

National NSW Environmental activism

Blue Mountains airfield lease rejected, ending divisive dispute



By **Josh Dye**

November 7, 2021 – 7.00pm

The state government has rejected a commercial lease application to turn a remote airstrip in the Blue Mountains into a helicopter tourism hub after a community campaign opposed it.

Katoomba Airfield is on Crown land in Medlow Bath, surrounded by national park. It has been operating since 1968, but has traditionally seen low-level use.



The campaign has divided the community. DEAN SEWELL

In 2017 FlyBlue was awarded an interim lease to manage the airfield after winning a Department of Planning, Industry and Environment tender.

But in February, after a lengthy campaign by local conservation groups, the department rejected a 50-year lease to develop the airfield by sealing the runway and building an aircraft hangar and passenger terminal to accommodate charter flights.

FlyBlue owners Derek and Floyd Larsen successfully requested an independent review. But in late-October, the department upheld the decision to reject the long-term lease “on the basis that there is no valid planning pathway to authorise the proposed activity”.

The Larsens are [aggrieved](#) to lose the lease because they believe the community engagement process was hijacked by vocal environmental groups. They also believe the department's latest reason for denying their lease was wrong, citing the airfield's ongoing usage.



Blue Mountains residents Max Horn, Veda Horn, Anne Ingham and Denise Thompson oppose the proposed airfield lease. DEAN SEWELL

“The NSW government asserting that FlyBlue has failed to establish existing use rights, and therefore a planning pathway, is to dispute established facts that are so self-evident as to be irrefutable,” Mr Larsen said.

“The NSW government has relied on existing use rights to issue lawful tenure over Katoomba Airfield since 1991.”

But the department decided FlyBlue was unable to demonstrate that unbroken existing use rights applied to fly helicopter charter flights on a commercial airfield.

Blue Mountains Conservation Society president Tara Cameron said the community was “absolutely over the moon” with the decision.

“We’re very happy about this very sensible decision to reject the lease application the second time,” she said.

“The fact they’ve now pointed out there’s no valid planning pathway strengthens a long-held view from us that [the land] needs to go to National Parks ... that’s the sensible place for it to be.

“It’s really strategically important to the beauty of the area, the peacefulness of the area. That’s why people come to the Blue Mountains.”

Blue Mountains City Council mayor Mark Greenhill said the decision was “a vindication of the community campaign”.

“I’m really proud of the Blue Mountains community who collectively show time and time again that our local environment matters and is worth fighting for,” he said.

Cr Greenhill, citing the unexpected review process, said he hoped “this is now an end to the matter”.

A spokesman for the department said the site’s future remained up in the air.

“Crown Lands will hold discussions with the National Parks and Wildlife Service, Blue Mountains City Council and the Deerubbin Local Aboriginal Land Council about the future of the airfield and use of the site, including the possibility of it being incorporated into the Blue Mountains National Park,” he said.

The airfield will remain open to emergency services, but the Larsens are being evicted this month.

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