

By Gareth Narumsky

A resident group is taking its concerns directly to the Federal Government as it fights a school development green-lighted by the Prime Minister's Building the Education Revolution program.

The Charing Cross Precinct Committee agreed last Monday to make an official motion to Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard, claiming that planned buildings at St Catherine's School in Waverley were approved without council or community consultation and are inappropriate for the area.

Committee Convenor Danny Caretti said the motion may not be able to stop the partially Federal Government-funded project from going ahead but it would at least raise a wider awareness of the issue.

"It doesn't look like we're going to be able to stop it... we've got the Federal Government against us, we've got the State Government against us, we've got the school against us, the only people who are supporting us are the council and they can't do anything... but at least we can show the flaws in the way this [the Federal Government's] money's being dished out, and the effect it's going to have on the community," said Mr Caretti.

"I went to a gathering of all the councils with precincts... what came out of that meeting is that we were not the only ones that this was happening to."

Federal Opposition Leader Malcolm Turnbull, NSW Planning Minister Kristina Keneally, State MP Paul Pearce, Waverley Council and the St Catherine's School board would also receive the motion, Mr Caretti said.

He also planned to include it in a submission he is making to the Senate's enquiry into Primary Schools for the Twenty-First Century.

Waverley Councillor Mora Main said she supported the motion.

"I've supported the residents all the way through on this... I'm pleased that it's going to be referred to the senate enquiry," she said.

Ms Main said she was disappointed that the approval process had been taken out of the council's hands.

"Council's got processes there and the community's used to it, the council is also likely to have to pick up any of the pieces if there are problems during construction," she said.

Resident Karin Fior, 61, a small business owner, echoed Ms Main's comments about the importance of council processes.

“Residents are supposed to follow by-laws... the school comes along, [and] because they’ve got federal funding they override all [the] local by-laws... this is not the way to behave in a neighbourly way,” said Mrs Flior.

Headmistress Lynne Stone said she felt the school had taken the concerns of the local community into consideration.

“I’ve met with residents on one occasion, so we’ve talked extensively about what their issues are about this block of land... under the BER guidelines we’ve designed with their concerns in mind,” she said.

“There’s been a letter drop to all of our neighbours, inviting them personally to come and look at the plans and voice their concerns with me.”

Mr Caretti said that Ms Stone had spoken with residents in regard to past projects, but not on this occasion.

“She didn’t talk to anybody about this project at all, the first we knew about it was when the sign went up,” he said.

“We got that [letter] after we got the advice that the building was going ahead. In the letter all she wants us to do is go there and for her to show us the plans, it’s not like we’ve got any say.”

St Catherine’s School did not have a representative available to attend last Monday’s meeting, Ms Stone said.

The school’s plan includes two new buildings linked by an overhead walkway, to house a multi-use hall, classrooms, a science laboratory, a media training facility and an art studio.

The Federal Government is providing \$2.5 million towards the project under its “Building the Education Revolution” plan, an initiative which places approval for projects in the hands of State Governments.

The Federal Government’s “Building the Education Revolution Guidelines” document requires states and territories to “ensure that the design, application and assessment processes [of BER projects] are fast-tracked, with minimal red tape.”

In response, NSW Premier Nathan Rees stated in a February 2009 AAP article that infrastructure projects related to the Federal Government’s plan would bypass the usual planning and local government approval process.

Mr Rees said at the time that fast tracking the approval process was needed to meet Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's demand on the states that the first projects start to be built in June.

The National Coordinator's Implementation report said that since February 25,489 BER related applications for funding have been received and assessed, with 24,382 approved.

The BER project is part of the Federal Government's \$42 billion Nation Building – Economic Stimulus Plan, and was announced by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd on 3 February this year.

The Federal Government has invested \$16.2 billion over the next three financial years in the project.

To appear in THE BONDI VIEW NOVEMBER 2009