

# *Camden Residents' Action Group*

*Incorporated*

*Camden – Still a Country Town*

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## **Media Release**

**9 March 2019**

### **DEVELOPMENT of ST. JOHN'S PRECINCT CAMDEN: A TURNING POINT FOR HERITAGE?**

**The protection of Camden's St John's Anglican Church Precinct is a watershed in the fight to stop inappropriate over-development of this most historic town, the Macarthur region and elsewhere. If we cannot prevent the development of this iconic Precinct, nothing is safe.**

Historic St. John's Anglican Church Precinct in Camden is at the literal and actual heart of this uniquely historic area. In founding Camden township the Macarthur family, on behalf of the community, gifted land and most of the funds for the establishment of the Anglican Church through statutory trusts with specific conditions.

It is very clear that the majority of the general community of this town is very disappointed by the news that St John's Camden has granted an option to Moran Australia (Camden) Pty Ltd to purchase most of this State Heritage Register Listed Precinct. The reported intention of Moran Australia (Camden) is to construct a 100-bed aged care facility between the Church building and its Rectory.

To reiterate, the land was donated by the Macarthur Family to the people of Camden and is held by Charitable Trusts for the benefit of all the residents of Camden. The Church voluntarily entered into legally binding agreements with the Macarthur Family to place the land into Trusts and hold the land for the benefit of the community 'for ever'.

We have questioned the church on their legal authority to violate the trusts. We have correspondence from the Sydney head office of the Church citing a 100-year-old piece of legislation called The Anglican Church of Australia Trust Property Act 1917 as authority for the sale. Reportedly, this Act confers powers on the Church to alter trusts, perhaps beyond those of the courts. In the twenty-first century, the existence of legislation delegating legal authority to a religious organisation is abhorrent. Many wealthy and less well-off citizens have gifted and entrusted property to the Church, but the Church's commitment to honour the donors' trust and intentions seems unreliable at best. **We call upon all candidates for and members of the NSW Parliament to commit to repealing this and similar Acts.**

Local Council zoning of the Precinct prohibits the construction of an aged care facility, and the NSW Department of Planning has suspended the operation of SEPP (State Environmental Planning Policy)

Housing for Seniors or People with a Disability 2004 in heritage conservation areas in the Greater Sydney Region, thereby strengthening this prohibition. **We call upon the local authorities to rigorously enforce the existing planning constraints. We call upon all the candidates for and members of the NSW Parliament to commit to permanently suspend the operation of all SEPP's in heritage conservation areas and for items listed on the State Heritage Register.**

We have examined the statements and the publicly available documents associated with the sale. There are no publicly available documents giving the local church the authority to use sale proceeds to construct (next to St John's Church itself) a new worship centre, as is its stated intention. Further, church policy documents state the sale of land for the construction of buildings is against church policy<sup>1</sup>. We know the corporate church does not regard Camden as a major focus for development. We fear the sale is an attempt by the Sydney city-based corporate church to redistribute the assets of our local church. We fear the story is like the nearby Forrest Crescent land sale (1968) which saw St John's sell off around 32 acres attached to the Precinct, with the bulk of the proceeds leaving the Parish. The church accounts are exempt from the Australian Accounting Standards, so it is difficult to be precise. In the twenty-first century, public organisations with such extensive assets should not enjoy exemptions to transparency and accountability. **We call upon the Federal Government to make whatever changes are necessary to ensure adherence to the current Australian Accounting Standards by all religious organisations.**

Since the first announcement of the sale proposal, we have noticed an unusual style of corporate governance within the local Church and the resultant polarisation of community attitudes. The Church's decision about the proposed sale flies in the face of the wishes of the local community which was excluded from any participation. It also disrespects legislation, based on expert research on behalf of the people of NSW, that the Precinct is of exceptional heritage and cultural significance and is to be conserved. Instead, the Church's decision to proceed is based on the hope that a potential developer can find a way around legislation that reflects the will and social values of the people. **We call upon the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney to audit the apparent Anglo-Catholic leadership of the Parish and the minimisation of the use of established Anglican creeds and liturgy** (perhaps another breach of the trusts associated with the Macarthur gift).

**We call upon the representatives mentioned above to listen to and support the wider community.**

**We call upon community members who value our democracy, including separation of Church and State, to protest about this attempt to bypass local planning and heritage legislation.** Also, a DIY petition kit (including instructions) can be downloaded for the collection of signatures about the preservation of the St John's Anglican Church Precinct <sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> 2.2 Sale of land not to fund depreciating assets 2.2.1 Standing Committee has agreed as a matter of policy that other than in exceptional circumstances land should not be sold in order to finance depreciating assets such as buildings. This policy was made by the Standing Committee on 17 February 2014 under clause 6(5) of the Standing Committee Ordinance 1897. See [link](#)

<sup>2</sup> The link for the kit is [DIY Petition Kit](#) or <https://www.stjohnscamden.info/Resources/DIYPetitionKit.pdf>