

Battle of Sydney: Lucy Turnbull v the north shore

Analysis

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Lucy Turnbull wants to fix Australia's biggest city. She may have to defy the north shore and NSW Premier Gladys Berejiklian to do it.

Appointed the first chief commissioner of the newly formed Greater Sydney Commission two years ago, Turnbull has one of the most important planning jobs in the nation: cajole dozens of autonomous councils into implementing the commission's 20-year plan to make Sydney a better-designed city.

One of her greatest challenges will be convincing the prosperous suburbs along a new \$20 billion train line that will run from central Sydney through Chatswood to Hornsby to accept tens of thousands more residents on their currently peaceful streets.

Planning advocates and business groups, who are watching closely, wonder "does Sydney's planning tsar have the guts to upset the north shore?"

So far Turnbull has shown little appetite to challenge vested interests, and it is unclear if she has the skill or will to outmanoeuvre the political interests blocking development in some of Sydney's most desirable suburbs.

From the McMahons Point views of the Sydney Opera House to Mosman's ocean-facing mansions, the lower north shore has some of the most attractive streets in urban Australia. Popular with bankers, doctors, lawyers and others who make the upper middle classes, the public schools are excellent, the private schools plentiful and the commuters short.

But "high-octane nimbysism" by residents has seized up construction of housing in the area, says Tim Williams, the chief executive of lobby group Committee for Sydney. In an allegation

heavy with class overtones, Williams claims new homes in Mosman will be limited to 300 and in Hunters Hill to 200 – two of the wealthiest suburbs in the city – while Camden in Sydney's poor south-west would get over 10,000. "We are putting homes where there are no transport links or jobs and not putting them in places with the best rail connectivity in Sydney, possibly Australia," he says. "This is perverse, antisocial and economically damaging."

He faces some heavyweight opposition. Berejiklian, whose electorate includes the north shore shopping and transport hub of Chatswood, says the suburbs should take more people as long as the influx doesn't change their look – which sounds like she means apartments should not be built near the beautiful federation houses that dominate the suburb.

A former transport minister, Berejiklian is responsible for the one project that experts say makes the north shore the obvious place for greater development, the Metro Rail.

Australia's biggest public transport project, the new rail line is designed to unclog the nation's biggest city and economic heart. The first stage will be finished in two years, and will go from Chatswood – where no new offices have been built in two decades – to the north-west boundary of greater Sydney.

Commuters will be able to get to stations along the route much quicker. That's why property developers want to build a lot more offices and apartments nearby.

"The north shore is not taking enough of the load," says Chris Johnson, chief executive of Urban Taskforce, a property developers' lobby group that wants a ban on combining offices and apartments in Chatswood lifted.

Residents are horrified at the prospect of more densely populated suburbs and say their roads, schools



Lucy Turnbull will press the case as the Metro Rail makes the north shore ripe for development. PHOTO: JESSICA HROMAS

and other urban necessities aren't ready for an influx of people. "Get your infrastructure in place first before you develop the population," says Richard Quinn, the mayor of Hunter's Hill.

Almost everyone agrees Sydney is a city with too much traffic, not enough housing and weak public transport. Turnbull is the first politician responsible for overseeing city-wide planning. Instead of the previous system of 41 autonomous councils

Turnbull is respected for her intelligence and feared for her access to the PM.

Even though she has had a long involvement in Sydney city affairs – she was city mayor in 2003 and 2004 and chair of the Committee for Sydney from 2012 to 2015 – it is unclear if she is prepared to use her significant moral and political authority to pressure north shore councils into approving more housing.

"We are not going to solve the housing affordability problem, especially in Sydney, if we lock up the areas that have good access to jobs," says John Daley, the chief executive of

the Crattan Institute think tank where Turnbull was a board member until a year ago.

Turnbull is respected for her intelligence and feared for her access to the Prime Minister's ear, though some find her cerebral to the point of aloofness.

Turnbull declined to comment and her spokesman wouldn't provide any information.

Even though the commission is legally designated to "lead metropolitan planning" for greater Sydney, it has few direct powers. Its primary function is to advise the planning minister, come up with plans and promote good development.

Given the importance of her job and her inherently interesting position as Malcolm Turnbull's partner, Turnbull has taken a remarkably low profile. She has chosen not to publicly push councils or any other group to make concessions that might benefit Sydney overall. She has tweeted 23 times – her husband has sent more than 10,000 messages on the social media site – and not one has addressed a matter of substance.

That could change. The Greater Sydney Commission is finalising detailed plans covering five separate areas of Sydney, including the whole area that have good access to jobs. A draft version of the plan projected Northern Sydney's

population would increase 11 per cent over the next nine years to 981,600.

Some experts hope when the final report comes out soon it will have a higher number – a sign that Turnbull and the Greater Sydney Commission expect the north shore to accept more apartment buildings. The Committee for Sydney, which Turnbull used to chair, suggests another 70,000 houses and apartments could be built next to the Metro Rail line.

Turnbull works part time at the commission, and relies a lot on Geoff Roberts, her deputy and a former city planning consultant who is also an adjunct professor in the City Futures Research Centre at the University of NSW, says a federal minister familiar with their work.

The pair are determined to drive the economic development of Western Sydney in its own right, centred around a new airport, instead of using it as a source of cheap labour for richer parts of the city, the minister says. Seventy per cent of the workforce in Liverpool – which is 40 kilometres from Circular Quay by road – leaves the area each day for central Sydney.

Turnbull wants to help alleviate the problem through a strategy the commission calls "Three Cities", the federal minister says. "Lucy is doing a great job," he says. "She has nailed it in terms of how to think about Sydney."