

PUBLIC HOUSING: Demolition by neglect?

Over 600 public housing households in Millers Point and the Rocks face an uncertain future, as the state government considers the future of public housing in the area.

Tenants have condemned the uncertainty, and those who favour breaking up their 200 year old community in favour of wealthy vested interests. Many say they are prepared to fight to keep their homes and their community.

Housing NSW says that if the public housing in the area is sold off, the money will be used to purchase more housing elsewhere. Tenants say the government's deliberations take no account of their unique and long standing community.

Millers Point has been a working class community in Sydney since soon after white settlement. For decades the area has held public and low cost housing, owned over the years by Housing NSW, the Maritime Services Board and private landlords operating out of the MSB premises.

The history of Millers Point and the Rocks parallels that of Sydney. For most of its history, the area was a slum. It was the home of the notorious razor gangs until the late 19th century. Bubonic plague broke out there at the turn of the 20th century, and many buildings were demolished. More were knocked down to accommodate the Harbour Bridge. In the 1970s the Askin government tried to demolish all housing in the area, only to be stopped by a determined community and green bans imposed by the Builders Labourers Federation.

Now, spurred on by the Barangaroo development and the prospect of James Packer's casino development, wealthy interests are eying off the area.

Sixty concerned tenants attended a public meeting in Millers Point, called by independent MP for Sydney, Alex Greenwich, and attended by representatives of Housing NSW and the Barangaroo developers.

Residents at the meeting spoke against Housing NSW's "community demolition" by neglect. Tenants spoke of how they had reported repairs issues to Housing NSW, only to be told there was no money and the repairs would not be done. In many cases, tenants reported, Housing NSW offered to transfer affected tenants out of the area.

According to residents, Housing NSW has refurbished buildings once public tenants have been moved out. Tenants at the meeting said that refurbished buildings have been left vacant, vandalised, refurbished again, and vandalised again.

Although there are vacant Housing NSW properties on High Street, Millers Point, Housing NSW is not putting new tenants into them.

James Packer has expressed an interest in using this area as a part of his casino plans.

In November 2012, Alex Greenwich MP said of the area: "Alarming, it seems that the current Government intends to sell occupied homes and move tenants, and many have been in residence for years – some for five generations. Selling homes and removing low income tenants will have a major impact on this community... Selling high value inner city properties is like selling the family silver; it will also cleanse the area of poorer people... at the same time as millionaires get the rules changed to suit them."