

Conservation group urges Lake council to buy Munibung Hill land

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Local News



Munibung Hill Conservation Society member Fergus Hancock stands on the top of the hill, with a view of Warners Bay behind him. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

AS he stands at the top of Munibung Hill's eastern slope, Fergus Hancock has more than 250 million years of geological history beneath his feet and a panoramic view before his eyes.

"It is absolutely magnificent," says Mr Hancock, who lives just down the slope in Macquarie Hills.

"To the south you can see as far as Norah Head, and up to the north you can see Tomaree Head, Yacaaba, in Port Stephens, so it's well over 100 kilometres of coast that's visible from here. Plus the lake."

This Lake Macquarie landmark surging 165 metres above sea level also provides hindsight, according to Stuart Carter, a neighbour of Mr Hancock and fellow member of the Munibung Hill Conservation Society.

From this hill, Mr Carter explains, many generations of the Awabakal people would have watched Lake Macquarie take shape, as the water crept in at the end of the ice age, between 12,000 and 6000 years ago. It is a very special place to the Indigenous people, always has been.

When the Europeans arrived, they mined under the hill, grazed their cattle on it, quarried it, picnicked on it, and, at the foot of the western slope, built the lead and zinc smelter that operated for more than a century.

"The hill has had such an interesting life," says Mr Carter, who is the conservation society's president.



VIEWS: Near the top of Munibung Hill, looking towards the south, with the 80 hectares of land for sale down the slope to the right. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

Yet the view to the future of Munibung Hill is not as clear, in the eyes of the conservation society.

Just over the hill, on the hill's south-western side, a parcel of land of about 80 hectares is for sale.

Lake Macquarie City Council has approved a development application for 115 housing lots on about 11 hectares of the site. That land largely comprises two former gravel quarries, and from there, future residents could have expansive views over Speers Point to the lake and beyond.

The remaining 69 hectares, which include eucalyptus-covered slopes and gullies holding rainforest remnants, have been zoned E2 environmental conservation. That land has been recognised by the council as holding high ecological value.

The land is for sale by tender. The deadline for offers is today.

"There's been a lot of interest in it," says Barry Price, one of the selling agents, from Ray White Newcastle Lake Macquarie. "Mostly from developers, aged care [facility] operators, people like that."

Mr Price would not estimate how much the land could sell for.



FUTURE HOMES: The former quarries on the land for sale on Munibung Hill have been approved to be developed for housing lots. Picture: Supplied

Munibung Hill Conservation Society's Stuart Carter says the group is not opposed to the sale of the land and accepts the development of the 11 hectares already zoned for housing. It is the fate of the remaining 69 hectares that concerns him. He points to one line from the real estate marketing campaign, "The site offers a superb development opportunity now and into the future".

"With the sale going through, we're just concerned a new developer may well think this is an opportunity to challenge the existing zonings, and maybe have them amended to allow for more development," Mr Carter says.

Down the hill from the land in question is the Lake Macquarie City Council headquarters and the office of the Mayor, Kay Fraser. Her window may face away from the hill, but she has her own view on Munibung's value.

"It's probably quite iconic in the Lake Macquarie area," Cr Fraser says. "I walked up there, and it's absolutely spectacular from the top."

Councillor Fraser has responded to the society's concerns, saying the 69 hectares is protected by its environmental conservation zoning. The Mayor guarantees that parcel is safe - for now.



"Well, as the Mayor, I can give that guarantee now, but obviously future councils may wish to change that zoning," Cr Fraser says. "We can never say anything in perpetuity. It's impossible to say that."

And that's what worries Stuart Carter: "When a councillor says, for example, 'It won't change under my watch', 'my watch' is not forever, it might be just a four-year cycle."

HAVEN: Munibung Hill Conservation Society members Fergus Hancock and Stuart Carter on the eastern slope. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

As a result, Mr Carter argues, that land is "in limbo". But he sees a solution. The council could buy the land, even just the 69 hectares to ensure it is protected into the future. This is the first time in about 80 years the land has been on the market, so Mr Carter wants the council to seize the moment.

"Of course, we'd like to see council buy it," he says. "We'd like to think they would take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

But Cr Fraser says that is not about to happen.

"My understanding is that council considered it, but it's not viable for us at this particular stage," she says.

"It would be a fair amount of money to purchase that, and council has a responsibility to its ratepayers, how we spend the money of our ratepayers."

The council has a precinct area plan covering the land for sale, and that document outlines the significance of the hill, both historical and in the future. The plan states, "Residents will enjoy the high level of amenity afforded by the elevated nature of its site and its natural setting".

What's more, the council owns about 45 hectares on the hill and is looking at developing a network of walking trails. At the moment, there is no official network, with many of the tracks eroded and rutted.



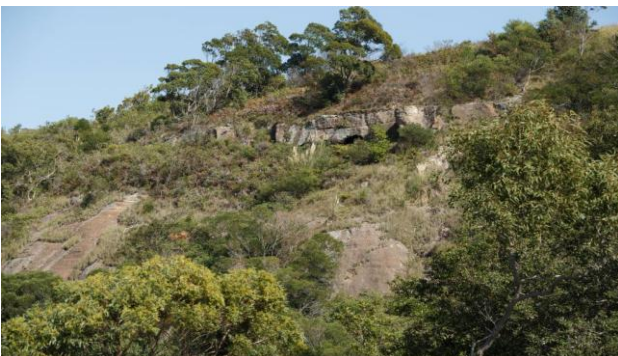
A view from Munibung Hill. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

Simon Collins, the council's project delivery officer, says about \$2.25 million in development contributions have been earmarked for that work. He says while more research needs to be done, if the land is sold and the development goes ahead, it could accelerate the hill's walking trails program.

"If we have the opportunity to provide those recreational opportunities, then having a community in close proximity activating those spaces, and encouraging other people to explore those spaces - within the constraints, of course - then I think it's wonderful," Mr Collins says.

Of course, we'd like to see council buy it. We'd like to think they would take this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Stuart Carter, Munibung Hill Conservation Society

The Mayor says she would "love to see Munibung Hill very accessible for everyone in Lake Macquarie, and from outside Lake Macquarie". She talks about the city missing out on opportunities that could attract more visitors to Munibung Hill, but Cr Fraser doesn't see buying this land as one of them.



"I think it's a bit premature for us to go in and start purchasing land until we have a full overview plan of what we want, how we see Munibung Hill working for us," she says.

The eastern slope of Munibung Hill. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

Conservation society members agree with the council that the hill should be shared.

"It's a magnificent site, and I really wish more people knew and it was better promoted by council, and that we had lots of people up here all the time," Fergus Hancock says.

Yet, he says, if the protection of high-conservation areas on the hill can't be assured, the very thing that makes Munibung special will be diminished or lost.

"If there is any rezoning of the conservation land, it will inevitably impact on the ecology of the area," Mr Hancock says. "It also means you'll see more housing creeping up the slopes, and that will reduce its amenity."

While she can't give guarantees for the future, Cr Fraser cannot see why the environmental conservation zoning would be changed on those 69 hectares of land.

"There's a lot more land to be developed elsewhere in our city, so there'd be no reason for council to consider rezoning that land," she says. "Council would be going down a slippery slope to do that. And there would be a great outcry from the community, so any council that would do that would be turfed out the next election."

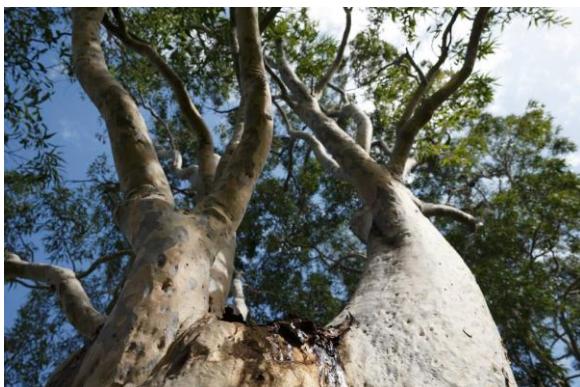


Boolaroo and, in the distance, Mount Sugarloaf, as seen from Munibung Hill. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers

Whatever lies ahead, Fergus Hancock will continue to climb the hill, appreciating the views and dreaming of what he sees for the future of Munibung.

"My vision is that this should be seen as a heritage area that looks at geological history, Aboriginal heritage and culture, European occupation and history, and how we enjoy and use semi-urban spaces in the future," Mr Hancock says.

"It has so many values, lying between east and west Lake Macquarie. For me, it's such a unique area, and I'd love to see it conserved as a heritage zone for the future."



In the bush on top of Munibung Hill. Picture: Max Mason-Hubers