

Anger mounts over secret sale of Crown land

By Darren Goodsir, Urban Affairs Editor

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A huge parcel of redundant government land next to the controversial ADI military site has been sold to an undisclosed buyer for a secret sum - with the deal likely to be settled days before the federal election.

The federal agency responsible for air navigation and safety, Airservices Australia, confirmed yesterday it had reached agreement to dispose of the 181-hectare site, at the edge of Cranebrook.

It is opposite the 1545-hectare ADI site, scene of a decade-long environmental challenge which has failed to stop the planned construction of 5000 homes in one of Sydney's biggest urban developments.

Airservices sold the Cranebrook lot as it is, meaning the prospective owners will inherit some disused sheds and a few broken-down communication towers. On face value, it could be a lucrative subdivision prospect. But, like the ADI site, environmental studies have suggested the land has at least two vulnerable species of plant, as well as rare forest and woodland traces.

The plants, *Dillwynia tenuifolia* and *Grevillea juniperina*, have been confirmed as falling inside the NSW Threatened Species and Conservation Act.

Penrith City Council, which has been monitoring the land since 1990, has control over rezoning should any proposal be submitted for residential development.

At present, it has special use clearance, accommodating the former wireless station functions.

However, councillors rejected a suggestion last year that the land be reclassified as "rural living" and separated into one-hectare parcels for hobby farms or homes on large estates.

During the vote, councillors argued that it was better to look at the rezoning issue once the status of the land had been resolved.

The Mayor of Penrith, David Bradbury, said yesterday he was astonished the deal had only been revealed in a phone call made by a council officer to an Airservices manager.

Cr Bradbury, who is running for the Labor Party in the seat of Lindsay against the sitting Liberal member, Jackie Kelly, said the secretive nature in which the sale process had been conducted had aroused suspicions about the site's future use.

"There has been no consultation with local community interests. There was no public tender and the details of the sale have been kept hidden from the public," Cr Bradbury said.

But a spokesman for Airservices, Richard Dudley, rejected the claims of secrecy, saying the agency's board had approved the sale last May.

Five parties were potentially interested in acquiring the site, with two submitting firm offers. Before the offer was accepted, two independent valuations were commissioned.

It was a private treaty sale, and there was no public tender, he confirmed. Neither the purchaser nor the price paid could be revealed.

"We have been in the process of selling this land for close to a decade, so there's no secret about this," Mr Dudley said.

A spokesman for Ms Kelly did not respond to calls for comment.

A bigger Airservices property on the eastern side of the ADI site, at Llandillo, may also be vacated in the future.

Mr Dudley said it was "critical" for air traffic control, but technological advances meant it might soon be surplus to requirements, and available for sale. He could not say when.