

# Premier's helipad is not cleared for any landings

## EDITORIAL

SYDNEYSIDERS are full of clever ideas about where the Premier, Barry O'Farrell, should stick his helipad for the harbour.

The rooftops of one or two commercial towers around Macquarie and Phillip streets, suggests one *Herald* reader. Lake Burley Griffin, the duck pond at Blackheath, the Blue Lake at Jenolan Caves? Why not just back up the cement mixers and make Port Jackson into the second airport? Or simply land choppers on whales?

Ah, how's the serenity?

The big surprise is that residents are overlooking the perfect site: the Premier's backyard.

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There is, to be sure, a fair bit of "not in my backyard" about the helipad backlash.

NIMBYISM creates poor policy when it is rooted in the protection of privilege, vested interest and political advantage. It has no place in planning policy or approval processes.

The problem with the helipad proposal, however, is that it has been rushed through without satisfactory planning, approval processes or community consultation.

Contrast that with the years of doddering over Badgerys Creek as a second airport site, with O'Farrell still refusing to see sense and commit.

The helipad is the latest in a series of opaque O'Farrell decisions on projects, among

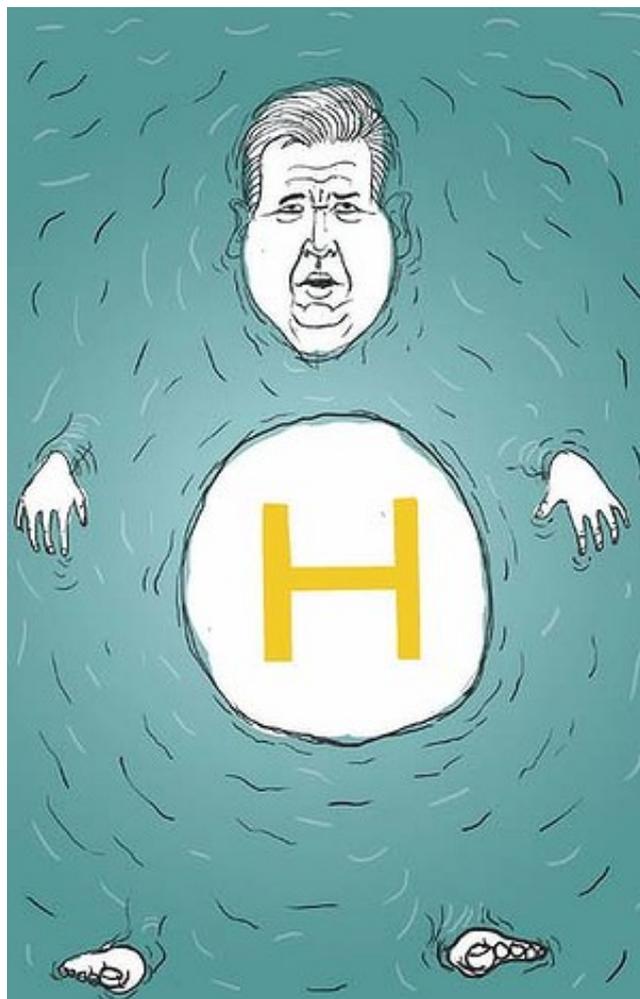


Illustration: Simon Letch

them the Barangaroo casino and Darling Harbour redevelopment. The government is starting to evoke the deal-making of its Labor predecessor.

The tourist dollar may well justify a harbour helipad but that argument is difficult to accept without proper research and a cost-benefit analysis.

The cynics are entitled to ponder this: if the Opera House, Harbour Bridge, parks, beaches, hospitality, barbecues, food, wine and so on aren't good enough to bolster tourism, what hope will a floating helipad have?

This newspaper supports policies that foster balanced business, economic and population growth across NSW. Sydney has a working harbour and that should be encouraged. But secrecy and ad hoc processes mar what may well be beneficial projects.

Without community acceptance that their views have been considered, developments such as the helipad proposed by Newcastle Helicopters soon lose legitimacy.

Residents, of course, should accept when they buy property or choose to live in large metropolitan centres that they will encounter congestion and noise.

Seaplanes have used Rose Bay as a landing area for generations.

But governments have a duty to plan to minimise the impacts of change; not allow incremental damage by stealth.

Residents around the harbour are crying loud about the potential noise of up to eight helicopter flights an hour between 7am and dusk.

This is no surprise. The International Standards Organisation even has a calculator which estimates that a 20 decibel noise change will elicit a "very strong response" from residents.

An independent noise assessment for Newcastle Helicopters estimates the helipad will create noise levels of about 62 decibels for someone standing outside the closest house to the flight path. That's like the noise of a living room with quiet music or TV playing, or the level of conversational speech - far below the 85 decibel national standard for exposure to noise in the occupational environment.

The choppers will take off and land at least 600 metres from homes. The people of New York live much closer to helipads that have drawn noise complaints for decades.

Last May the Mayor, Michael Bloomberg, was embarrassed when he was filmed flying his chopper in defiance of a weekend ban.

The US Federal Aviation Authority has also moved to ban most helicopters from flying directly from Manhattan over residential areas of Long Island - a route favoured by the wealthy when they head for retreats in the Hamptons. And in May anti-helicopter protesters gathered on Brooklyn Bridge and chanted "stop the chop".

The Sydney proposal promises "quiet technology" helicopters. The noise assessment recommended careful flight-path management and concluded there would be no significant increase in overall residential noise levels on a daily basis. This took into account the distance from dwellings, existing noise from road and bridge traffic and the long-term success of floatplanes.

Those recommendations are reassuring but they are not noise tests - Newcastle Helicopters only began its own after the resident backlash - and they do nothing to assuage concerns about the derelict process.

Having approved the helipads, the government now says the licence is in effect a one-year trial and is reviewing the process for future applications.

That is not good enough. The helipad approval should be revoked now and reconsidered when the rules are fixed and the community has been consulted.