

ISSUE 1716

“In Support of Progress”

Newsletter

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Budget estimates

A lot of criticism has been leveled at the government in recent days for their approach to the budget estimate process, and calls that public servants front MP's without their Ministers in order that information can be more free-flowing. As frustrating as it might be, this call is wrong. The public service is responsible to the government, not parliament, and it is the Ministers, not the public servants, who are responsible for the process.

Government should be accountable for the decisions it takes. An open and accountable government can command respect. Obfuscation breeds suspicion, that there is something to hide. As much as they might think otherwise, it is not smart (other than for adolescent and arrogant reasons) for Ministers to not disclose information when asked. In fact, their own status is diminished by not doing so.

If Ministers want to obfuscate, then so be it. The obvious solution to this problem is to defer or to not approve the budget and/or to move motions of no-confidence in the Ministers responsible.

There have also been calls to amend the powers of the Legislative Council so that they not be able to block supply without going to the people themselves. There is an obvious trade-off here, which is for the Legislative Council to establish ongoing standing committees of review – with teeth - in exchange for the tradeoff of their Supply powers.

Salmon on the east coast

Notwithstanding the fact that approvals are in place for a farm development on the east coast, that it has the support of government, the Opposition and the local government, that it will be limited in size and scale, and that a strong regulatory regime is in place to ensure best practice, protestors have recently taken to the water (a “flotilla” of objectors) to object to the development. In fact they commandeered the MOFO brand “FloMo” to prosecute their cause.

It is reminiscent of the forest wars. As Yogi Berra once said. “It's like deja vu all over again”. Again, one company is being demonised in order to give focus to “the enemy”. And again, environmental concerns are being raised to marshal the troops.

The company needs to engage in an open way, to confront the protests. The protestors are an eclectic mix, including members of environmental groups, recreational fishers, and some local residents and holiday home owners. Whatever their rationale, be it distrust of authority, a fear of consequence, those who delight in condemning any change, those who fear their amenity may be threatened, as well as those who feel a new environmental cause coming on, their common goal is to stop the farm proceeding.

If successful, these protestors will ensure that a new development does not proceed, that new employment is not generated, and that new wealth is not created. And they don't care. Well, I do.

Macquarie Point

In the last edition of this newsletter, I raised the absurdity of our planning laws. Well, the examples I gave then have nothing on this one.

The Macquarie Point team have been working away at a new plan for Macquarie Point – yes, a NEW plan. After 6 months of diligent work, they are now in a position to expose their new “bold” vision for the precinct – their words.

To recap - the old plan involved a precinct without access to the waterfront, being bounded by the TasPorts wharf and a sewerage treatment plant. The old plan considered the precinct to be appropriate for commercial, residential and office activity. It was prescriptive with respect to particular buildings, but after years of doing whatever it was doing, in the end it was but a plan on paper – it did not have any approvals as such.

On invitation, last year MONA presented to the Board and to the world a different concept for the precinct, one that was unconstrained by existing ownership and boundaries, one that for the first time engaged with the waterfront, and one that had an emphasis on culture, art and science. In other words, a greater thematic of “place” but a lesser thematic on “commerciality”. The MONA vision gained immediate traction and public support.

The government, we are told, approved the “Master Plan reset”, and our diligent team at the Corporation has been beaver away for the last six months or so to come up with a new proposal, capturing the MONA vision for the precinct. Now it will be a precinct for “art, science, culture and tourism”, seeking a “balance with commerciality”.

Out went the old plan – the old Master Plan was now obsolete and had to be discarded. A new Master Plan was required. Or, to use the popular vernacular, the Master Plan had to be “reset”. Out went all the old approvals approaches, because with the change of use a new set of approvals were now going to be needed to conform to the planning laws.

And so, with much fanfare, the new “Reset” Master Plan has now been rolled out. Yes, we are ready to roll. Well, almost...

Unfortunately, the new MasterPlan is still constrained in area by the sewerage treatment plant and the TasPorts wharf. And unfortunately, no consideration has been given in the reset to a precinct that no longer has the sewerage treatment plant. Also unfortunately, building costs now have to take into account the presence of the sewerage treatment plant, (basically double the cost) even though it is intended at some point to move the plant.

Gone are the prescriptive provisions for buildings – instead of a “Site Development Plan”, we will now have “Particular Purpose Zones”. On questioning, it would appear that these are basically the same thing, just different language for a new approvals process. Planners will be impressed. And while the new approvals are being sought, we will have “interim activation developments”, which in translation means a cycle way and the Goods shed where functions can be held. Presumably the car park also stays – for now and for the foreseeable future.

Given these momentous decisions, the next steps are to gain the relevant planning approvals.

First in line is the need to be in conformity with the Sullivans Cove Planning Scheme, a child of the Hobart City Council, which one assumes will no longer be relevant once the StateWide Planning Scheme comes into being. After passing through this process, and the Councils own processes, the reset Plan will need to go before the Planning Commission, with all the necessary approvals to be sought and all the appropriate objections and appeals process to be followed.

The good people at the MPDC confidently predict that there will be no planning certainty until at least April next year, which, considering the project has a 30-year 3-stage time frame, is in their view reasonable.

They are on the lookout for a "foundation" tenant for the precinct. One that presumably will not be allowed a development that involves offices or residences. Of course, consideration still needs to be given to a planned and sequential release of land to enable particular developments to occur, which are still unresolved and will no doubt be subject to individual consultations and Development Applications and the like. Best of luck with that foundation tenant!

So, we can be confident that our planning laws and the approach that has been taken and continues to be taken will ensure absolutely nothing is going to happen on this site for a very long period to come. Present thinking is that nothing will be appearing "out of the ground" for at least seven years. And also we can be confident that that the good people at the MPDC will continue to be very busy, holding meetings and engaging with stakeholders, to ensure everything remains "ticked -boo". At last count these number some 250, so of course they will need to continue to be very busy, holding meetings.

Meanwhile, on the remediation front, the team is learning more and more about what needs to be done to remediate the site, which now involves a water table, which in turn requires long term study. All good stuff.

So yes, it remains a farce. Process is running rampant, with no GRAND PLAN at all. All existing constraints remain.

For this matter to be resolved, the government needs to step in and reset its own agenda. Only the government can resolve this absurdity. It must resolve the issue of the sewerage treatment plant. It must recognize its role as the foundation tenant. It will be alone in this. And if it really does want the MONA vision to become a reality, then it must step up to the plate, take charge, accept the consequences for doing so and walk away from the current wasteful process –dominated activity.

TAFE

The Chairman remains in the chair. After the disaster that has befallen the leadership of TAFE, no remedial action has been taken by the government. The Chairman's position is untenable. He has two choices, neither of which involves staying on. Either he acts, or the government should.

Energy – and Climate – cont.

The Minister for Energy has advised he will legislate to cap power price rises for the following year to 2%, following reports of up to 20% increases in some mainland states. Simple question – why 2%? Why have any rise at all?