

The Rottnest Society's submission to the Rottnest Island Authority relating to their proposal to build workers accommodation for RIA staff and the small businesses operating on the Island. This submission was made in October 2024.

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Submission on Worker Accommodation by The Rottnest Society

The proposal is for staff accommodation to house 336 workers in 149 units in clusters on land on Parker Point Road.

It is unclear whether the proposal is for 149 units as stated in The Frequently Asked Questions, or 168 units (14 + 18 + 24 + 112) as indicated on the Plan SK-01. This needs to be clarified.

At the stakeholder briefing session on 26th September it was stated that some of the units would compensate from those already demolished (such as in the Burial Ground precinct) or scheduled to be replaced. The units would provide accommodation for RIA staff and the 67 small businesses currently on the Island and would be constructed over the next six years.

The Rottnest Society has expressed its concern at the large increases in staff accommodation for the Samphire and Lodge developments in previous submissions. These concerns remain and can be repeated for the RIA's own development.

The Society reiterates its previously stated concerns that:

“The RIA moved away from the provision of extensive staff housing some years ago for good reasons. A review undertaken in the 1980s identified the numerous problems and confirmed the need to minimise the number of permanent residents on the Island. The recommendations were implemented resulting in staff housing being minimised. This proposal demonstrates that the lessons learnt in the past have been forgotten.”

“No clear rationale has been provided in the information accompanying the advertised application. It can be surmised that the intention is to provide for all staff, not just those needing to be there after the last ferry leaves. No costing of the current situation, or evidence that the current situation is not and cannot be made to work. There is also no analysis of what the social benefits and costs will be. Those staff with families will have to spend more time away from them and those without will develop a social pattern not dissimilar to those of a mining camp with its associated issues.”

“The move to having all staff accommodated on the Island does not reflect any comprehensive analysis but is purely the result of commercial interests asserting that they would prefer the arrangement in order to provide greater attractions for their staff. This is considered to be bad policy as it would be based on a temporary situation (low unemployment and few backpackers) and a recipe for a range of problems that will occur to an even greater extent than those that arose in the 1970s and 80s.”

Other points relating to the current proposal:

It is of concern that while the RIMP indicated that all options, (other than large staff accommodation settlements on the Island) would be fully investigated, there is no evidence that this has occurred.

There is no statement or analysis of how behaviour and activities of the 336 staff to be accommodated in the proposed units will be managed. Moreover, there is no statement of the family breakdown of the occupiers of the units, such as the need to cater for partners and children and the ability of the Island’s existing resources to address the additional health and education needs of the larger permanent population.

It is understood from the stakeholder briefing that the provision of the units to private commercial operators will be on the basis on year-long leases with strict conditions charged on the basis of full cost recovery. This approach is supported.

As the following tables show, there are nearly as many units that will be allocated for staff as for holiday makers. This appears to be disproportionate and leads to the concerns expressed below that the intent would appear to be to cater for all workers on Rottneest rather than those who have to be there after the last ferry departs.

Staff housing

	Units	Status
Existing RIA	85	Existing
Discovery Rottneest	12	Approved
Samphire	108	Proposed

Lodge	102	Approved
RIA proposal	149	Proposed
Total	456	

Holiday units

	Units	Status
RIA units	291	Existing
Samphire hotel	80	Existing
Lodge hotel	102	Under construction
Discovery Rottnest	83	Existing
Total	556	

There is a concern that there is little information provided with the advertised proposal in terms of an analysis of the demand and justification of the large numbers of units to be provided. As there is an obvious concern in the community, and even one detects from within the RIA, that having a large permanent population on the Island would come with risks, it would be expected that the aim would be to supply only what was absolutely necessary.

It can only be assumed from the application that the number of units proposed will provide for the peak period demand, i.e. the worst case. Surely it would be better to provide facilities which would be fully utilised, not empty for half the year. Unfortunately, there is no way of knowing whether the number of units can be justified. The only justification provided is in terms of providing businesses with sufficient housing for its workforce. There is no analysis and costing of options other than housing on the Island. The Rottnest Society is of the opinion that staff accommodation should be carefully rationed to minimise the number of permanent residents and maximise the occupancy of the units to avoid provision of accommodation that would only be occupied during the peak periods and be vacant in other periods.

The recent announcement (reported in the West Australian on 19th October) that there will be ferry services up to 9pm Thursday to Sunday during summer should mean that during the peak period there will be a lesser need for staff to live on the Island. This should now be reflected by amending the development proposal.

Clearly commercial interests have petitioned the RIA to provide more permanent accommodation for staff on the Island claiming it is difficult to attract and retain staff. However, this is a short-term phenomenon, likely to be overcome as more backpackers return and labour shortages elsewhere in the economy lessen. The proposed increase in staff accommodation will be a permanent feature which will need to be managed forever.

The rationale presented by the RIA that workers accommodation is required on the Island ignores the fact that such a shortage of staff accommodation is no different to the shortage of staff accommodation in country towns across WA. If the government is desirous of building accommodation to address the accommodation requirements of the tourist industry it should focus on the more flexible response by building accommodation on the mainland where all tourist operators could benefit.

The design of the units is purely functional and in no way reflective of the Rottnest character. The units will be reminiscent of mining camp transportable/prefabricated development. There does not appear to be any consideration given to the Rottnest character in terms of building form, colour or texture. While there is a short statement of the environmental goals being pursued by the RIA there is no commitment to landscaping and largescale planting to camouflage the very unattractive eyesore.

In the interest of transparency, The Rottnest Society requests that the assessment report for this application be made public, as is the case with other statutory decision makers such as the West Australian Planning Commission and local governments.

THE ROTTNEST SOCIETY

21st October 2024