

THE NIMBIN GOODTIMES

Your FREE community paper

Gahnia Edition
June 2024

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Buyback: Occupation until relocation

by Naomi Shine

Beautiful old homes, made from incredibly sturdy Big Scrub timbers, are being boarded up across the flood zone in Lismore and left to moulder.

People needing shelter are moving in, and NSW Reconstruction Authority doesn't know how to deal with the situation.

On Friday 24th May, the NSW Reconstruction Authority (NSWRA) informed residents that the police will be asked to evict peaceful occupants of buyback homes on Pine Street in North Lismore.

Ultimately the police didn't arrive, but a community vigil of big scrub home defenders was established at Pine Street in support.

The community vigil acted to remove the fencing and boards on the home and display signs reading 'Occupation until Relocation' and 'Precarity is Painful'.

Over the last weekend in May, Reclaim our Recovery shared a social media post about the community vigil. The post went viral and has been shared 225 times throughout the community, receiving almost unanimous support for the big-scrub home defenders, with the instagram post even shared by housing advocate Purple Pingers.

Local MP and Parliamentary Secretary for disaster recovery, Janelle Saffin even commented on the post on Saturday morning, stating, "I know that the people will not be evicted today or tomorrow... and local agencies are trying to assist them and will meet with them next week."

Reclaim our Recovery will meet with NSWRA to discuss the many failings of the NSWRA



Community vigil at a fenced-off but livable house occupied by home defenders in Pine Street, North Lismore.



Photo: Chibo Mertineit

programs, in particular the lack of transparency in the buyback program, the lack of integration of Resilient lands with the buybacks, and the total disregard by the Authority of tenants in the flood zone.

The NSWRA has the power to issue a 'Licence to Occupy' for buyback homes, and this would be a great outcome. People who do not have safe shelter are not less than human; everyone needs and deserves shelter.

Christina, one of the home caretakers said, "We have a right to a safe home, everyone does. If there was a genuine concern for flood risk and people's endangerment for staying in houses on the flood plain, then there wouldn't be anyone

allowed to be on the flood plain. However, there are still people paying rent and mortgages to live in houses less safe than this one.

Local North Lismore resident Laurie Axtens said in defence of the occupants, "We're very concerned that these precious houses will be destroyed for chip to burn in the Broadwater biomass electricity generator.

"These brave house-sitters will ensure the buildings are kept intact until they can be moved to flood-free locations."

Pine Street resident and immediate neighbour, Paul Paitson, who declined the buyback offer, said, "The occupants are great people. They're thoughtful, kind, helpful – great neighbours, and

great for our community. The houses were refurbished after the flood and deserve to be lived in."

Reclaim Our Recovery spokesperson Miriam Torzillo said, "It doesn't pass the pub test to board up livable houses on the floodplain with no timeline or certainty of relocation. We support the occupants' call for 'Occupation until Relocation.'"

The NRRC and then the Reconstruction Authority should have engaged the community to co-design the recovery programs from the beginning, as their own Disaster Mitigation Plan advises.

This would have likely avoided a situation where houses sit wasted and empty during the state's most acute housing crisis, and police

are being called on people seeking shelter.

Dr Aidan Ricketts, local resident, said, "It's cruelly ironic that immediately adjacent to this street where people are defending houses, is an area of bushland frequently occupied by homeless people in tents with no facilities and nowhere to go.

"We understand the intent of the buybacks is to ultimately help residents to move out of harm's way, but that is a long-term operation that requires practical and humane processes that recognise the scale of the homelessness crisis in the region.

"I myself have delayed accepting a buyback until the authority undertakes to allow my family to reside in our home until it is properly relocated."

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