

NEWCASTLE WEEKLY

Group pushes ahead with plans to establish information centre at Tomaree

ROD THOMPSON

JANUARY 11, 2024

SHARE

<https://newcastleweekly.com.au/group-pushes-ahead-with-plans-to-establish-information-centre-at-tomaree/>

With facts and figures at the ready, the Tomaree Headland Heritage Group (THHG) is pushing ahead with plans to establish its own visitor information centre (VIC) at the site.

It comes after the organisation manned a “help desk” over the Christmas-New Year holiday period, with volunteers being overwhelmed by a record number of people walking to the summit.

They were also met by several key concerns, including a significant lack of parking and associated traffic management issues; inadequate signage and directions for guests; and a need for material about the area and Tomaree Coastal Walk.

The THHG will present the data, obtained over 11 days (16 and 17 December, and from 26 December to 3 January), to National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), Port Stephens Council, Destination Port Stephens, Port Stephens MP Kate Washington, Paterson MP Meryl Swanson and the Department of Communities and Justice, who has management responsibility for Tomaree Lodge, to state its case.

“We periodically provide this service (help desk) to ensure the visiting public can access information and directions at the entry point to the Tomaree Head Summit Walk, which is otherwise unavailable,” president Peter Clough said.

“There’s also a need, now, for material on the recently opened Coastal Walk.

“So, after the latest influx of tourists, it’s clear to us we must meet the demand and boast our own information and kiosk facility.

“We think it makes a lot of sense since Tomaree Headland is the most popular attraction in Port Stephens.

“It’s such a major asset for the region.

“Sure, it is not this busy all the time, all year round, that goes without saying.

“But, it’s a destination in itself.

“We’ve got toilets at the entry point of Tomaree Lodge now, which we didn’t have before, and that’s where we want an information centre and a little kiosk.



Photo: Nicole Shelley



Photo: Nicola Shelley

“People can walk up the mountain for a few hours and then have a cup of coffee, a water, a sandwich or something when they return.

“You could make it a commercial entity, which could help pay for it.

“We only want a small one... we’re not after a big facility like the VIC in Port Stephens, which is located at Nelson Bay.

“That’s a few kilometres away.

“It’s the region’s main centre and a very successful one.

“We’re not talking that level, just something central for the headland and Tomaree Coastal Walk.”

Adding weight to the Tomaree Headland Heritage Group’s argument is the new 27km track, which officially opened in September at a cost of \$6.7 million.

“Everyone’s expecting that to bring more visitors to the LGA,” Mr Clough told the *Newcastle Weekly*.

“NSW Premier Chris Minns, while in town, also mentioned the coastal walk would attract an extra 300,000 people per annum.

“Even when we were out there the past fortnight or so, we had a good percentage of inquiries about it.

“Questions like ‘how far was it?’, ‘where did it start?’, ‘how steep was it?’ and ‘can you just do a portion of it?’

“So, it would be nice to provide answers straight away.”

Mr Clough admitted the THHG required the strong support of the NPWS, Ms Washington and council to fulfil its ambitions.

“The next step is to get a decision from the Minister, who’s Kate,” he said.

“It’s the NSW Government who has the responsibility for the site.

“Then, once a decision is made, we’d like a management trust – combining community, council and government – to develop a masterplan and planning processes.

“I know that will cost a lot of money, however it’s already costing \$1 million a year, which is in the NSW Budget, to secure and manage that site now.

“So, that’s \$1,000,000 annually just to look after it, with no prospect of anything happening in the foreseeable future.

“What we’re suggesting, and we’ve approached council, is for them to talk to the government about using a portion of that side for the information and kiosk facility.

“Maybe just a small section of the Tomaree Lodge at the entry point, it’s the logical place.

“That way it’ll be a starting point for the transition of it to this community.

“Information is so important these days yet it’s negligible out there at the moment.

“All it’s got is a sign saying ‘Tomaree National Park’.

“We’d love council, NPWS and the government to sit down and, together, adopt a united approach to signpost the area properly moving forward.

“It deserves it... it’s the most populous attraction up here and an iconic site.”



Key outcomes from Tomaree Headland Heritage Group's Help Desk (from 9am until 12.30pm)

- Upwards of 350 visitors per hour on most days including people who walk along the foreshore past the Tomaree Lodge site. Potentially there are well over 1,000 people per day at this time of year who visit the Headland, Coastal Walk and Tomaree Lodge foreshore
- Most visitors by far were family groups
- Most visitors were from Sydney with Newcastle day-tripper numbers also prominent

Primary and consistent feedback

- Lack of information particularly directions to the Summit Walk, Coastal Walk and Zenith Beach. The Tomaree Coastal walk starting point is over 300m in a southerly direction, which needs directional signage. THHG handed out large numbers of NPWS Coastal Walk maps, which were helpful but did not identify loops as most people had vehicles and intended to return. The maps did, however, have walking distances but need time frame information, for example, return walk times and public transport information, including buses to and from Fingal Bay, which would have been most helpful, and we believe is urgently needed
- Extreme parking shortage
- Many people indicated that Paid Parking signage was confusing particularly as it does not say "paid" – many thought the four-hour parking signage represented an exemption period and were also uncertain about 'meter registration' requirements. Also, the nearby parking meter is difficult to read and therefore needs some sort of shading device or relocation. Maybe visitors need to be encouraged to use the App – this should perhaps be advised on all maps and in the visitors centre
- There were hundreds of questions and comments about the future of Tomaree Lodge
- There were numerous requests for information about the WWII remnants on the Headland portion of the National Park, which sadly do not have interpretative signage

Priority recommendations

- Very strong need for an "Information and food and beverage Kiosk" inside the entry to the Tomaree Lodge, which should include Coastal Walk and Summit maps
- Very strong need for a Welcome to Tomaree Headland sign and directional signage to the Tomaree Coastal Walk and to the Head Summit etc. It needs to become "visitor friendly" as Port Stephens has competitors up and down the coast
- Re-introduction of outdoor showers in the nearby amenities block as hundreds of people use the Zenith and bayside beaches at this time of year
- Additional parking and far better traffic management to avoid accidents – at some point on Shoal Bay Road there should be a sign identifying Access to Tomaree Headland Only – no through road
- Jetty reinstatement and/or introduction of shuttle services would be positive steps towards addressing parking and traffic issues
- Still no "Box Beach" while "Zenith Beach" signage is very small and should be elevated
- Establish a meeting of key stakeholders (particularly including NPWS) to adopt a "united approach" to addressing the issues having regard to the Headland being the most popular visitor attraction in Port Stephens. THHG believes that adopting a "visitor friendly" approach will enhance the experience and generate favourable reviews about Port Stephens, given competition up and down the coast. Also, it found that listening to the visiting public is important as it contains a lot of wisdom and experience – maybe more of this type of research should be undertaken by key stakeholders such as the NPWS