

Chopper plan in tailspin as harbour anger grows



The barge is an 'older vessel' ... an artist's impression from the operator's website.

Ian Kiernan, celebrated yachtsman and former lone round-the-world sailor, has a vision for the proposed helicopter platform floating smack-bang in the middle of Sydney's busy and glistening harbour.

But it is not the vision put forward by the project's advocates, who see it becoming a tourism magnet. Kiernan conjures up an altogether less benevolent scene - the platform surrounded by the spear-like masts of protesting yachtsies.

"Wild Oats has got a 40-metre mast," he says darkly. "We'll be putting yachts right around it, I tell you. Vertical spears - that will make it pretty hard for them."

Kiernan, the founder of Clean Up Australia, is a new and influential voice in the chorus of protest building against the Newcastle Helicopters project, which envisages operating up to eight flights an hour from a floating platform moving between some of the harbour's most spectacular locations.

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The state government approved the heliport without an environmental impact state-

ment, without a public tender, without public consultation and without noise-testing.

The project's co-owner, James Guest, says it will be a blessing for the state's tourism industry and for business travellers wanting a quick chopper flight between the airport and the city .

But Coalition frontbencher Malcolm Turnbull has given the plan both barrels, describing it as a "reckless and undemocratic" disgrace, while trying diplomatically to distinguish between the actions of the Premier, Barry O'Farrell, and those of his minions.

Turnbull told Fairfax he was seeking talks with O'Farrell and Deputy Premier Andrew Stoner about the way the new operation was seemingly waved through the newly amalgamated Roads and Maritime Services agency.

"I'm terribly disappointed about it," Turnbull said. "Brad [Hazzard, the Planning Minister] has been working on a whole new policy on how to better engage communities in planning decisions, recognising that was a failing of the previous government. This decision undermines all of that work. People will look at this and say, well, it's back to the old way of making decisions and letting people know afterwards."

The harbourside resident, whose federal electorate takes in some of the most directly affected areas , insists its not just rich toffs living around Australia's most famous waterway who will be hit.

Turnbull and Kiernan say it is also the tinnie users, the yachties, the little racing skiffs holding weekly races, the people in parks and those on the beaches.

"The nightmare I've got in my mind is a combination of a summer's afternoon, many hundreds of boats out on the harbour, most of them sailing skiffs, a strong nor-easter, sailing races under way, and these helicopters landing. Seaplanes have to find somewhere with no boats. The problem for the helicopter is he has to land on the barge," says Turnbull. "Who's going to be responsible the first time there is an accident ?"

The commodore of the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron, Malcolm Levy, is equally alarmed. He says the first he knew of the proposal was when he read about it in the press. "The area I see designated on a plan shows quite a large part of the harbour ...

used continuously in yacht races and by recreational users. If there's going to be a barge stuck in the harbour, does that mean we are to stop what we've been doing?"

Safety concerns have barely been addressed in the government's initially enthusiastic pronouncements. The air safety regulator, CASA, says it is not involved in approving the project because the pontoon is not an aerodrome.

Some of the Coalition government's most prominent members are feeling the heat from constituents, particularly Health Minister and North Shore MP Jillian Skinner and Vacluse MP Gabrielle Upton.

Leading Sydney barrister Robert Stitt QC, who chairs the local government precinct committee in Lavender Bay, told Skinner in an email this week: "I do not remember any previous government decision that has sparked such spontaneous anger and outcry."

Stitt told Fairfax he was being inundated with calls from people upset over the lack of consultation.

The National Trust has launched an urgent investigation into whether the proposed operations area for the helicopter platform will intrude on the buffer zone set up around the Opera House as part of the iconic building's World Heritage Listing.

If that is the case, according to trust conservation manager Graham Quint, the Minister for Planning should have been involved.

But Brad Hazzard's office would not be drawn on the issue yesterday.

It seems that in the manner of a stealth bomber threading its way through anti-aircraft defences, the proposal has wound through the bureaucratic labyrinth with barely a warning flag raised by anybody.

A series of questions put by Fairfax to the Premier's office and those of three ministers in the past 48 hours has revealed a muddled chain of confusion about who knew what and when.

The agency responsible for issuing the permit, known as an aquatic licence, is Roads and Maritime Services (RMS) which is currently under Roads and Ports Minister Duncan Gay.

Gay's office said he was not aware until November that the application had been received.

"From that time, RMS followed the usual procedures for assessing and issuing an aquatic licence," Gay's spokesperson said.

But the office of Deputy Premier Andrew Stoner says he knew about the application at least by October 9, because he met Guest to discuss it. And his department of NSW Trade and Investment had been providing "introductions to relevant government departments and agencies from May 2012".

Significantly, Guest claims that by the time he came to see Stoner in early October, Newcastle Helicopters already knew the project was approved.

"The only person I met with at a ministerial level was the Deputy Premier, and that was only after we knew the licence was going to be issued," he told Fairfax.

This is despite the fact that Gay, the minister responsible, says he was not informed until the following month. In addition, Stoner's office advised that neither he nor any other minister brought the matter to cabinet and that he did not inform the Premier.

A list of detailed questions to O'Farrell was responded to by the Premier's office with a text message reading: "Will leave to Deputy Premier. Thanks."

Gay's office says he is directing the head of RMS to review "how such proposals are assessed and regulated".

Inside the bureaucracy, the decision-making process seems to have centred on officers locked in to narrow bands of expertise who did not have any experience dealing with the unusual aerial dimension of the proposal.

An "aquatic licence" is normally issued in conjunction with events on the harbour that require other craft to observe exclusion zones.

Another reason the agency's senior managers did not appear to pick up on the proposal's potential for controversy was because they were too busy trying to bed down a difficult restructure, observers suggest.

There seem to have been difficulties integrating the different cultures of the formerly

distinct Roads and Traffic Authority and Maritime Services Agency into the new RMS.

Despite the enthusiastic tone with which Stoner first announced the new helicopter service on November 20, this week he retreated to talking about the project as a 12-month "trial."

This has alarmed Newcastle Helicopters, which was seeking urgent clarification of the new rhetoric yesterday. Guest told Fairfax he had put "months and months " of work into the proposal.

"It has been a hard slog. I dedicated all my time to this project."

He says he will be hiring "quiet technology" helicopters to operate the service, and that all other financing will come from the bank.

In response to noise concerns raised by harbourside residents, Guest says the voluntary testing the company carried out this week "supports our theoretical evidence about how quiet the aircraft are".

In any case, he says, the "harbour is noisy already, just inherently being a harbour with lots of different vessels and the amount of activity that's happening".

For different reasons, Turnbull is also scathing about the government's attempt to now soft-sell the project as a "trial".

"At the end of 12 months they will have made an investment in equipment, no doubt invested in their helipad, and then if the service is not continued, they will complain they have lost money and it will cost jobs," he said.

"You are better off getting this thing right in the first place."

For now, the government seems determined to tough out the backlash against the project.

Stoner's office said that while Turnbull and others were entitled to their opinions, he noted the floating heliport had been "warmly welcomed by the tourism industry, including the Tourism and Transport Forum, who said it would 'bolster Sydney's tourism offering and enhance access to destinations in regional NSW' ".

Perhaps Stoner should also remind himself of the words enshrined in the Sydney Harbour Regional Environmental Plan. The harbour, it declares, is "a public resource, owned by the public, to be protected for the public good ... [this] has precedence over the private good whenever and whatever change is proposed for Sydney Harbour or its foreshores".

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