SUSTAINABLE TOURISM AREA

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Setting the Scene

The area we have come to know as “*Pittwater*” is one blessed with an abundant natural environment exemplified by its make-up of waterways, ocean, native bushland, beaches, villages and conscious low-to-medium density residential and retail/commercial development.

Being an hour’s drive north of the Sydney CBD, it is an area of diverse appeal and which should evolve into an accessible, while sustainable, tourism destination for visitors to Sydney.

Amazingly, with the exception of a small selection of B&B accommodation, there is no upmarket accommodation between Sydney Harbour and Broken Bay, the northern boundary to the Pittwater peninsula.

The Opportunity

Newport, the beach-adjacent village close to the mid-point of the Pittwater coastline, has had the Council initiative of a village Masterplan, drawn up with considerable community input and consultation during the last decade. Unfortunately, a number of Council’s Planning staff has seen fit to treat this Masterplan as a source of optional guidelines, rather than the philosophical and architectural template which was its intent. It is not too late to set the keystone of that template, with a sympathetically designed significant structure in the centre of this village: one from which community-welcoming space and activities can radiate – a community composed of both residents and visitors.

Such a structure needs an appropriate site. The ideal site is the semi-developed property which runs from the Barrenjoey Road frontage immediately adjacent to the northbound bus stop, through to the Foamcrest Avenue rear boundary of the at-grade parking area. The Barrenjoey Road frontage and a contiguous section of the carpark (c40% of that carpark) are owned by a property division of Woolworths; the southern and northern sections of the carpark (the remaining c60%) are Community land held by Pittwater Council.

Except for a Woolworths’ owned liquor store and an inefficiently used carpark (due to its split ownership) this site has lain fallow for a decade. Woolworths concept to develop it into a boundary-to-boundary box-like, large supermarket was majority rejected by the Newport community back in 2008.

A Council and community backed proposal to turn this site into a lifestyle-centric village focal point, in a way which would ensure for Woolworths that no competitor would ever get access to it, would be a positive way for Woolworths to rid itself of this corporate millstone, while retrieving something of its corporate reputation with the community of Newport.

The Village of Newport

In spite of the fallow spot near its centre, Newport has quietly continued its evolution into a people-friendly mix of more than a dozen cafes, an even greater number of restaurants and take-aways, numerous attractive fashion and beauty outlets plus interesting and stylish

furniture and homewares stores, while retaining the very important core facilities of an independently owned butcher's shop, a green grocery, a newsagency, a patisserie and a pharmacy.

Additionally, its community friendly atmosphere has recently attracted new retail ventures, such as an award-winning specialist ballet outfitter, a direct importer/vendor of French foods & wines, a Japanese porcelain specialist and a custom-graphics apparel and accessories store.

The ideal extension to Newport village is something which complements – rather than overpowers – the currently evolving retail offering. Valuable bonuses would be the further enhancement of what is on offer, while assisting to attract a controllable increase in visitation to the area.

The Concept

A Newport addition which addresses all these aspects would be a small, five star, boutique hotel. Not an institution which would compete with the *Newport Arms* (or *The Newport*, as its new owner has now announced for its future era). But an initiative which complements both the historical and the anticipated facilities of a revitalised *The Newport*.

For those who are familiar with the boutique hotel which for decades was *The Sebel (Townhouse)* at Elizabeth Bay, this would be a good model for what is envisaged for Newport village – *not architecturally*, because *The Sebel* was a c10-storey building on a narrow steep site, *but conceptually*, in the atmosphere and facilities which it offered to the international, interstate and intrastate clientele which it attracted.

As with *The Sebel*, this boutique hotel would incorporate:

- Less than 100 guest rooms and suites;
- A mid-to-up-market restaurant of c100 covers, overlooking or opening onto a public piazza;
- *No* public bars but a cocktail bar, open to inhouse guests and those eating at the restaurant;
- Conference rooms, suited to small to medium business seminars & meetings and sit-down banquets/receptions for up to c100 persons.

Additionally, the development would include:

- A shopping arcade, likely to attract even more upmarket boutique retailers than those already in the current village mix and hence enhancing the overall range and attractiveness of Newport's retail;
- Membership of an international hotel group, such as *Small Luxury Hotels of the World*, both to ensure the grade and the style of its service and to put it on the international map in attracting clientele.

It could be the decisive step which heads Pittwater towards the more environmentally conscious direction of the Noosa style, rather than the destructive evolution of the Gold Coast style.

Special Considerations

Because any development of this site means surrendering Community use land, such a development must address a number of factors:

PARKING: Unlike the supermarket formerly proposed by Woolworths, such a boutique hotel development would not add dramatically to the business hour parking needs of Newport village. As an accommodation focussed facility, its greatest requirement for parking is likely

to be overnight, thus complementing – not exasperating – the daytime parking requirements for community use of retail, commercial and professional services.

But a condition of the development would have to be sufficient undercover parking to satisfy the hotel's needs as well as at least replacing the equivalent of the number of at-grade parking spaces currently available to the public.

THE MASTERPLAN: As the development involves Council administered public property, the design of the facility must address the requirements of the Masterplan template, a bonus being that it would set a precedent for future developers consolidating lots within the village. This means it must comply or improve upon set-backs, etc, as stipulated in that Masterplan and be empathetic to existing adjacent residential properties.

A PEDESTRIAN PIAZZA: The northern parcel of Community land needs to be developed as a community focal point and become the link between the hotel and its facilities and the outdoor life of the village.

It is anticipated that the owner of the Robinson Road group of shops, which backs onto the northern boundary of this land, may wish to refurbish/redevelop these shops to facilitate the opening of existing and future cafes into this piazza area. (A condition of any such redevelopment could be the provision of reasonable pedestrian access between the piazza/hotel and Robinson Road.)

Because the hotel structure would be directly south of the proposed piazza on what is now Community land, it would be reasonable not to require setback on this side, sufficient space and visual separation already being provided by the piazza itself and no additional shadows being cast. However, a visually appealing hotel facade would be mandatory, as this would be the most dominant aspect above the piazza.

AN ELEGANT & ENVIRONMENTALLY SYMPATHETIC STRUCTURE: With Pittwater Council's embracing of the '*placemaking*' philosophy of village/town evolution, it would be a requirement that this hotel development be a flagship for the application of this philosophy to the Newport village. It is anticipated that this building be one which is appealing not only to those who occupy or pass by the areas within and directly adjacent to it but also to the many residents and visitors who will look down on it from the hills which surround it on all but its eastern side.

Bonuses – Extensive & Longterm

For several years, the Pittwater community (in particular *Pittwater Business* and the Councils within its geographic footprint) have been discussing the many benefits of a University campus (or at least several faculties) becoming established in the Pittwater area. Where a university campus is located in a special, indeed an advantageous, location (eg *Cook University*, FNQ) it is endowed with opportunities to offer specialist courses and degrees. The location of a five-star hotel facility close to such a proposed campus is an incentive for that educational project to proceed sooner rather than later. On the one hand there will be local vocational opportunities for students and, on the other, the hotel will have a local source of eager graduate employees, very familiar with the area.

The obvious qualifications in *Hospitality/Hotel Management* and in *Event Management* can be complemented and expanded with degrees in *Tourism* and in *Environmental Sciences* and other disciplines which fit hand-in-glove with the Pittwater, the Hawkesbury and the other adjacent areas.

Additionally, upmarket hotel accommodation will provide the impetus for expansion of existing tourism businesses (kayak tours, guided bushwalking, day-sail & cruiser hire, ferry cruises, etc) and the opportunity for the creation of others.

It will also directly address the needs in availability of quality accommodation, as indicated by the reported logarithmic growth in Airbnb listings and demand throughout the Pittwater region. While Airbnb obviously generates visitor retail expenditure, it contributes almost nothing to government income at any of the three levels, while increasing the pressure on community resources, facilities and utilities.

Conclusion

This proposed development could be the catalyst for very much more than the solution to a gap in the Newport village. It could be the lodestone for the sensible and sensitive development of sustainable tourism and even tertiary education throughout the Pittwater area.

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This concept has been developed by Peter Middleton, a passionate resident of Pittwater and a consultant on Travel & Tourism Marketing to major international airlines, travel companies and other tourism organisations for 40 years.