

MEDIA RELEASE

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Minister Scully calls in Town Hall Square – we can breathe a sigh of relief

CEO of the Urban Taskforce Australia, Tom Forrest, today strongly supported the intervention of the NSW Government into Clover Moore's \$150 million Town Hall Square vanity project.

Planning Minister Paul Scully's determination that the project be assessed under State Significant Development rules by the Independent Planning Commission puts a welcome handbrake on something that would have had a massive and detrimental impact on such a significant part of the Sydney CBD.

Through the Lord Mayor's actions, and those of the City of Sydney, the council has unwittingly become the great uniter – single-handedly forming an unlikely alliance in opposition that includes the Urban Taskforce, the business community, the Labour Council and the trade union movement, and the media.

Paul Scully is right to take control of this ill-considered project.

Having the Council assess, then determine, its own mega-project was a recipe for further disaster, making the Oxford Street bike lane debacle look like a minor misstep in comparison.

The cost of the unwanted Town Hall Square "revamp" of anywhere between \$150 million and \$300 million, along with the loss of significant Council assets, is unconscionable at a time when The City itself is calling for the delivery of more housing affordability and is struggling to manage the scourge of the e-bike infestation across the CBD.

While housing development applicants are being hit with fees and charges in the millions of dollars, set by the City of Sydney, that are driving up the cost of housing delivery, even on Council's generous low-ball estimate of \$150 million, this Town Hall Square frolic is an indulgence we cannot afford.

The down sides of this proposal have been wantonly ignored by the City of Sydney. Thousands of workers will be displaced, incurring the ire of the SDA.

The amenity delivered by the 1929 art deco Woolworths building, which services the population of residents and workers in the central and southern part of the CBD, will disappear under this proposal.

Council says that a square is needed. But it already has one – Sydney Square, situated right between Town Hall and St Andrew's Cathedral – and it looks dreadful! How can we trust a council that has run down the glorious old square into such dismal decay with this new, unwanted mega project?

The short answer is, we can't. The NSW Government has stopped short of stepping in and ruling it out, but putting this project through the rigours of a merit based assessment by the IPC will surely spell its end.

If Council is serious about improving the amenity of the city, it should look to demolish the monstrous, ugly, brutalist council office buildings located behind Town Hall that cast a pall over what could otherwise be valued urban open space.

Council's concrete and pebblecrete offices besmirch the wonderful 19th century architecture alongside it. The challenge to Council: get rid of the blight you are directly responsible for before you spend \$150 million plus on a new one.

The City of Sydney should move Council's ugly, dilapidated offices to new premises at Green Square, demolish the Askinesque 1970s eyesore it currently occupies, and partner with industry to create new housing and to revitalise Sydney Square.

Council should look at a new plan for the seven buildings opposite Town Hall.

The long overlooked precinct should be redeveloped with significant uplift, preserving heritage elements and creating a mix of market and affordable housing, retail amenity and a thriving employment zone on the site.

End

*The comments and analysis above can be attributed to **Tom Forrest**, CEO, Urban Taskforce.*

Media Enquiries: Tom Forrest, Chief Executive Officer: 0429 460 863

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*The **Urban Taskforce Australia** is a property development industry group, representing Australia's most prominent property developers and equity financiers.*