

Fairy Bower Precinct

JUNE 2017 NEWSLETTER

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email: chair@fairybowerprecinct.info

7TH JUNE >

NEXT FAIRY BOWER COMMUNITY FORUM MEETING:

Wednesday 7th June 2017, 7pm, St. Patricks College.



Picture postcard view of **Manly Sea Life Sanctuary Oceanarium (formerly Oceanworld)** in February 2013. The building has not changed significantly since its extensive late 1980s redevelopment. The public walkway around the building is actually the top of the underwater walk concrete tank. However the building exterior is in currently need of maintenance, including cleaning. (Image John Cowper)

The June Meeting will include:-

- ◆ Marine Parade, amenities block & pool works update
- ◆ Council logo and branding report
- ◆ Proposed Regional Museum
- ◆ General Business

is going on, and outline what are the next steps in the long history of this facility. As a brief background, the aquarium first opened as *Marineland* in November 1963 in the form of a large circular tank over the harbour, with large port-hole windows to look through. It was Australia's first Oceanarium and was financed by South African investors.

Welcome to All Fairy Bower Residents

NEWS

Manly Sea Life Sanctuary Future

Since the commencement of the ferry service to Manly in the 1850s, the history of Manly has always involved the intertwined interests of both visitors and residents. So the potential loss of a local cultural icon - our Manly aquarium - is a matter for everyone.

The proposed closure of the Sea Life Sanctuary (formerly *Oceanworld*) was first revealed in the *Manly Daily* two months ago. Since then many residents, and the *Manly Community Environment Committee* have expressed concern about this announcement. Obviously any loss of this major local attraction will particularly impact residents and families with younger children and visitors to Manly - both day-trippers and holiday makers.

So it might be useful to provide a better explanation of what

In February 1988 it reopened after a \$12 million (budget) redevelopment, which installed an underwater sea-walk built on the harbour floor, below and around the original main tank structure. The major reconstruction made a visit to the aquarium a simply stunning experience, having at that time the longest underwater aquarium tunnel walk in the world (110 metres).

However the rebuilt aquarium was not a financial success to the extent hoped for and its ownership changed, first in 1992 to Coral World, and then again in December 1999 when the operators of the Sydney Aquarium at Darling Harbour took over the lease - for only a \$1.6 million payment. The aquarium was rebranded to its present name in 2012.

While some of the displays have changed over time (top tank from seal shows to reptiles around 2000 and from reptiles to penguins around 2012) the current form of the facility is still the 1988 opened building. So for the purposes of considering the building's age and design standards, it is basically a 30 year old structure.



The amazing view from inside the Manly aquarium tunnel walk tank circa 2005. The original 1963 tank was considered state of the art when it opened but subsequent development of curved clear acrylic panels rendered it obsolete, and in 1987-8 the Manly aquarium was rebuilt to the latest design standards. (Manly Sea Life Sanctuary)

To gain more understanding of the issues I met with the Manly Oceanarium's Operations Manager, Ms. Ashley Hayes. Ms Hayes firstly advised the site is currently leased from Roads and Maritime Services (RMS) and the existing lease is due to expire in early 2018.

As part of considering their options for say a further 10 or 20 year lease, Merlin Entertainment (who have controlled the business since 2012) did an assessment of the existing building and future use, including impacts on their creatures and people. The conclusion in their view was that while the building was currently considered acceptable, the building would need to be upgraded from both animal husbandry aspects and visitor access within the term of a new 10-20 year lease. (e.g. the building has no lifts for disabled access.)

Other than a significant financial cost, this would also obviously have a major impact on operations and the creatures. Ms Hayes also inferred the present business

operator took a risk adverse position, noting that if there was even a 2 percent chance the Manly facility would not be viable in 10 years they would exit.

When I asked about some obvious currently visible maintenance issues with the exterior of the building (such as ceilings being propped up), Ms Hayes expressed the view the building was sound but was just not viable as an aquarium. When I then asked if the facility was currently financially viable, she expressed the view they had enough visitors and it worked well operationally. However after considering all the issues Merlin had made a decision to exit the operation at the end of the present lease term. She also outlined that Council had been approached about their decision before the public announcement, but that no response had been received. (Obviously an amalgamation issue - Manly Council would have responded.)

The future of the building has now been placed in the hands of the RMS, who were planning to call for expressions of interest on future re-use of the building. Merlin would then work with RMS to close the existing Sea Life facility depending on any proposed future use.

Ms Hayes raised the possibility from public feedback that the building could be used as a community environmental educational facility, or a conservation facility, or a resource centre for schools. Ms Hayes also noted that Merlin would continue to support their existing environmental activities in the Manly community, such as *So Manly* and their support of the community garden project, beach cleans and animal rescues will continue - just from Darling Harbour.

While noting and appreciating Ms Hayes information, I think the view could be taken from the state of the building and the current displays, that the current operator's gross income from aquarium entries and dives is probably only just covering existing staffing and essential operation costs. It is clear they are struggling with external maintenance but whether this is due to management or financial reasons is unknown.

Another obvious issue at work is the change in attitude to business risk between the 1980s and the 2010s. In the 1980s speculative risk taking was common (e.g. \$12 million to build a new aquarium in Manly just based on estimated attendance) whereas now business wants a guaranteed return (reportedly a 2% risk of unviability of an existing operation is enough to withdraw).

I then spoke to the RMS manager working on the matter, Mr Joseph Pascuzzo. He is a local from Seaforth and he indicated that RMS anticipates doing a building survey, then calling expressions of interest between July and September 2017. He noted there was no option (extension) remaining on the existing lease and that alternative uses of the site were currently limited by the E2 (Environmental) zoning and the purpose built design of the existing structure.

He outlined that if no other aquarium operator, nor other suitable use could be found, the lease had make good provisions which could see complete demolition of the existing building. I suggested that some discussions with



Manly Underwater World under construction in late 1987. This photo particularly shows the sheer scale of the aquarium structure - note the new tunnel walk compared to the original tank size. (image Manly Sea Life Sanctuary)

the community may be useful and he was sympathetic to this. He noted they had not yet approached the Northern Beaches Council for discussions on the matter.

In conclusion, the future of our Manly aquarium is still work in progress. Personally, I think we need to collectively make the effort to find a new aquarium operator who can make the Manly Oceanarium a real success. Given there are around 6 million ferry trips per year only 200 metres from this aquarium, it should also be possible to make this a financially viable operation - if it is made interesting enough to really attract the general public. If we fail to do this and the facility is lost, both residents and visitors will lose an entertaining and educational attraction that has been part of Manly's history for 54 years.

2017-18 Council Budget Report

At the second last LRC (ex-councillor) meeting on the 17th May we received a report on next year's budget. Firstly the rates are set by IPART and in Manly the rates increase cap for next year is to be 1.5%. (The rates are to remain on the existing pre-amalgamation Council differentials for a further 3 years after the current year.)

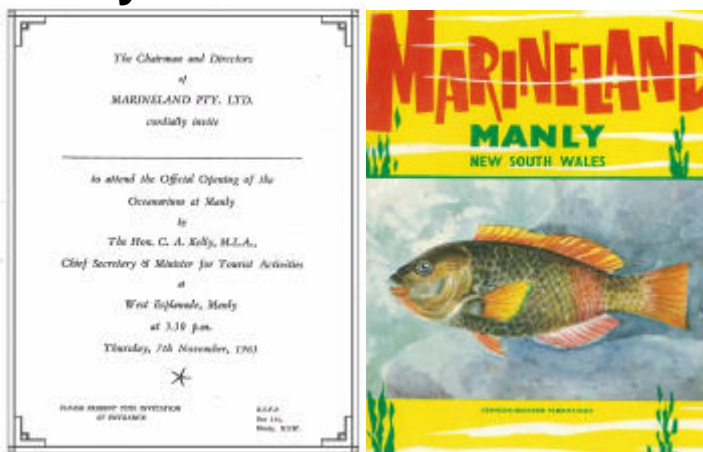
Councils were charged with collecting the (now deferred) new *Fire and Emergency Services Levy* for the State government, but were to have their costs of collecting this reimbursed. This has required a land revaluation across the Northern Beaches, which may produce winners and losers as regards rate changes, depending on how individual unimproved property values are revised in relation to the former Council averages. It has been two years since Manly was re-valued and the average increase over the period has been 30%. (For comparison the average increases in Warringah and Pittwater were 10% and 7% respectively).

In Manly the 10 year infrastructure supplementary rate of 2.2% for all ratepayers has been removed, so with the 1.5% annual increase there will be a net reduction of rates of 0.7% this year. As regards income, rates are currently 44% of Council's income, Council's domestic waste charges are 15% (limited to cover actual costs), user fees and charges are another 22%, other revenues are 6% and grants and contributions are 10% - so Council's income is quite diversified. Northern Beaches is currently the 4th largest Council in NSW.

As regards expenditure, employee benefits and on-costs (for 1800 employees) are 41%, materials and contracts are 35%, other expenses 13%, and depreciation 10%. Next year a surplus of \$13.7 million is forecast, in a total estimated budget of \$355 million. After extraordinary items are removed, Council is \$10.4 million better off due to the 9.4% rate increases in Warringah applying from next year. Whole of Council amalgamation savings next year are currently estimated at \$5.4 million. (A rather negligible 1.5% !)

However amalgamations savings are expected to increase when the staff employment guarantee period ends in 2021. So far staff losses are saving \$3.3 million, but have cost \$2.8 million in redundancies to realize. Currently it is planned to pay down Council's existing gross borrowing of \$48 million down to \$8 million over 10 years - though the future policy on

Manly Marineland 1963



Above: Official opening invitation from 7th November 1963, *Marineland* Guide Book and two pre-1974 colour postcard views (Nu-color-vue SL128 and unknown).

Below: Early 1980s photo of *Marineland* together with post-1982 Manly Wharf (note hydraulic ramps visible). (Images Sylvia Adam and Sea Life Sanctuary Collections)



borrowing is to be placed before the elected Council. Capital expenditure (capex) over the next 4 years is projected to be \$324 million.

Next financial year (17-18) Council was planning to spend \$114.1 million on capital works. Relevant capital work projects for the *Fairy Bower Precinct* include \$3 million for seawall works at Fairy Bower over the next 2 years. (\$0.5M next year and \$2.5M the year after). As a point of clarification, this is for the seawall not the paving (remember the previously proposed Marine Parade walkway upgrade project? - which has now disappeared).

\$1.5 million was allocated to the *Manly2015* laneways projects (Whistler Street and Central Avenue as outlined in last month's FB newsletter).

Fairy Bower Amenities

It was now planned to start the Marine Parade amenities block reconstruction in June. The project was most recently delayed by a need for a development application to be lodged, as part of the block is to be sited on land owned by the Catholic Church. There is a proposal for a boardwalk at the Little Manly Reserve which will be put to the community for consideration.

Other interesting items were: The allocation of \$2 million to "car parking infrastructure" including standardizing parking meters across the whole Council area. Also 26km of road resheeting is planned across the northern beaches next year. A priority program for repairs with prediction modelling was reported to be in place to assess "need".

This year it was originally planned to spend \$152.4 million on capital works, but this has now fallen to \$105 million, due to project deletions (Manly Oval car park) and project



Last Thursday night was the **opening of the latest Manly Art Gallery exhibition - Instrumental** - a photographic exhibition of famous musician's instruments by Chuck Bradley. The guest speaker was Damian Lovelock, and the night was made very special with surprise guest performers Reg Mombassa, Joe Glover, Dom Turner, Rick Grossman and Buzz Bidstrup (who stepped aside so photographer Chuck Bradley could have his turn on the drums). *If you want to be part of the Gallery and receive invites to free openings, join the Manly Art Gallery and Museum Society* - browse to <http://www.manly.nsw.gov.au/attractions/gallery/manly-art-gallery-society/> As others have said, membership has its benefits ! (Image Emma Elstub)

deferrals (like the Fairy Bower pool).

So want to meet new people and get involved in community matters? Come and join us 7th June 7:00pm at the ICMS (St Patricks College).

Hugh Burns
0435 407 257
hughburns@y7mail.com

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