

## NEWS

# Worimi lose Tomaree Lodge land claim

THE NSW Government says it is still committed to keeping Tomaree Lodge for community use after a Worimi claim on the land was rejected in the Land and Environment Court.

The government says it will call for public consultation on the future of the former residential disability centre for 60 days from the end of October.

The decision handed down on Wednesday, October 19 by Justice Rachel Pepper came after two claims - lodged in 2015 and 2019 - were rejected at the ministerial level, leading the Worimi Local Aboriginal Land Council to turn to the Land and Environment Court in 2020.

Justice Pepper upheld the government's contention that the land was legally occupied and "needed, or likely to be needed, for an essential public service" in dismissing the Worimi claim.

The Worimi Local Aboriginal Land Council did not respond to requests for comment by ACM, publisher of the *Examiner*.

Following the court's decision, the Minister for Families and Communities and Minister for Disability Services, Natasha Maclaren-Jones, said that the government would open consultation with the community at the end of October to help decide the "best future use of the site".

"The NSW Government recognises the importance of Tomaree Lodge to the Port Stephens community, and we are immediately looking to plan the future of the site with a focus on the needs of the local community," Mrs Maclaren-Jones, a member of the NSW Legislative Council, said.

"From the end of October we will be consulting with the community and interested parties including Port Stephens Council, Worimi Aboriginal Land Council, and local community groups about how best to re-purpose Tomaree Lodge for community use."

Tomaree Lodge was originally a quarantine station before being used as a home

for people with disability.

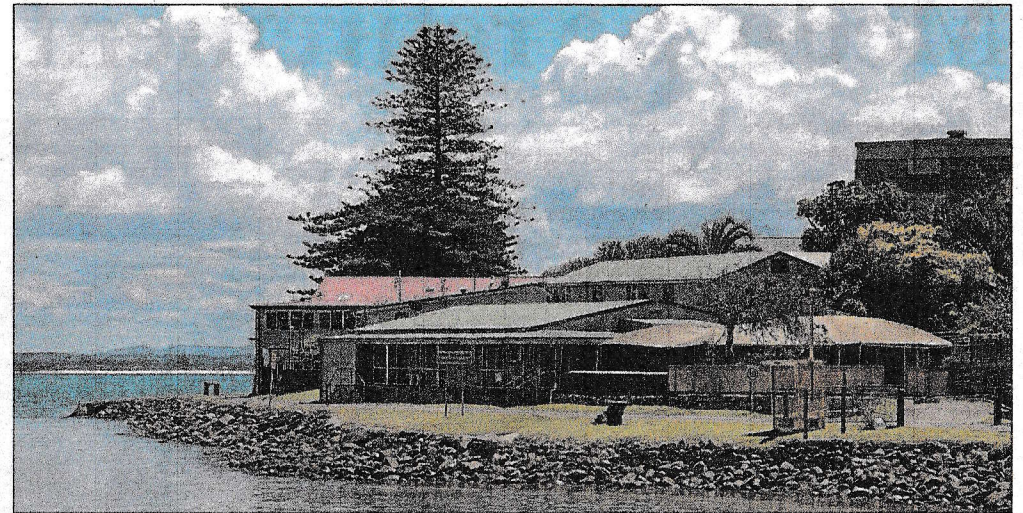
It was slated for closure in 2013 when the NSW government moved to shut all of the state's large residential centres - including the Stockton Centre and Kanangra at Morisset - at the same time as the NDIS was beginning. It took until 2020 to finally empty Tomaree Lodge.

Since then Labor state member for Port Stephens Kate Washington has campaigned to ensure the site, now managed by the managed by the Department of Communities and Justice, is not sold.

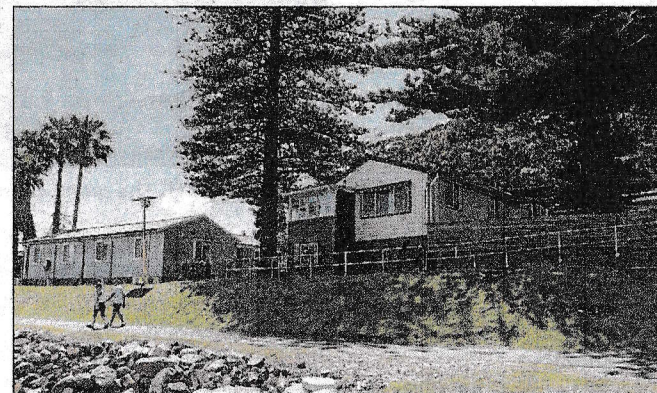
"We know the Liberal Government always wanted to sell this site, but our community fought to keep it in public hands," Ms Washington said.

"I've been proud to stand alongside our community every step of the way, and I'll be ensuring their great ideas steer the future course of this very special site. Given the government's passion for privatisation, I'll be keeping a close eye on the process."

In the lead-up to the 2019



A Worimi land claim on Tomaree Lodge has been rejected. The NSW Government says it is still committed to keeping the site 'for community use'.



Tomaree Lodge sites on a nine hectare site on the Shoal Bay foreshore, at the foothill of Tomaree Mountain.

state election, the Coalition pledged to keep the site in public ownership. Both sides of politics were waiting for the outcome of the Worimi claim.

Various uses have been

suggested for Tomaree, with Labor MPs joining welfare advocates this year to propose that it and the Stockton Centre be used as temporary accommodation for homeless people.

Parliamentary secretary for the Hunter Taylor Martin, a Liberal upper house member, joined Minister Maclaren-Jones in encouraging the community to have their say about the future of Tomaree Lodge, which is a state significant heritage site.

"The Port Stephens community is passionate about the future of Tomaree Lodge, and I'm looking forward to hearing more from the community about how this historic and iconic site can be repurposed," he said.

Mrs Maclaren-Jones said the government "remains committed to allowing locals to decide how Tomaree Lodge is best used for their community".