16 September 2019

Ms Lucy Turnbull AO
Chief Commissioner
Greater Sydney Commission
GPO Box 257
PARRAMATTA NSW 2124

Dear Ms Turnbull,

PIA SUBMISSION – PYRMONT PLANNING REVIEW

The Planning Institute of Australia (PIA) holds trust in the planning system as the highest priority. We are acutely aware of the scrutiny planning decision making processes are under in relation to the Star Tower proposal and Pyrmont peninsula. The Pyrmont Planning Review has generated substantial interest amongst our members.

PIA’s submission underlines the importance of the planning decision making system running its course (including the work of the Independent Planning Commission) and ensuring that the community can continue to trust that their engagement in strategic planning is valued. As a result, PIA will not comment on the merits of the Star Tower proposal.

PIA submits it is unreasonable to expect that the Review can meet both its terms of reference and achieve a high trust outcome in the short timeframe nominated. In making this claim I stress that it is not PIA’s intention to criticise the professionalism of the planners involved, nor the discretion of the State Government to reconsider and review areas and matters of State significance.

PIA’s submission has two elements: (1) our response to the engagement process for the Pyrmont Peninsula review; and (2) our broader concerns for maintaining trust in the planning system in the context of planning for the Pyrmont peninsula.

1. PIA input regarding the Pyrmont Planning Review engagement

PIA is concerned that only 6 weeks has been allocated to the Greater Sydney Commission (GSC) to carry out a detailed review of planning controls in an as area diverse and strategically significant such as the Pyrmont peninsula.
More specifically, PIA’s view is that the tight program runs a high risk of eroding trust in the value of the planning system. The following points are relevant to this concern:

- The limited time given to interested persons to prepare a submission (2 weeks), and the highly formal and abbreviated 10-minute maximum face to face interviews that were allowed would likely only elicit general thoughts or entrenched opinions from stakeholders. Neither of these outcomes are optimal for a productive and meaningful engagement of all the interested stakeholders.

- Members of the public would be hard-pressed to comprehend the current planning controls applicable across the Pyrmont peninsula, let alone provide meaningful comment on their ‘efficacy and appropriateness’. A professional planner could do this in the limited time allowed, but not everyone can access or pay for these services. Stakeholder involvement should be an activity accessible to all, and not just those with the time or money to promote their opinions.

- No plain English summary or discussion paper addressing the Government’s vision for Pyrmont and the current planning controls is available. Such a document would have at least allowed members of the public a basic understanding of the matters for which their comment was sought. Instead, the public communication of the review provided links to 7 documents that together comprise more than 1,000 pages. By any measure, it would not be possible for a layperson to read, comprehend and form an opinion on the efficacy and appropriateness of current controls in the limited time allowed.

Without public trust in the process there is a real risk that the review outcomes will not be credible in the public’s eyes.

PIA suggests that the Government allow stakeholders the opportunity to comment on the Commission’s draft report. This is particularly important as the public was not given any material summarising what the current Pyrmont planning controls are (which is the central focus of the Commission’s terms of reference). This would create something like ‘a level playing field’ for all stakeholders to have their say.

This action would also reflect the approach used in the Commission’s 2019 assurance review of planning in Ryde LGA. This action need not add unreasonable to the project timeframe, as the review report exhibition period and Commission review of submissions and issue of final report could be completed by November 30.
1. PIA input on why trust in planning is important

Trust, reinforced by strong community participation, gives legitimacy to planning decisions. It allows the planning process to be accepted as a valid means for making difficult trade-offs and determining land use decisions in the public interest.

The impacts of planning decisions are increasingly visible in the media. When planning outcomes are seen to be linked to private benefit or an overtly political agenda, the community don’t perceive the planning reasons as being independent or don’t see planners as in control of the outcome.

In these cases, the community believe they have not been heard and see planning as unsupportive or irrelevant – and they are less willing to engage in future. As a result, the reputation of planners and the planning profession can suffer and their capacity to create great places to live and work is reduced. The overall risk is for a less sustainable and less prosperous city.

PIA is acutely interested in a transparent and consistent planning process being maintained for the Pyrmont peninsula. This means a process that respects the community and stakeholder engagement expressed in the Eastern City District Plan, and the emerging City of Sydney Local Strategic Planning Statement.

Ultimo Pyrmont has a long and successful planning record with a state and local government collaboration that has transitioned a mix of industrial, business / tourism and housing uses in a striking inner-city harbour setting.

While one development proposal alone should not trigger a review, it is not unusual to reconsider the future use of a precinct where there are strong development pressures, changing economic development priorities and where future infrastructure could impact the capacity for growth.

The Government’s request to the GSC to undertake a very rapid review of the future character and capacity of Pyrmont Peninsula at this time is laden with risk. The community have recently been extensively involved on long term growth and local character strategies – and there is an expectation that this engagement would carry significant weight in future planning decisions.

PIA trusts that the GSC will consider the substantial recent engagement processes and offer the stakeholders respect by balancing those results against the outputs of the rapid review announced by the Government.
The outcome of the GSC’s Pyrmont Review should not just be executing the terms of reference – but ensuring that the community and other stakeholders continue to be willing to engage and trust that the land use planning system can shape places in the public interest.

PIA would be pleased to continue to offer the Commission support and access to practicing planner input on improving trust in the planning system.

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Juliet Grant RPIA (Fellow)
PIA NSW President