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Mr David Davis MLC
Chairman,
Select Committee on Public Land Development.

Dear Sir,

Re Former Kew Cottages Site.

As a member of the Kew Cottages Coalition and the parent of Bruce Anderson a former Kew Cottages resident for 36 years, I tender the following submission for the consideration of the Davis Committee in the hope that wise counsel will not let this shameful, undemocratic sale and misuse of public land continue unabated into the future.

Due Process

The sale of any public land to a private developer or otherwise should require complete justification. The owners of the land be they the legal or the traditional owners should be fully consulted and their wishes carefully considered. This process is particularly necessary if the land has buildings or other improvements on it used for the good of the community and particularly its occupants. In the case of the Kew Cottages site, the real owners, the people of Victoria, were never properly consulted by the Government of the day when the decision to close the cottages and sell this property to a private developer was made.

Instead of the Victorian public being properly consulted by either the Kennett or Bracks Governments, both appear to have yielded to the pressure of private developers to allow this highly valuable land, ideally located close to the Eastern Freeway to be redeveloped as an upmarket housing development for the financial benefit of both the Government and the developer particularly the latter. A pretence used that there was a shortage of land suitable for housing development close to the city does not hold up as there is and was at the time, plenty of unoccupied Crown land within close proximity of the city and which was and still is today not fully utilized for any useful purpose.

Land Availability

One such area is the vacant land adjoining the Royal Talbot Rehabilitation Hospital between the Eastern Freeway and the Boulevard at Melway map reference 45A1, which commands excellent views of Melbourne over Fairfield to the north and the City to the west. It appears to be virgin land providing limited usage for recreational purposes only. I have no doubt there is a deal of other Crown land available in metropolitan Melbourne which is currently underutilized and was at the time suitable for housing. To close the Kew Cottages and sell the site for a commercial housing development was in my view completely unjustified and a tragedy which unfortunately did not have to happen.

The Deinstitutional Myth

No doubt some Government members may have been impressed by the claims made at the time by the deinstitutional lobby that all institutions were outmoded and intrinsically bad. Therefore it was argued that they should all be closed and the residents rehoused in normal suburban houses. Then by some magical process they would become normal citizens and immediately accepted by their neighbours and absorbed into the local community. Unfortunately except in a few rare cases this has not happened as anyone with a realistic understanding of public opinion and attitude could have predicted. The claim by both the Liberal and Labour State Governments and the State Department of Human Services that the Kew Cottages residents are better off in brand new purpose built residences located separately out in the community is highly debatable. Some parents and some former staff would disagree quite strongly with that claim for a number of valid reasons, the chief of which are:

- (a) The lack of “in house” medical and dental facilities which were provided at the Kew site and which are now not available at the Community Residential Units (CRUs)
- (b) The pleasant, safe and relaxed ambience of the former Kew Cottages site where most of the residents could walk or relax in a parklike setting and enjoy the many “tailor made” recreational facilities provided on the site in complete safety and in many cases with a minimum of supervision.
- (c) The existence of specialized educational, training and recreational facilities on site, designed and constructed to suit the special needs of the intellectually handicapped and in some cases the multi handicapped which are not readily available to the intellectually disabled generally in the community.

Health and Educational Services

In the case of (a) above the medical facilities provided at the former Smorgan Medical Centre included a complete 24 hour nursing and dental service, staffed by fully trained and highly experienced Doctors , Dentists and Nurses. The Smorgan staff fully understood the special needs of the Kew Cottages residents, who in many cases were non verbal and illiterate. Therefore they were not able to communicate their symptoms and thus were not able to assist in their diagnosis and treatment without some form of approved restraint or the specialized communication skills of the staff. This high standard of service is understandably sometimes lacking in the community health system.

With regard to (b) above, despite the various assurances given by the Department of Human Services that it will be quite safe for the 100 or so intellectually disabled residents left on site to walk around the site in relative safety is ofcourse a complete nonsense. The only speed reducing devices to be used on the roads will be traffic humps located at intersections where speeding vehicles would have to reduce speed to turn or negotiate the intersection. The fact that most of the intellectually disabled residents have little or no traffic sense appears to have been completely ignored by the site planners.

With reference to (c) above I find it difficult to justify how an excellent training and recreational facility such as the Perkin Centre specially designed to meet the special requirements of intellectually disabled people and staffed by appropriately trained and dedicated teachers could be abandoned in favour of using external training facilities not always adequately equipped to meet the special needs of intellectually disabled people.

Economic Justification

On the question of economic grounds, the dubious claim that large institutions are very costly to maintain and operate I find very difficult to accept, when the cost of building, maintaining and providing the services for the 73 CRUs recently built by the Government at an average cost of over \$800,000 each, plus the cost of the 20 CRUs to be built on the Kew site for the KRS residents remaining on site. There will also be the annual costs of maintaining these 93 CRUs which will only increase in time which should be considered. As the bulk of the building costs was in the purchase of the land and the demolition of any existing buildings, just imagine what could have been achieved with the injection of the equivalent \$60 - \$70 million this project is costing the taxpayer into the Kew Cottages site. A few older buildings could have been updated and possibly up to 200 new 5 bedroom houses built on the Kew Cottages site. This would have had the very important effect of substantially reducing the urgent list of 1000 or more ID people waiting for admission to full time care, which successive governments both State and Federal continue to ignore.

Then of course there is the question of running costs. How any government can claim that a large number of CRUs are cheaper to run in total than a large institution such as the Kew Cottages defies belief, when it is realized that the resident to staff ratio in a CRU IS NORMALLY 2.5 TO 1.0 compared with most institutions where it ranges from 8.0 to 15 or more to 1.0. The supporting administrative costs would probably be about the same in both cases. On the question of whether the Kew Cottages site would support an extra 200 CRU type buildings the developer at one stage produced plans proposing over 300 new dwellings for this site.

Conclusion

In conclusion I would like to remind the Committee that our forefathers had the foresight, imagination and welfare of the intellectually disabled and psychiatrically disturbed people in the State of Victoria to acquire and dedicate this once beautiful parklike site for the sole benefit and wellbeing of these people. It seems very thoughtless, unnecessary and unappreciative that this once beautiful and historically important site is being decimated for purely financial considerations without the proper and full approval of its real owners the people of Victoria.

Also in closing may I draw the Committee's attention to a piece of poetry very relevant to this Inquiry adapted by Robert F. Riddiford from an Elegy written by the English poet Thomas Gray:

Elegy Written On A Hill In Kew, The Former Site Of Kew Cottages.

*No church bell tolled the ending of their stay,
No cheering crowds to send them on their way,*

*But gone are they where people will not see,
To leave this hill to darkness and to me.
No voice had they to reach the seat of power,
When faceless figures fixed their final hour,
Their site too good for such as them to hold,
To richer citizens it will be sold.*

*These lesser ones to scattered sites must go,
And where and why is not for them to know,
Now gone the aimless wandering of their feet,
But safe were they from danger on the street.*

*From here I see the far- off city light,
And feel the sombre history of this site,
And pause to think of those unknown, unseen,
And contemplate the joy that could have been.*

(With thanks to Thomas Gray and Robert Riddiford)

Yours faithfully,

Don Anderson