



The Blue Mountains is not just another suburb of Sydney

From the Land Use Subcommittee

Following the profile of the Society's Land Use Subcommittee in last month's Hut News, members might be asking "why does the Blue Mountains Conservation Society concern itself with urban development and housing issues? Don't we need more housing in the mountains? Isn't this just a NIMBY issue? And what's this got to do with the environment anyway"?

Debates over a perceived lack of housing and housing diversity in the mountains regularly erupt in the pages of the *Blue Mountains Gazette*.

Certainly, access to housing is an issue and housing supply is just one factor among many. But what is often lost in these debates is the recognition that the Blue Mountains is not just another suburb of Sydney. It is a unique place, one of only two cities in the world located in a World Heritage Area.

A substantial threat to the health of our World Heritage Area is its proximity to urban areas. Unlike other World Heritage Areas there is no buffer between developed areas and the National Park. Everything we do on the ridge tops impacts on the National Park and the World Heritage Area downhill. Pollutant, sediment and weed-laden stormwater from the town centres, development sites, industrial areas, tips, roads, residential areas and sporting fields has to go somewhere. It runs downhill, impacting on the quality of water flowing into the World Heritage Area and, from some parts of the mountains, into Sydney's drinking water supply. Sewage from the nearly 80,000 residents in the Blue Mountains has to go somewhere – into the Nepean River and the water supply for Richmond and Windsor.

Increasing development on the ridge tops puts more stress on already overstretched infrastructure and adds to the cumulative impacts of human activity on the natural environment we live in and on which our local tourist economy depends. This is why the Blue Mountains Local Environmental Plan contains stringent planning controls and development standards for housing and other development.

State government policies like the new Low Rise Housing Diversity Code undermine these protections. This Code, now in force in the Blue Mountains, allows fast-track approval for medium density housing which meets state-wide 'one size fits all' development standards. Developments under the Code are not sensitive to local conditions, bypass Council development standards and approval, and neighbours have no say. Council continues its negotiations with the State Government to have the Blue Mountains exempted from the Code.

In the lead-up to the Council elections in September, we're likely to start hearing again from real estate agents, developers, chambers of commerce and some candidates talking up the need for more housing and development in the mountains. They may suggest cutting 'green tape' in our Local Environmental Plan and opening up the large-lot 'leafy green streets' of Glenbrook, Wentworth Falls, Leura and Blackheath to subdivision and more intensive forms of housing development.

When you hear these ideas, think about the impacts on our built character and the World Heritage Area and 'vote for the environment'.