

20<sup>th</sup> August 2026

**RESPONSE TO THE TOMAREE LODGE MASTERPLAN**  
**Submission by the Tomaree Headland Heritage Group Inc. (THHG)**  
**on the Summary of Revision 1 dated 29 06 2026**

## **Introduction**

THHG welcomes this opportunity to comment on the Masterplan which was released last month by the Minister for Communities and Justice the Hon. Kate Washington MP.

THHG, inaugurated in 2019, includes representatives of 8 very diverse Tomaree community organisations which have a strong interest in planning for the future of the Tomaree Lodge site. These are:

- **Destination Port Stephens Inc.**
- **Business Port Stephens Inc.**
- **EcoNetwork Port Stephens Inc.**
- **Nelson Bay RSL Subbranch Inc.**
- **Tomaree Cultural Development Group Inc.**
- **Tomaree Museum Association Inc.**
- **Tomaree Residents and Ratepayers Association Inc.**
- **Port Stephens Marine Parks Association Inc.**

THHG was an early advocate for a Masterplan and has sought to provide SHAC and the Department with relevant local information on the site and its significance to the Tomaree Community. We are pleased to note that the consultants have taken note of many of our contributions.

Our suggestions and recommendations on the current Masterplan Summary of Revisions are offered in relation to the following issues:

### **1. Business Plan, Financial Viability and Identification of Preferred uses:**

- In our view this should be a priority. In fact, we believe that the overall concept should have the benefit of an overarching Business Plan which should include Business cases for key preferred future uses such as:
  - a) Education and Research
  - b) Tourism and Employment
  - c) Cultural Interpretation and Sense of Arrival
  - d) Heritage Interpretation and Museum
  - e) Environmental Sustainability and Interpretation
  - f) Creative Arts
  - g) Recreational Infrastructure and Activities

**These elements are mentioned as themes on Page 14 and also on Page 55.**

**The Business Planning should evaluate the costs and revenue potential of the various options for preferred uses and be guided by the Conservation Management Plan.**

Having regard to the strong need to ensure the site is financially sustainable, we believe this deserves priority.

Prior to 2024 the community had strong concerns about the cost to the State to secure and maintain the site which was, at that time, in excess of \$1m annually. The site was **also decaying** and it is now pleasing that the planning is well advanced and that there is a Delivery Plan to bring the site to operational level. However, THHG would wish to see a plan which ensures a positive financial outcome and which ultimately avoids any continuing drain on the State Budget.

The **Business Planning process must take into account** current and forecast visitor numbers and their level of expenditure. Such data can be accessed through various sources e.g. Destination Port Stephens, National Parks and Wildlife statistics and from THHG reports based on 'Help Desk' counts conducted during holiday periods over the last three years. These counts have recorded that up to 600 people per hour visit the Headland. These figures confirm the high level of appeal of the Tomaree Headland.

The early establishment of a Café/Information facility at the entry to the Lodge site will enhance the visitor experience and the sense of arrival as well **as providing a strong lease revenue source for DCJ** and an all year round data source.

## **2. Education and Research**

THHG believes that the Masterplan should have emphasized the potential for education and research activities, particularly Marine Science and Tourism which are synonymous with Port Stephens.

Our belief was highlighted **in the DCJ Community Consultation process**, conducted over a period of 6 weeks in 2022/23. The Consultants (Umwelt) reported that 23% of respondents highlighted Education and Research as a priority (there were over 500 respondents to the survey).

Prior to commencement of the Master Planning, the University of Newcastle had 3 Tomaree Lodge executive level site visits initiated by THHG which indicates there is a strong level of interest in the education sector.

## **3. Entry Precinct (referred to as the 'Common' in the Master Plan)**

In our view the **Sense of Arrival and entry precinct** proposal is underwhelming and misses a real opportunity, particularly:

- a) **No incentive to visit the remainder of the Tomaree Lodge site**
- b) **Missing the potential to develop a strong revenue opportunity**
- c) **Missing the opportunity of benefitting from the large number of visitors who only intend to walk to the summit (90% plus of all visitation – data collected at THHG 'Help Desks' over a 3-year period)**

We have previously put forward a detailed submission demonstrating the strategic importance of this precinct to service 'all' visitors to the Headland and to the revitalized Lodge Site. Our experience at the Help Desk indicates that **a large proportion of visitors have no knowledge of what the Lodge site has to offer** and in the absence of readily available information, limit their experience to the summit climb.

See attached artists impression which will also substantially reduce the impact of the Amenities Block.

Having a Visitor Information service at the entry is so sensible for many reasons:

- a) Providing a venue for compelling storytelling opportunities to inform on the environmental, cultural and heritage attractions, using still images, audio visuals and interpretive displays, QR Codes as well as printed information (perhaps also available in major languages)
- b) Many visitors require additional information on the grades and difficulty level of the various trails and information could be provided on safety precautions e.g. Defib locations) as well as the need to respect environmental and heritage values. Many visitors may not be bothered walking along to the Tomaree Lodge precinct (even as far as the proposed Checkpoint - over 200 Meters) to gather important safety information
- c) We need to remember some people who visit The Bay in general and Tomaree Headland in particular can't climb to the top of the summit. Those with limited mobility, parents/carers pushing prams, those with walking aids and wheelchair users will still be able to enjoy much the site has to offer.

Some in their Family/Group/Party might head up the Mountain, while others wait at the cafe/Info centre and/or are enticed to take the less challenging, yet still highly attractive option of meandering through the Tomaree Lodge precinct

- d) The entry is an obvious location to commence Guided Tours including for environmental or heritage themes
- e) The Café/Information facility also could offer all weather protection and a meeting place before and/or after walks, tours etc. It would also cater for afterhours visitors
- f) One option would be to redevelop the existing Amenities Block (which serviced the decommissioned swimming pool) by making it more harmonious with the surrounding environment, for use as the Checkpoint

Also, it is particularly important to note that the current location of the DCJ Information Centre makes use of an administration office which does not open at critical times i.e. at weekends and public holidays daylight saving hours. It is **clearly missing the key visitor market** and this is evident by the small number of current visitors to this centre.

In summary, THHG recommends that the Checkpoint function should be relocated to a site just inside the southern boundary possibly occupying the open space overlooking the water.

#### **4. Community Participation in Perpetuity**

We believe the community has an expectation to have ongoing involvement with the future repurposing and ongoing operation of the Tomaree Lodge and hence we would like you to investigate an appropriate Management Model for the longer term. ***This need was identified in the Community Consultation document of 2022-2023 (see Page 79).***

## 5. Accessibility, Public Transport and Parking

There will be commercial and administrative activities which will require parking and hence allowance should be made for additional onsite parking.

The Masterplan acknowledges the very significant challenges associated with managing visitor access to the Headland as a whole and to the Lodge site.

***‘A shared transport solution is required between DCJ, Port Stephens Council and NPWS’.*** (See item 5 applicable to the Common Precinct)

- a) The Masterplan’s recommendations focus on the need to strictly limit the entry of motor vehicles to the site and to avoid additional provision for parking inside the Lodge site.
- b) THHG suggests that these issues require considerably more discussion, analysis and recommendations on how to solve the associated problems.
- c) There is already a major problem with the limited capacity of the road system and inadequate parking to service the Headland.
- d) The recent completion of the NPWS Coastal Walking Track which terminates at the entry to the Lodge Site is adding to the access shortcomings.
- e) The enhancements proposed in the Masterplan for the Lodge site will encourage even greater visitor demand and have serious consequences for traffic and parking infrastructure. This is one aspect of the Masterplan that calls for statistics on the number of visitors and the strategies which may be needed to provide access to what is and will continue to be a ***Nationally significant visitor attraction***.

THHG has in earlier submissions raised a number of options to deal with this challenge, including a shuttle bus service combined with remote car parks, improvement of the Shoal Bay Jetty to take larger passenger craft such as a ferry service, and reconfiguration of the road network serving the Headland.

The Masterplan should acknowledge the recent Port Stephens Council Plan for the redesign of the northern end of Shoal Bay Road to provide a turning circle capable of taking smaller shuttle buses and additional parking (**See attachment 2**).

The Masterplan envisages an activation of the Lodge Site to accommodate a range of uses detailed on page 55 Lodge Site. Many of these ‘Places’ involve services, public exhibitions as well as commercial and administrative functions which will require internal parking.

How are these needs to be met?

## 6. Proposal for Relocation of the Oyster Hatchery

THHG understands that the current location of the Hatchery was selected to enable easy access to a special quality of seawater which may be difficult to obtain in the proposed Checkpoint location.

We would prefer to see the Hatchery upgraded on its current site and opened to public visitation. The operators have welcomed this suggestion.

## 7. Amenities Blocks

We prefer that the Amenities block near the Swimming baths and the Hatchery be retained and upgraded because of the potential refurbishment of the Hatchery on

its existing site, for walkers and picnickers and the potential for the swimming baths to be reinstated.

The Amenities Block at the entry to the Lodge should be repurposed to:

- a) Ensure that amenities are retained either in their current location ('The Common') or nearby but substantially reducing the visual impact
- b) We have put forward an artist's impression which could achieve improved amenity and ensure the amenities are retained. This was proposed to whet the appetite of the designer of the entry precinct. We believe this can be achieved in a cost-effective way to DCJ

## **8. WWII Commemorative Walk Proposal**

We have put forward a proposal to the Minister for the development of a WWII Commemorative Walk which would traverse both the Tomaree Lodge Site as well as the National Park on the Tomaree Headland.

This would clearly highlight the role of the Tomaree Headland during WWII. This proposal was put forward by Tom Lupton (now deceased) who was a previous President of the Nelson Bay RSL Sub-branch. The Sub-branch fully supports the proposal and is willing to play a key role in the development of this project.

The Commemorative Walk would act as a catalyst for the many heritage and veterans grants available, to fund improved interpretation and presentation of the sites on both NPWS and DCJ land.

Also in the Masterplan, the Surf Battery Number 2 was not included in the plans for the 'Contemplation Precinct'. While this structure may not be on Lot 453 (the Lodge Site), it is a significant relic of the WWII defence installations and the best location for an interpretative panel would be on the Lodge Site.

Also, the planned Torpedo Track upgrade could play a significant role in the WWII walk proposal as it passes a key element of the WWII history. This track, when added to the NPWS Headland track system should be recognized as completing one single circular route which will facilitate the entry of visitors to the Lodge Site from the northern extremity.

***We suggest that the Commemorative Walk proposal be included in the Masterplan.***

## **9. Allowing New or Replacement Buildings**

THHG appreciates the desirability of respecting the natural, heritage, and cultural significance of the Lodge site and adoption of planning principles as listed in the DCJ Website (*See the Masterplan page*). However, we believe that some flexibility may be necessary to achieve the renewal goals and objectives detailed in the 'Our Discovery' section (pages 54 and 55) of the Masterplan.

Adaptive reuse of Heritage listed buildings should be preferred to the insertion of high impact new buildings or uses. We do envisage the need for a new building to house the Checkpoint facility at the entrance from Shoal Bay Road.

There are examples of such reception and information facilities at the entrance to Nationally Significant Heritage Sites such as Port Arthur in Tasmania. That structure was sensitively designed with a low-key impact which does not compete with the overall heritage character of the precinct. It has achieved the necessary

function of intercepting, servicing and informing visitors at a clearly designated entry portal.

## 10. Community Consultation undertaken by Umwelt on behalf of DCJ from 30 Oct 2022 until 6 January 2023 - over 500 respondents

THHG searched the Masterplan for references to the important survey of Community preferences for the Future Uses of Tomaree Lodge without success.

The Umwelt Report's summary of its major findings is provided on pages 78 to 80 of their document. The strongest support for potential future uses were (page 78):

- **Education and Research** **23% of respondents**
- **A Café/kiosk** **23% of respondents**
- **Museum/Interpretative Centre** **23% of respondents**
- **Open space for community activities** **18% of respondents**
- **Performing Arts and Cultural Centre** **16% of respondents**
- **Recreation Trails** **12% of respondents**

Other key suggestions put forward were:

- a) Preference for a Management Model that is Community Based i.e. Community Trust with key stakeholders (Page 79) involvement including our local Council
- b) That consideration be given as to how the site could facilitate multiple uses to generate **multiple income streams** (Page 78)
- c) A commonly held opinion was a preference to **'maintain the site's natural and heritage features where possible'**

## 11. In Summary

THHG suggests that **greater emphasis in the Masterplan** be placed on:

1. Education and Research which have the potential to generate significant revenue and recognition of Community feedback
2. A Museum and Interpretative Centre
3. The Entry Precinct 'Common' should include the Café/Information Kiosk. This is the optimal location for visitors to the Headland as a whole, as this is where the bulk of visitors arrive and need to make route decisions.
  - a. As well as being more convenient it would **maximize the revenue potential to DCJ**. We are surprised at the proposal to place the Checkpoint and Information Centre at B11, some 200 metres from the entry, and the Café at C8, approximately 235 metres from the entry, in a building with difficult accessibility.. The current Information Centre is primarily an administration/staff office.
4. A much stronger focus being placed on the Sense of Arrival and its interaction with the summit walk and the WWII Military History of the Tomaree Headland
5. Accessibility by Public Transport, including a Jetty to facilitate access by a ferry service and introduction of Shuttle Bus services particularly from Shoal Bay CBD

6. Generation of revenue to ensure the State does not continue to incur the \$1m per annum which the community in 2024 strongly reacted to and hence the push for the State Government to address the repurposing of the site.
7. Provision of parking
8. Financially sustainability by progressing the development of a Business Plan and related Business Cases.

Also, it is important to highlight:

- i. That we should avoid trying to be all things to all people
- ii. That this is an iconic, nationally significant site which should be appropriately recognized when identifying preferred uses
- iii. The need for meeting community expectations and ensuring their participation in the long term management of the site

As discussed and also your offer at the recent meeting with the Minister, we would be most happy to meet with representatives from DCJ regarding our suggestions.

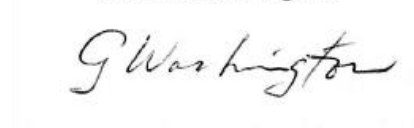
**Peter Clough**



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**President – THHG Inc**

**Geoff Washington**



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**Vice-President – THHG Inc**