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# Inner city Sydney community garden to be axed, but making way for affordable housing

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## **City of Sydney councillors have been locked in an increasingly tense political stalemate over a “scrappy” community garden in the city’s inner west as the matter boils down to green space versus affordable housing.**

But a casting vote by the Lord Mayor Clover Moore at last night’s council meeting closed the book on the matter.

Councillors were blocked from debate at the last minute by the Lord Mayor, who affirmed her support for development of the community garden in Erskineville, despite there being other unused sites available.

More than 200 people signed a petition opposing development of the council-owned land, used by the community for over a decade in a bid to maintain a green corridor within Australia’s most densely populated city.

As it stands, there is no official proposal for a housing development before councillors. But the council’s chief executive officer Monica Barone said last night that an offer had come forward, and that taking it up would uphold a “standing council resolution that this was a site for affordable housing”.

It’s evident this is a divisive issue without a simple answer. New South Wales has an affordable housing shortfall of 79,400, projected to blow out to 24,100 by 2036. On the other hand, however, green space – which can reduce temperatures, improve urban water sensitivity and boost mental health – is increasingly being paved over with concrete.

Former Independent MP Dr Kerryn Phelps, along with four other councillors, threw their support behind the garden.

“One of the things that has become incredibly evident to me ... is the difficulty of getting green space back once you’ve built on it,” Dr Phelps told councillors last night.

“The problem is if you build more high density without that green space infrastructure, then it decreases quality of life and the health of the people in the area.”

She said developing the area would be a “retroactive measure” and pointed to the viability of three other sites, including a carpark, which could be converted to housing.

Today, Dr Phelps told *The Fifth Estate* the loss of the green space was “tragic”, but she would continue to advocate for the community.

“The council’s plans to create more green space is being contradicted, Clover is trying to take away half a community golf course and now this,” she said.

Councillor Craig Chung shared the sentiments, highlighting the council’s championing of green space flew in the face of its support to scrap it.

“It seems incongruous that we would remove a green space when we have a carpark or another brown built site that could be converted,” he said.

As a resident of the area, councillor Jess Miller passes the community garden on a regular basis. She told *The Fifth Estate* the land was “scrappy”, lacking good governance and used by an exclusive few.

Highlighting Sydney’s “extraordinary cost of land” had exacerbated the housing crisis, Ms Miller said it was easier to think laterally to create communal green spaces than it is to find inner-city land, close to transport, shops, schools and the Royal Prince Alfred Hospital.

“This housing will be for teachers, cops, cafe workers, everyday Australians who are just trying to secure affordable housing,” she said.

“It is well known that land available for affordable housing is in very short supply... [The development] could mean someone who works at RPA as a carer or a nurse can actually afford to live where they work, and that is really important.”

Local resident organisation Friends of Erskineville has fervently opposed any development on the site, instead calling on the council to “step up and provide greater support” in a post to social media on November 11.



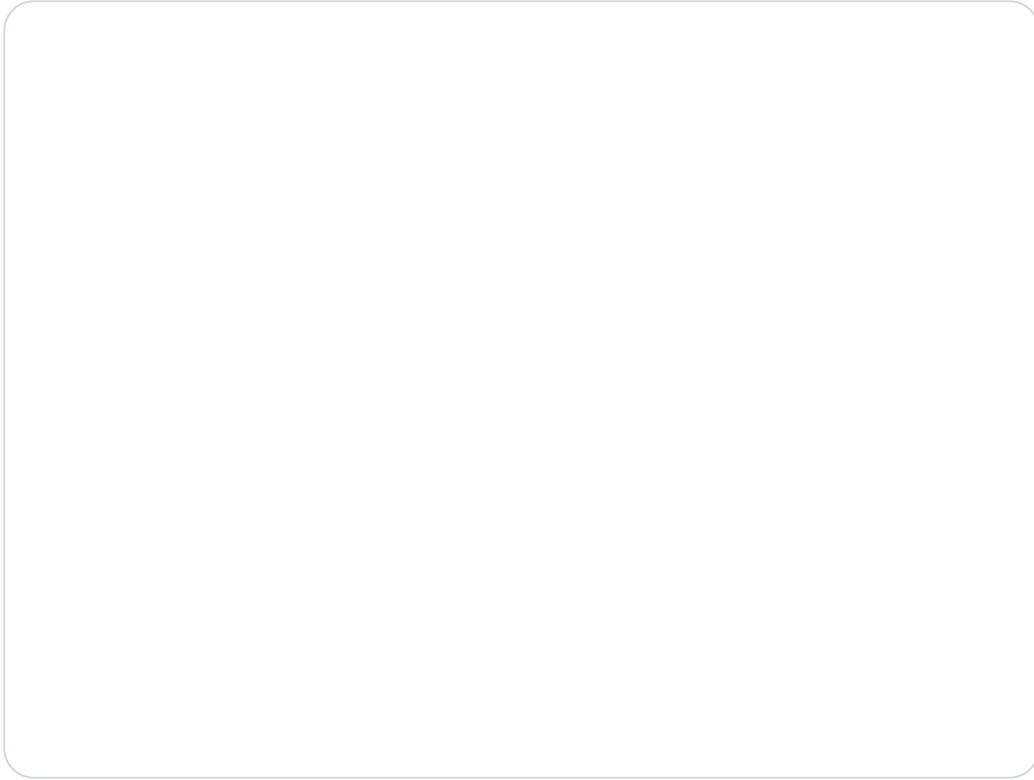
**Friends Of Erko**  
@FriendsOfErko



We have recently re-affirmed our support for the [#Erskineville](#) Rd community garden and oppose any development on the site. We are asking council to step up and provide greater support.

[facebook.com/groups/4099420](https://facebook.com/groups/4099420)

facebook.com/groups/4099720...



3:31 PM · Nov 11, 2020



See Friends Of Erko's other Tweets

Following a fiery debate on a private community Facebook group, with accusations of elitism thrown at the supporters of the garden, Friends of Erskineville member and community gardener Julie Moffat said in a statement she has become “acutely aware” of Sydney’s dwindling natural habitat.

Developing the site would mean sacrificing two mature trees, she said, “our wildlife deserves more understanding and support.”

“Regarding affordable housing, which is very important, City of Sydney has a huge portfolio of property, and three other sites they have considered for affordable housing, two that have a building and one has a car park.

“There is potential for council to provide both affordable housing, and to invest and support retaining this Erko Rd site as green space.”

Of the divisive issue polarising councillors, Peter Phibbs, a professor of housing and planning at the University of Sydney, said far too often arguments are not based on the merits of a project.

“I’m not saying this is what is happening here, but as soon as community housing, or affordable housing, is mentioned, people get agitated,” he said.

“Where there is a fine political balance, people like an argument, they get into their camps, and that sometimes means an issue that can be resolved, isn’t.

“There is a stigma around affordable housing, but people don’t realise the people accessing these homes are normal Australians.”

Mr Phibbs also wonders why the site can’t make room for both a communal garden and affordable housing, as did ASPECT Studios landscape architect Sasha Coles.

“Social housing in one of the most unaffordable places globally is priority number one,” Mr Coles said.

However, he highlighted, policy makers need to be sensitive to communities that have worked together to develop a shared space.

“The more dense we become, the more the need for community green spaces,” he said.

Green spaces have positive effects on mental health, social cohesion and physical fitness, and as cabin fever set in and governments began to ease restrictions induced by COVID-19 earlier in the year, those living in urban areas turned, en masse, to green spaces.

“With good design there is opportunity to cater to both social housing and green space,” Mr Coles said.

A radical idea could even see residents provided controlled access to a rooftop garden, if designed with safety in mind.

The council is a long way off next steps in regards to developing the community garden in Erskineville, but the matter is expected to be brought forward at the next City of Sydney council meeting.

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**Rebecca**

18 November 2020 at 10:07 am <

<https://www.thefifthestate.com.au/urbanism/environment/inner-city-sydney-community-garden-to-be-axed-but-making-way-for-affordable-housing/#comment-163566>>

I hope the new social housing is only given permission to proceed if it installs a community farm on the roof. Like Op Het Dak in The Netherlands.

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< <http://www.sustainablehouse.com.au>>

**Michael Mobbs** <

**<http://www.sustainablehouse.com.au>**>

17 November 2020 at 8:12 pm < <https://www.thefifthestate.com.au/urbanism/environment/inner-city-sydney-community-garden-to-be-axed-but-making-way-for-affordable-housing/#comment-163564>>

Reflecting on the last two of my comments, I see why the idea of building on a community garden has roused me to action.

It's the same Earth-killing mentality underway for killing koalas bit by bit as their trees and habitat are destroyed tree by tree, bit by bit.

Just as koalas are bound for extinction tree by tree, so too is the ever-diminishing habitat in our city.

Three weeks ago Sydney council cut down 25 mature trees in Erskineville.

In Chippendale the Council's approved a social housing project and with it the destruction of one of the suburb's signature gum trees on a site which is home to myriad birds and insects, a majestic beauty of a tree and similar to that on the Erko garden. (Social housing projects are exempt from Council tree protections.)

Enough words here . . . to action . . . as Sherlock Holmes would say, "I see the game . . . the game's afoot".

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**Michael Mobbs** <

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17 November 2020 at 7:31 pm < <https://www.thefifthestate.com.au/urbanism/environment/inner-city-sydney-community-garden-to-be-axed-but-making-way-for-affordable-housing/#comment-163563>>

Something else about why this garden will be kept but not from my mouth or typewriting.

Here is what one of Australia's leading soil scientists said about the soil and suitability of the Erko Garden when the community leaders sought professional advice about its suitability in the early days, years ago: – Simon Leake from Sydney Environmental and Soil Laboratory. His report is in a PDF



which I'm sending to the Editor with a request it be published here in my comment if possible. The detailed analysis concludes:  
"Erskineville Rd Community Garden Report

### Summary

Despite restrictions imposed by the underlying soil compaction and lack of water supply, this site is otherwise well suited to community gardening. These issues can easily be addressed with the use of raised gardening beds combined with more thorough preparation of the soil.

The installation of water supply via town water or water tanks to capture runoff from the adjacent properties are the only real capital items required to overcome all limitations."

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17 November 2020 at 7:17 pm < <https://www.thefifthestate.com.au/urbanism/environment/inner-city-sydney-community-garden-to-be-axed-but-making-way-for-affordable-housing/#comment-163562>>

Once built on the garden will be lost forever. This is a tragic loss for the birds, insects, and community life there. The lock put on the gate by the Council and its refusal to give the gardeners a key for over a decade meant that every plant, shovel, mulch load, and every gardener had to squeeze through or over the Council's hostile, ugly fence. But they did. And every week they bought buckets of left over food from nearby shops to compost there, saving hundreds of kg of climate pollution each week. Not one of the gardeners, one of whom I count myself to be a lucky one, too, sees themselves as exclusive except in the sense they would not be squeezed out or excluded by the bloody-minded Council staff's security lock. This Council is the richest in the state and gets about 30% of its income from rental properties it owns, including the several hundred million dollar property it bought in Martin Place about ten years ago. It has more properties ripe for public housing within a short walk from this garden than any other entity, including the state government. This is a trigger for me. For this decision I hereby declare political war on the Councillors who want to kill off this lovely lung of a

garden and will campaign to save it for all right through to the September elections next year. Talk about short-sighted idiocy.

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## **Don Owers**

17 November 2020 at 6:29 pm <

<https://www.thefifthestate.com.au/urbanism/environment/inner-city-sydney-community-garden-to-be-axed-but-making-way-for-affordable-housing/#comment-163561>>

Perfectly in line with the thoughts of High Rise Harry more grey and less green.

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