

Big Robbery: Historic handback under threat

by S Sorrensen

The newly-elected Lismore City Council will hold its first ordinary meeting on Tuesday, 8th February. (The previous meeting was not an ordinary meeting; more of a get-to-know-you and check out the chairs thing.)

Of the 13 motions set for this meeting, most come from newly-elected Councillor Big Rob (yes, that's his legal name, since 2016).

Of particular interest is his motion to halt the Council's handback of land on the North Lismore Plateau to the Widjabal Wiabal people.

Big Rob's motion has four parts. The first is this: "Council take no further action in relation to its decision of 13th July 2021 (Item BP21/567) to hand back all Council-owned land at the North Lismore Plateau to the traditional owners."

Obviously, this motion is a huge shock to many people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

In July 2021, Lismore Council voted (seven votes out of eight) to hand back 35 hectares of Council-owned land to the local mob, the Widjabal/Wiabal people.

This land, adjoining the controversial North Lismore Plateau development, includes numerous sacred sites and important environmental zones.

This decision was lauded by the traditional owners.



Cr Vanessa Ekins with the Sleeping Lizard at North Lismore last July. Cr Ekins championed the cause to have the land transferred to its traditional owners. Photo: Hannah Ross, ABC

Bundjalung Elder Uncle Mickey Ryan said, "The handback is a very big step by our community for justice and reconciliation, for all of us, Aboriginal and non-Indigenous alike."

Understandably, the previous mayor Vanessa Ekins, who championed the handback and led the Council to this historic decision, is incensed.

"It is outrageous that councillors would even consider reneging on our promise to hand the land back," she said.

"Adopting this motion would set us back years, seriously damaging Lismore City Council's credibility and fracturing important

relationships between Council and the Widjabal Wiabal people."

Councillor Elly Bird agrees. "This handback of land to the traditional owners is a decision that has been made," she said.

"Any move to halt, slow or stymie that decision will be seen to be totally disrespectful, and it will do immeasurable damage to the reputation of Lismore City Council."

The second part of Big Rob's motion wants Council to reconsider "options for Council to realise a financial return on its R1 zoned land (included in the handback) at the North Lismore Plateau."

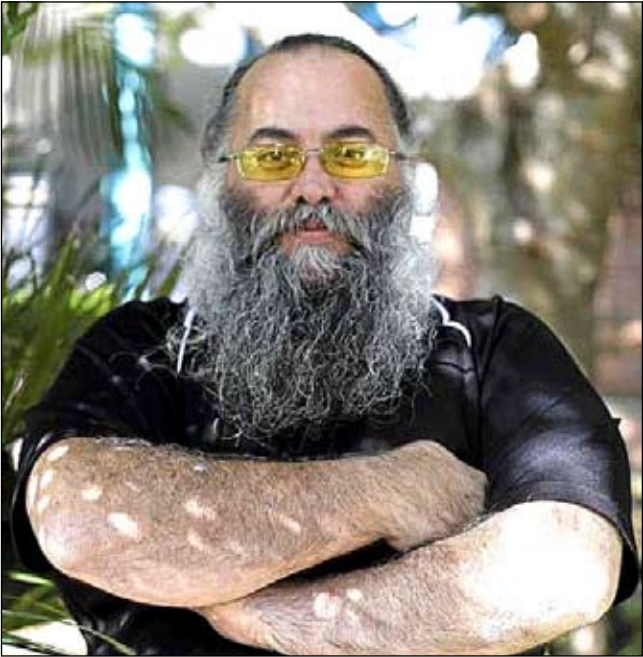
But 10 years ago, Council

spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on reports investigating developing this land. It was determined then that it was financially unviable.

"Cr Rob's motion suggests that a portion of the land be sold for development, but this makes no economic sense," Cr Ekins said. "The cost of providing road, water and sewer infrastructure would far outweigh any gains."

The third part of the motion is about the costs of rehabilitating the old quarry there.

And finally, part four proposes that "Council provide in-principle support to transfer ownership of



Cr Big Rob intends to halt the handback of land to the Widjabal Wiabal people. Photo: bigrob.com.au

the E2 and E3 zoned land owned by Council at the North Lismore Plateau to the traditional owners and prepare budget estimates and supporting information to allow further consideration of this matter in the upcoming Operational Plan and budget process."

Councillor Ekins said, "This 'in-principle support' to let traditional owners have just a part of what they were promised at some future time pending 'further consideration' is complicating and deferring what was a simple matter,"

Councillor Ekins is calling on supporters of the historic handback decision to let their councillors know that

a promise to the Widjabal Wiabal people has been made, and that promise must be honoured.

"There is a legitimate expectation by the Widjabal Wiabal people and the broader community that the handover of this land will happen," Cr Ekins said.

Cr Ekins is urging people to email and phone Lismore City councillors to make their feelings known. Contact details for all councillors are on Council's website: lismore.nsw.gov.au

A gathering will be held outside the Council Chambers at 5pm on Tuesday 8th February, prior to the Council meeting where the motion will be debated.

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