

Hill Centre

As you probably all know by now, they have demolished the Hills Centre to a point where it would be very difficult, if not impossible to repair.

I would like to thank everyone for their help and perseverance.

I would especially like to thank Graeme Rule and Christine Leaves, who have supported and encouraged me, along with others and Tom Simmat the architect who helped in the last few weeks with information and strategies. I would also like to thank those people who collected signatures, you know who you are, this includes Janice Marshall, Lynda Purchase, Leah Tonkins, Jackie, Noelye Wilson, Michelle Smith, Craig Brown (Toongabbie Primary), Devendra Prasad, Karen Dickson's daughter, Crestwood Primary, Galston primary, Stan Walsh and Judy Barr who both collected a few hundred.

Maybe I am a bit naïve, but I believe, ultimately the people vote for elected members so they will represent the community. Sometimes when people remain silent, then nothing changes. Unfortunately, I didn't realise how ingrained was the lack of hope and realisation that the station and the Hills Centre could co-exist. This I think in part was further emphasised by the local media and the managers of the centre (Empower Church) who saw the demolition as a fete a compli. From what Dominic Perrottet said, it didn't have to be that way. If each group were able to meet together with North West Rail Link, instead of "divide and conquer" mentality then they could have come to a compromise that met both needs, and ultimately a better and cheaper outcome for North West Rail. Unfortunately, the show committee were not interested in meeting with us, as they think they had what they wanted. I have always believed the local member is there to look out for the community, not sit back and wait for someone to complain. From the letters written to parliament by Michael Richardson and from what I have heard of Alan Cadman, they would not have stood by and let the Hills Centre be demolished.

For people who think this was about preserving the showground, think again. While I'm sure the football players need a place to train, and the show is a political bouncing ball, it was a group of sixty people who attended a meeting aimed at 'saving the showground'. Far fewer than the 120,000 people who use the Hills Centre every year. I have been told the council want to turn the showground into another Homebush Bay. For a start I have heard the Harvey Lowe Pavilion will be demolished and replaced in about 8 years by a multipurpose centre to replace the Hills Centre (and most likely a nice spectator stand included). Getting rid of the Hills Centre was just an excuse to do what they want on the showground. This was not about the station, it was about the council wanting to get rid of the Hills centre. They wanted to get rid of it anyway, regardless of the station. They have never been in a situation to manage it properly, especially after disbanding the original Board of Directors and replacing Bernie Mullane as Mayor.

Council will get around \$50 million from the land. They are still debating the cost as they believe they should get more. They have received 90% of that, and the rest on settlement. When it goes to court, the eventual settlement cost will be made public. Thirty million dollars of this will go to the new council chambers to fit it out, they have already paid cash for the building. The council have also received \$99 million for infrastructure, so this idea of spending of infrastructure, footpaths etc. is a poor justification for selling of their biggest asset. Council is in a very good financial position, in the black. Council spend \$10 million on parks and gardens every year from tax payers' money. What is wrong with spending a little bit on performing art?

The council have recently had nothing to do with the Hills Centre or advertised the Centre in any way. Many people would not realise the unique features of the Hills Centre such as the car lift where

you can drive on and be lifted up to the main floor, the extendable stage, the sprung floor in the Sabeno room, the special wiring for the sound, the versatility of the centre to be transformed into three separate venues, the effort put into the acoustics that was hampered by the removal of the acoustic boards in the ceiling. Even the public believed that centre was underutilised and under used. Anyone who lives near the Hills Centre can tell you how well it was used by the community and cultural groups. In fact 120,000 people used it every year, compared to Sydney Arts Theatre of 150,000 per year. Where are they going to go now? Council were being paid 100,000 plus 5% of profits a year but they said that wasn't enough. The council's own survey says over 75% of people think performing arts are important and adequate.

I also realise how much this is still a small country town in many ways when I hear the stories and gossip of people. There is so much angst about various things in the community relating to the Hills Centre. I will attempt to squash some of those rumours starting with Hillsong Church did not kick out the "Friends of the Hills Centre". When Pegasus took over as managers of the Hills Centre, they were paid to manage it and get events in. They did not get all the promised events in and in fact relied on Hillsong to pay their way, at the same time. Pegasus was running the centre from 1989 to 2010 with very few new customers and none of the shows that made the Hills Centre so popular. I don't know why council kept them on for so long if they were unhappy with them operating at a loss. Why didn't they get someone in who could manage it? I also need to add this is a community resource and should be subsidised like any other.

Response from Hillsong re rumours of wanting the Hills Centre demolished.

"We do not have any influence with the Hills Shire Council or in fact the State Government who have made the decision to demolish the Hills Centre to make way for the new North West Rail Link. Hillsong Church nor its leadership have ever lobbied for the demolition of the Hills Centre.

We have always seen our building as a community facility and since its opening in October 2002 and over the many years while the Hills Centre was operating, we also hired our facilities out to schools, businesses and other organisations. We have never seen ourselves as a competition to the Hills Centre. Our building is used primarily for our own needs as a church building, college facility and for many other uses for our congregation and community. When we do have the opportunity to hire it out and if it fits our schedule of uses, we will hire it out to a third party."

From shortly after the Hills Centre started, there was political influences and inquiries aimed at undermining the viability of the Hills Centre. This concert theatre could have been not only a venue for community groups but could have contributed to the performing arts in the local community.

In 2010, Empower Church approached the Hills Centre as they wanted a venue for their national conference. I'm not sure what transpired, but they were approached by Hills Shire Council to put in a tender as Council was asking for tenders. They put in a tender of \$100,000 which they thought was ridiculously low for such a theatre. The Council said they wanted the church in as they would serve the community and not charge the commercial rates of others. They saw this as a good opportunity to outreach and serve the community, as well as supporting the other ministries they had such as the Global Care Ministry. They had a three year lease with an option for another two years. They had planned to get another five year lease, recarpet and refurbish the centre until they were asked to leave. They were not compensated for the move or the loss of income.

The church while they were there had put a lot of work into the maintenance and repair of the building. It appeared that no maintenance had been done in a long time. Builders from the church volunteered their time and effort into the building. They doubled the amount of events there. My daughter responded to an advertised position there last year and toward the end of the year there were events on every day. She even spoke about a famous Indian singer who required security staff as well as Hills Centre staff. The Indian and Sri Lankan groups payed \$35,000 a night for the hire of the theatre and sold tickets often at \$250 a ticket. Some events were booked in Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane Exhibition Centres, and in NSW, the Hills Centre. By the time the church finished there were 120,000 patrons using the centre and they had doubled the events. Most people they were thought they were doing a great job, but could have had more experience in the performing arts and the requirements.

On the 3rd April this year I sent a 7 page letter to all the councillors. Two of them responded, the Mayor, Michelle Byrne and Raymond Harty. Ray said it was great I was writing and he agreed that performing arts were important, but he believed the Hills Centre was too big and in the wrong position. It would be better to have a smaller theatre in Terminus St near the city centre. Michelle Byrne organised a meeting with us. Mark Stanton, Group Manager Community Services, Michael Edgar, Group Manager Strategic Planning. They proceeded to tell us that the Hills Centre was acquired by compulsory acquisition, was running at a loss, the church had the same groups that were always there and everything they did was part of the church. We questioned whether they thought the Indian groups were part of the church and they said yes. They told us they would never replace the Hills Centre as it was too big, underutilised and had never run at a profit. They said they would do a consultation in 2014 and it normally takes about eight years to promote a facility. I asked them why they have not started the research already and they suggested it takes time.

In June 2012, Council bought their new venue as quoted below. They had decided to move to make way for the new station. They announced they would be moving to the Southern end of the site, below the Hills Centre. (When we had the conversation with North West Rail, they said Barry O'Farrell wanted the showground as a priority and made the decision to move the station). This is the option we suggested. There are indications that the decision to demolish the Hills Centre was already being considered then but they didn't announce it until October.



<http://www.thehills.nsw.gov.au/SPContent.aspx?PageID=845&ItemID=771#.Uh9UfpJgdqV>

"The Hills Shire Council is set to move from its current location on the corner of Showground and Carrington Roads, Castle Hill, to a new location at 3 Columbia Court, Baulkham Hills at the gateway to Norwest Business Park, to ensure continuity of customer service during the construction of The North West Rail.

Mayor of The Hills Shire, Councillor Greg Burnett, said Council is in full support of the North West Rail Link and has taken an opportunity to remove itself from the Hills Centre Station construction site.

"This decision reinforces that the North West Rail is now full steam ahead," Mayor Burnett said.

"The North West Rail's Environmental Impact Statement 1 outlines that Council's operations centre and some Council land will be heavily impacted by the construction of a new station at The Hills Centre," he said.

"Following the Premier's announcement to locate The Hills Centre Station away from the Showground to the southern end of the site under Council land, it became clear that something had to be done to ensure Council could still fully serve the community throughout the construction phase and beyond," he said.

The Mayor was totally out of touch with reality. The suggestion that Riverside or council facilities could be used is totally inappropriate. Anyone who is in touch with the Hills Centre knows the church is not big enough to have events there all the time. Regarding the compulsory acquisition, we were told by North West Rail that when the council said they were moving, it opened up the opportunity for them to utilise the whole site. I believe the council have let the community down.

I found this article written in 2009.

http://www.juliusmedia.com/cxweb/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=797

Pegasus Venue Management have run the centre for over 17 years, for a reported subsidy of \$325,000 yearly plus \$90,000 for maintenance. They stopped staging musicals some years ago, and had not been able to obtain additional subsidy from council. By contrast **Parramatta Council** subsidises its Riverside Theatres to the tune of **\$2 million per year.**

This is a long way from the 20 million they are quoting over 25 years. Unless they included the initial construction costs. Parramatta council have since put in better managers and it is not being subsidised to the same degree. I asked the council for a list of costings of the Hills Centre which Dave Walker said he would supply. I am still waiting.

This was the response to a twitter I sent to the Mayor in March this year.

'Dr Byrne said a study would commence in 2014 to identify options for supporting the local performing arts community.

"A number of people have expressed concern about what will happen to the future of performing arts in The Hills. I can assure everyone that Council is listening," Dr Byrne said.

"Understanding what is right for the performing arts community in the Sydney Hills is a complex issue that will require careful consideration."

"Council values our many and varied community groups and while I'm sure there will be a diverse range of opinions about what should happen, **finding the best fit for the entire community** will be our priority."

"I am very much looking forward to the huge benefits our Shire will receive once we have a rail line connecting us with Macquarie Park, Chatswood and the CBD."

"It's time we let the NSW Government get on with the job and start preparing for our brighter, more connected future."

<http://www.thehills.nsw.gov.au/SPContent.aspx?PageID=951&ItemID=903&count=1#.Uh3M7pJgdqU>

This was telling me to back off and 'we let the NSW Government get on with the job'. Well I'm sorry, I wasn't backing off. This study will be a farce, aimed at what they want rather than what the community wants. I believe they have already decided to build a multipurpose centre at the showground. They are employing someone next year to look at what they can do at the showground. What's the bet there will be a recommendation to build something at the showground. Add to that the \$100,000 amphitheatre so they can run their carols by candlelight, and Shakespeare plays and there will be no money left for a theatre.

Dominic Perrottet has said there was not enough outcry about the Hills Centre being demolished initially to cause him to act. He said he met with Empower Church who were managing the Hills Centre and they didn't care, as well as he spoke to all the principals and they didn't care.

From what the teachers told me they said they had no choice, they were told it was being demolished, no consultation, or they didn't even know about it.

Empower Church also wanted to stay. They wanted to sign a five year lease as they were going to recarpet the building and refurbish. They met with Dominic Perrottet and North West Rail twice. Both times they were told they couldn't save it. They also went to the Deputy Premier and he said it was not possible. They met with council who told them there was no interest in the performing arts. It is well known by council the church were not happy about the decision yet the Mayor told us the church didn't care, they were going to move out anyway.

After the church realised they couldn't stay, they looked at other options to continue the Hills Centre. They had suggested to council they set up the Hills Centre name in another building they would lease. They were told they would not support it, that they were going to build a multipurpose building on the showground. They did not want to lose the support of council as they now had to get approval for a new building so they opted not to fight the demolition, but still wanted the Hills Centre to stay for the community. They were happy I was fighting for the community but didn't want to get involved for fear of not having their new building approved, especially after the council sent them a very firm legal letter stating they had to be 7th May or there would be hefty fines.

I started out with a Causes page on Facebook on 12th January. On 4th February, when I wrote to North West Rail, I had 90 signatures. It quickly grew to 100. Then someone suggested we could get signatures so a friend, Stan and I started getting signatures. I went to the Castle Hills show on 10th March and was eventually kicked off the showground because I was harassing people, after getting so much support (I think because of something they thought Hillsong had done). Lots of people were telling me it was too late. If only we had the same momentum then as we do now.

The very first night I was collecting signatures I came across the fore man of the building, a group of people who lived near there, someone who had donated brick, an employee of the Hills Centre and lots of people who didn't know it was being demolished. I took that as a sign I should be doing this.

On April 4 I sent a 7 page letter to Dominic Perrottet saying that we had 1,000 signatures. I received a response from Christian who said he would respond when he is able. The response only came months later after a staff member asked why he hadn't replied. I also sent a similar letter to Gladys Berejiklian, minister for Transport, with a copy to the Premier and letter to Minister of the Arts. I also wrote to Ray Hadley who didn't reply. When I went on air he was very rude.

We had tried to get an appointment with Dominic in June without success. They after Christine Leaves was able to get me an appointment we had to wait 6 weeks for the appointment. I was most upset when he said we had only been doing anything for a month.

Michelle Byrne mentioned a one point it would be good to have something like Rouse Hill Town Centre with community facilities and accommodation. It appears there may have been some discussion relating to master plans in the North West Rail suburbs.

“The Kellyville and Rouse Hill postcode alone has seen a surge in population figures of 25.4% between ABS Census dates 2006 and 2011, eclipsing the Sydney average of 6.6% in the same period. Furthermore, the State Government is projecting that the Northwest region as a whole will grow by 52% within the next 20 years. New planning instruments have reflected this projection and have rezoned key areas in Kellyville and Castle Hill to accommodate for greater densities around the proposed train stations. Key players such as Lend Lease and GPT have invested heavily in providing new community master plans and additional amenity in these suburbs and their surrounds. Specifically, the “New Rouse Hill” community and Rouse Hill Town Centre have been and are still continuing to develop in preparation for the accessibility which will be brought on by the new heavy rail link.”

<http://www.palladium.net.au/edm/summer-2013-web.html#one>

I also wrote to various other politicians and the premier. My email was referred to the Minister for Local Government, the Hon Don Page MP, who asked the Division to respond on his behalf.

Under the Local Government Act 1993 (the Act), councils are largely "independent" and "self-governing" bodies with rights and powers conferred by law. The Minister for Local Government and the Division of Local Government do not have the power to intervene in the day-to-day operations of individual councils.

I understand the NSW Government's Environmental Impact Statement 2 (EIS 2) Submissions Report states the Hills Centre facility would be demolished as part of a multi-billion dollar infrastructure project, the Northwest Rail Link, and that the site will be acquired as part of this project. I also understand that while the Council fully supports this infrastructure project, the Council is committed to identifying options to support The Hills Shire's performing arts community.

I therefore suggest you raise your concerns about the proposed demolition of the Hills Centre with the Council directly by writing to the General Manager, Mr Dave Walker, or contacting your local councillors. They are responsible for bringing community concerns before the Council and, where possible, resolving those concerns.

I wrote to Kevin Rudd who referred it to Athony Albanses who replied the demolition of the Hills Centre is a matter for the state Government.

Most politicians, for those of you who have written have been forwarded to Gladys Berejiklian including George Sourtis, State Minister for the Arts, and Tony Burke, Federal Minister for the Arts.

On the media front we had the ABC come and film the Police Graduation on 9th May, the last event in the Hills Centre, we initially turned down Channel 7 as we went with ABC, then when we approached them they said they were not interested. Many people said to try Ray Hadly. He has also believed the council's story, and was quite rude to me on air. Alan Jones did give an airing on radio and we got a few more contacts. Local media were supportive, although they wanted to push for a replacement of the Hills Centre, not keep it.

Unfortunately, I missed the last Sunday Church Service at the Hills Centre (the last public event) as my father suddenly had a massive stroke. He passed away Monday 6th May morning in Orange and I was back in Sydney on Wednesday 9th for the news story before going back to Blayney that night for the funeral on the Thursday. If there is one thing I regret about this whole campaign it is that I spent Saturday writing a piece for a journalist student instead of visiting my father in Orange on the Saturday when he was unwell before he had the stroke.

More recently, as well as previously, I tried to arrange a rally with the media and due to my limited contacts, and sporting events going at the same time, I had limited numbers of people who would be prepared to come, as well as thinking Dominic Perrottet was helping us, so had to cancel. It appears there was a lot of belief that we should campaign for a new performing arts centre rather than fight for the Hills Centre. This is further indicated by the latest publicity about the demolition.

I believe there would be a case for having money returned for donations as they were given in perpetuity. If someone knows a lawyer who would follow it up you could have a class action against the council.

The idea of David Catt that the Hills Centre should have been built near the coffee shops is unrealistic as Castle Towers and the coffee shops did not exist when the Hills Centre was built. Maybe the council should have utilised the Hills Centre restaurant to its advantage and built a coffee shop there. The advantage of the Hills Centre being where it is, as I have been told by the experts is the ability to bump in shows and have freely available car parking.

I wrote to Brad Hazzard regarding the conditions of the project, specifically Clause E41.

“LANDUSE AND COMMUNITY FACILITIES

E41. Where community and council facilities are impacted during construction works through temporary or permanent land acquisition, reduced amenity, reduced access, reduced functionality or other impact, the Proponent shall, **in consultation with** the relevant council, **community groups** and key stakeholders, address construction impacts and agree on feasible and reasonable mitigation and management measures. Where appropriate, the Proponent shall determine viable alternative options for community facilities during the construction phase. **Mitigation and management measures shall be implemented, prior to impacts occurring.”**

I questioned whether the mitigation issues were addressed in regard to the schools, cultural groups and the dance schools.

More information available on the web site <http://savethehillscentre.weebly.com/mitigation-issues.html>.

This is still being investigated and would be a good avenue for justifying a new performing arts centre. If you are a group who can no longer provide the service you are currently providing, please email Brad Hazzard with details of why there is nowhere suitable for you to meet.

Email Brad Hazzard and let him know how vital a performing arts centre is for the future of the area.
The Hon. Brad Hazzard, MP
(02) 9228 5258
office@hazzard.minister.nsw.gov.au

As this has consumed nearly every waking hour of my time, I feel it is now time to step down and let someone else take on the fight for a new centre. I am willing to help but it really needs an entire team to help.

Thanks again for all your support and help.

Julie Rourke

BA App Sc

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<http://savethehillscentre.weebly.com>

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Save the Hills Centre

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