

Secret plan to develop bushland



Going bush ... Geoff Brown of the Western Sydney Conservation Alliance surveys some of the endangered plant life at the site.

Photo: *Brendan Esposito*

Sunanda Creagh, Urban Affairs Reporter
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THE State Government seems likely to allow a developer to build houses on a piece of western Sydney bushland even though secret documents show government experts advising against it.

The 181-hectare former Air Services Australia site at Cranebrook, near Penrith, is home to several endangered species of flora and fauna and areas of Aboriginal significance, but the Federal Government sold the site to the property developer IFC Capital in 2004.

IFC Capital is a donor to the NSW ALP.

It is illegal to build houses on the site, but the developer has asked the Department of Planning to include the land on a list of sites earmarked for development, called the metropolitan development program.

Documents released under freedom of information laws show the department's regional director for Sydney West, Andrew Watson, wrote to IFC Capital in 2006 advising that "new land release proposals will only be added to the MDP if they meet the sustainability criteria contained in the metropolitan strategy ... the former Air Services Australia site does not meet any of the exemptions established for inclusion on the MDP".

There was no need to build houses on the site because the State Government had identified enough places in north-west and south-west Sydney for residential development, he said.

"The inclusion of additional sites ... is only likely to occur in exceptional circumstances. Your submission does not demonstrate such exceptional circumstances."

However, other freedom-of-information documents show that a year later senior government officials proposed including the site on the development program list.

An officer with the Department of Planning, Peter Goth, wrote to his counterpart in the Department of Environment and Climate Change last November advising that senior officials had agreed to recommend the Cranebrook site be added to the list but warned that a "veil of secrecy" was vital.

"The process needs to continue to be treated completely cabinet in confidence," he said.

An environment department officer, Ray Fowke, wrote in November 2001 in an email to a colleague that while "the Cranebrook site has major conservation values that should be protected", the department was likely to support a "more intensive development" at parts of Cranebrook as long as the rest of it was conserved.

Geoff Brown, of the Western Sydney Conservation Alliance, accused the environment department of backing down from an earlier stance that the whole site should be saved.

"DECC have resorted to what they do best, which is picking up the scraps of what developers leave left over," he said. "These developers gambled when they purchased it [because it didn't have the right zoning for residential development]. They are either very stupid or they were tipped off they would be likely get an outcome that allows them to build there."

Mr Brown said the Federal Government had set aside \$15 million to conserve bushland in western Sydney, and the NSW Government should apply to use this money to buy back the Cranebrook property.

The Minister for the Environment, Verity Firth, said she still wanted to protect the entire site.

"DECC is a part of a whole of government process that involves examining all the options, but this does not change the commitment to actively pursue conservation for the entire site."

A spokeswoman for the Department of Planning said no decision had been made to include any part of the site in the metropolitan development program.

"The proposed land release to which you refer differs significantly to the previous proposal which is addressed in a letter from the Department of Planning Sydney West Regional Director [Andrew Watson]."