

14th March 2007

THE ROTTNEST SOCIETY
POSITION ON PROPOSED
AMENDMENTS TO RIMP



Proposed amendments

On 23rd February the RIA advertised several proposed amendments to the Rottnest Island Management Plan (RIMP) which must be approved by the public if this development is to proceed. We attach the RIA's document as well as one we have created with the proposed amendments inserted into the text. They also advised that the public were invited to comment on these amendments for a period of two months, closing on 21st April.

If you have seen the RIA's website you will also know that they have added a rider to this invitation to comment which says "You are invited to provide a written submission detailing your approval of or opposition to changes outlined as an Addendum to the Rottnest Island Management Plan 2003-2008 (RIMP). The Addendum outlines changes, mainly in zoning, **that are necessary for the Authority to progress towards financial sustainability for Rottnest Island. Should you disagree with the amendments, your submission should include alternatives leading to financial sustainability for Rottnest.**" Whilst we understand that the RIA may have been feeling frustrated we do not believe that this is appropriate – especially given that the public did not have an opportunity to comment on whether it wanted a development such as this in the first place.

This would be a major addition to Rottnest and is likely to have significant negative impacts on the amenity of current visitors and on the natural and social environments. We believe that the Minister for Tourism, the panel overseeing the tender process for the development, or the Rottnest Island Authority have not been sufficiently forthcoming with the public in relation to a number of concerns about the development. In fact you could say that they appear to have glossed over a number of related questions. It is clear that insufficient attention has been paid to matters of law and governance in the haste to get this hotel development on Mt Herschel up and running. This has meant that, following challenges by the Rottnest Society and other members of the public, the Rottnest Island Authority (RIA) has had to backtrack and take care of matters which should have been done prior to calling for Expressions of Interest (EOI). This also makes one wonder what else has not been attended to in accordance with the Act and the RIMP.

The natural environment of the island is badly degraded in many places; however the RIA does not have the resources to restore, conserve or protect it with the 500,000 visitors it currently receives annually – let alone with an extra 90,000 visitors. Neither has the RIA implemented Recommendation 115 of the current Rottnest Island Management Plan which requires it to "Undertake research on the relationship between the Rottnest Island visitor numbers and behaviour and environmental, social and economic impacts on Rottnest Island" (required to be carried out in 2005).

Drivers for this development

The Society believes that there are two major drivers for this inappropriate development – the need for extra income streams to assist the RIA become financially self-sustaining, and the

desire of the tourism authorities and big business to promote the island as a “world class tourist destination” to wealthier tourists (and locals).

Rottnest Society’s solutions

The Rottnest Society has long been aware of these two forces at work in the management of Rottnest. We see the issues thus:

- **Public funding for certain aspects of management of Rottnest Island**

While in general it is reasonable for government to expect a statutory authority to be financially self-sustaining, we believe this does not apply in the case of Rottnest. It is a publicly owned “A” Class Reserve with no base of resident ratepayers. There is no private ownership of land, and no local council. Yet the statutory authority is responsible for the provision of all the services of a remote small country town and is expected to cope with a visitor population of 500,000 people annually. The RIA’s major sources of income are the landing fees it charges each person to visit the island, and the rentals it charges for accommodation. It also receives income from business leases. On the one hand the RIA has been required by successive governments to keep it affordable to ordinary people – and this should continue – however this obviously limits what the RIA can do by way of income boosting. On the other hand the RIA is responsible for the provision of visitor and accommodation services, for the provision of all utilities, for the conservation and maintenance of a significant built heritage component and for the conservation and restoration of the fragile and degraded natural environment on Rottnest. All of these things are more expensive to manage than similar items on the mainland simply because of the cost of transport. It has been recognised by a number of reviews and reports over the decades that this is an impossible ask. The Society believes it is time for an acceptance by the community and by political parties of both persuasions that the public purse must fund several of these functions on an ongoing regular basis, at the same time requiring the RIA to be financially self-sustaining in the areas of visitor accommodation and services.
- **Purpose for which Rottnest is managed**

The Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987 directs the Rottnest Island Authority to manage the island primarily with the interests of all Western Australians in mind – not on behalf of the Tourism agencies or for wealthy persons. It is important for the Tourism Minister and agencies to realise the value of Rottnest not only to the people, but to the state, and to realise that this island keeps an enormous amount of money in the state given that a significant number of the 500,000 annual visitors who are Western Australians return time and again to visit (including a large boating population). The Rottnest-loving public have long known how easy it would be to ruin the very thing that they value so highly by chasing the higher-spending tourist (or local for that matter). Tourists and the wealthy are of course welcome to join them at Rottnest – as long as they accept it as it is. It is time for the authorities to fully accept that this is our local holiday isle and not to be promoted as a world-class tourist destination - thereby resolving this conflict of purpose.

We believe that this is an opportune time to make these points and attempt to get them adopted as policy by both government and opposition – thereby removing these two drivers for inappropriate development.

Action taken by the Society

We have recently:

1. Written to the Premier and we have urged him to:

- Declare that his government accepts ongoing Community Service Obligations in relation to the funding of the conservation and restoration of the natural environment of this “A” Class Reserve, the conservation, restoration and ongoing maintenance of the heritage buildings and also towards the cost of maintaining and upgrading the utilities infrastructure.
 - Clarify and confirm with the Minister for Tourism, WA Tourism, Landbank and the Rottnest Island Authority(RIA) that the purpose for which Rottnest is managed is as defined in the Rottnest Island Authority Act 1987 (the Act)
2. Met with the Shadow Minister for Tourism, Katie Hodson-Thomas, and discussed these matters with her

We will be working to make these points wherever we can, and to have the Act amended to enshrine the principle of Community Service Obligations. We urge you to assist in this by writing to the Premier and the Minister as well as to the Shadow Minister.

The Society believes that there is public support for limited additional accommodation on the island and is not as a matter of principle opposed to this. However we firmly believe that any such accommodation should address the summer shortfall of accommodation, and should be available to as wide a range of people as possible and should be consistent with the intent of the Act and the RIMP. It should only be built if there is a clear understanding of the seasonal nature of the island and with a better understanding of the impact of visitors on the environmental, social and economic aspects of the island. Further there should be no attempt to increase the number of visitors without a concomitant funding commitment to allow the natural environment to be restored and conserved.

In the event that the amendments are not approved by the public the Broadwater hotel proposal can not go ahead. However, for those in favour of some extra accommodation of a different type and size, there will be an opportunity to amend the Rottnest Island Management Plan when the current one expires in 2008. We would expect the public consultation period for the new five year plan (2008-2013) to be held within 12 months. This would be an appropriate time to raise the issue of extra accommodation and to thoroughly review the associated issues.

The Mt Herschel development

The Society does not think that the proposed Broadwater hotel is appropriate for Rottnest because:

- The proposed hotel is too big with 120 rooms (350 beds) – there are only 170 beds in Longreach villas. This is likely to adversely affect the amenity of those staying in the villas and the severely degraded nearby dunes and headlands
- It will bring up to 90,000 extra overnight visitors annually without research to determine impacts
- The likely length of the lease for a private investment of \$50 million could be forty years. Successive RIA boards and managements have had problems with managing long leases where property has been allowed to run down, staff numbers have been inadequate, operating hours compromised and inadequate service been available
- The footprint is too big and is not confined to the present bitumen area. Apparently requires clearing of some native vegetation which may be a problem on an “A” Class Reserve
- There are no height limitations in terms of AHD (effectively above sea level) and encouragement to re-contour dunes for extra height so that the hotel will appear as

four stories from Bay and will dominate Longreach Bay and beach, Longreach villas and the golf course

- The high energy and water use model with air conditioning, swimming pool and spa baths not appropriate design for an island short of power and water – not sustainable building
- Noise from pool/café deck is likely to affect the amenity for Longreach villa users and boaties in the Bay
- Traffic increase on Geordie/Thomson’s road is likely to be substantial and unacceptable for walkers and cyclists
- Target market is wealthy singles, couples and conference visitors which contravenes the Act in specifically leaving out families, and in excluding those who are not wealthy.
- Development is intended to become a “world class tourist destination” which also contravenes the Act which requires that particular regard is paid to the needs of persons normally resident in the state.
- It is not clear to the public which major work on the utilities as outlined in the Norman Disney Young report Conclusions is required and how it will be funded.
- We doubt that the development will be able to overcome sufficiently the natural barrier of severe winter weather to boost winter numbers substantially and we are therefore concerned about its long-term viability
- This accommodation model is not that recommended by the Rottnest Island Taskforce and it was easily the least preferred model in the TNS social research survey quoted by Minister and RIA

Society Action on proposed amendments

The Society will therefore be opposing these amendments and we urge you to do the same. We urge you also to send the message out as widely as you can.

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