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The sharing Sydney Harbour access program: A partnership approach

Authored by:

Felicity Smith

Department of Infrastructure, Planning & Natural Resources

felicity.smith@dipnr.nsw.gov.au

SYDNEY HARBOUR

Sydney Harbour is highly valued by Sydneysiders and visitors. It can be described as one of Australia's greatest assets and the heart of Sydney. In the past few decades the Harbour foreshores have seen many changes including a shift from industrial to residential use. The profile of the Harbour as a place for residence, tourist destination and recreation continues to grow and with it the community desire to maximise public access to its foreshores and waterways.

Sydney Harbour is a commercial working port, a transport route and very much part of the 'connected city'. It is a desirable place to live, a place of natural beauty and a community playground. The governance of Sydney Harbour is complex, with often overlapping jurisdictions and multiple stakeholders. The Harbour comprises 230 km of foreshores and is bordered by 20 local government areas. At least ten State government agencies and two Commonwealth government agencies also own or manage various foreshore lands.

In recognition of the value of our incredible harbour, in February 2003, the Premier announced the availability of \$10 million of State Government funds for capital works grants. Through the Sharing Sydney Harbour Access Program (The Access Program), the State Government is providing \$2 million of grants per annum for the next five years, on a dollar-for-dollar basis, to local councils and incorporated clubs / associations for new and enhanced public access projects. Through this partnership approach of matching funds, this will achieve at least \$20 million of access improvements on the ground.

The Access Program aims to increase access to and along the foreshores of Sydney Harbour and its tributaries for people on foot and bicycle and improve access to and from the waterways for recreational boating. There is also an emphasis on encouraging non-motorised forms of transport.

The Planning Framework - The Access Plan

In response to the competing demands and pressures on Sydney Harbour, in 2000 the State Government released the Sharing Sydney Harbour Regional Action Plan representing a whole-of-government vision for Sydney Harbour. One of the

outcomes of this Action Plan was the joint preparation and exhibition (by DIPNR and the Waterways Authority) of the Integrated Land and Water Access Plan. The Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources and the Waterways Authority have since finalised, renamed and released the Sharing Sydney Harbour Access Plan (The Access Plan) that provides the framework for developing and implementing access improvement projects throughout the Sydney Harbour Catchment. The Access Program assists with the implementation of the Access Plan.

For the first time an integrated approach has been taken in the planning for both land and water access facilities in the Access Plan. A catchment-wide network of walking and bicycle access ways will link metropolitan parklands with urban waterfronts and water access points. Improved boating facilities will provide better public access for recreational craft such as dinghies, canoes, sailing and motor boats. The proposals contained in the Access Plan have been developed in consultation with local councils and members of a variety of recreational user groups

Major outcomes if all potential projects envisaged under the Access Plan are implemented include:

Land-based access improvements

- 33 kilometres of new walking tracks and on-and off-road cycleways along the foreshores and connections to the foreshores
- Public access increased from approximately 59 percent to 73 percent of the total 230 kilometres of foreshore
- Improved intertidal (beaches, rock platforms and mudflats) access to 32 kilometres of foreshore where the Waterways Authority will work to remove structures that impede such access
- Public domain improvements at 15 locations

Water-based access improvements

- New or improved small boat access facilities at 16 sites
- New or improved pick-up and set down wharves and jetties at 28 locations
- Improvements to 7 boat ramps
- Two new boat ramps

Typical Projects

Typical projects identified in the Access Plan tend to be within 2.5kms of the harbour foreshore but may go beyond, to the catchment boundary. They include:

- Walking tracks
- On-road and Off-road cycleways
- Public domain improvements eg better accessways, promenades, shelters, seating, lighting, signage, planting, interpretive facilities, dry-boat and cycle storage.
- Wharves and pontoons
- “Soft access” for landing small boats including seawall steps and beaches

Strategic Projects

Whilst priority is given to allocating grants to Councils, registered clubs and organisations, “strategic projects” may also be eligible. Strategic projects involve one or more of the following;

- State government land and infrastructure and/or
- projects that require “seed” funds for their commencement and to attract funds from other sources and/or
- missing links that cross jurisdictional boundaries or funding responsibilities and the construction of which will be of immediate benefit to the community and/or
- Opportunities for Councils to undertake future access improvement projects

Program Partnerships

Three State agencies (the Waterways Authority, Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority and the Department of Infrastructure, Planning and Natural Resources (DIPNR)) have come together to pool resources and accomplish this ambitious program in partnership. Funds are allocated from the Waterways Authority through the Waterways Asset Development and Management Program, DIPNR through the Sydney Region Development Fund and the Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority.

In addition, a Steering Committee has been established to coordinate the program’s activities, set strategic priorities and directions for the program, engender partnerships and set the general criteria for grants assessment. The Steering Committee comprises representatives of Commonwealth, State and Local Government agencies actively participating in the Access Program. The Steering

Committee gives information to the Sydney Harbour Executive (24 State and Commonwealth agencies), Sydney Harbour Councils (Mayors), Sydney Harbour Councils Executive (General Managers and Senior Planners) and the Maritime Forum.

One of the key objectives of the Access Program is to maximise additional funding opportunities by building effective partnerships with other agencies and the development industry. Ultimately, this will increase positive outcomes on the ground. Additional funds are likely to be provided in the form of direct improvement actions by major public landowners eg Sydney Harbour Federation Trust (SHFT), Sydney Olympic Park Authority (SOPA) and National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) on their lands.

The Access Program also builds on the success of the Parramatta River Foreshores Improvement Program (PRFIP), which produced significant award winning access and recreation improvements to foreshores of the Parramatta River. This was a State Government initiative aimed at improving the appearance and access to the foreshores of Parramatta River in the lead-up to the Sydney Olympics. The Program, conceived and managed by the former Department of Urban Affairs and Planning, accomplished several impressive and relatively complex projects, such as the upgrade of a 7 km long walking and cycling circuit around Iron Cove (The Bay Run). This is a great example of the type of project that benefits the local and wider community through providing access to the foreshores and recreational activities that promote a healthy life style.

This earlier program mainly provided a model for what can be achieved through coordinated planning and management. An independent evaluation of PRFIP recommended that the government continue to have a role in urban foreshore improvements and this should be based on the partnership approach.

The Access Plan represents a whole of Government vision for improving access to Sydney Harbour and its tributaries first envisaged in the “Sharing Sydney Harbour” – Regional Action Plan. With Councils matching funds and collaborating with the State Government, the Access Program also allows Councils and applicants to contribute

strategically to this regional and whole of government vision for increasing access to Sydney Harbour and its tributaries.

The First Year of the Access Program

There has been an overwhelming response to the first round of Access Program grants. In early November 2003, 25 capital works projects with grants under the Sharing Sydney Harbour Access Program were announced. There are also five additional grant applications that are still under consideration to receive funding this financial year. Through a partnership between local and State Government the grants will enable the construction of new and improved walking tracks, cycle paths, shared use pathways, bridges, jetties, dinghy storage racks, boat ramps, and the regeneration of bushland in foreshore parks.

The announced projects will deliver on the strategic priorities for the first year of the program. The projects have support from their local communities. There is also a wide geographic spread of projects throughout the Harbour catchment; from Rydalmere in the west to Manly in the east, and from the Lane Cove River to the north to Iron Cove in the south.

CONCLUSION

DIPNR and the Waterways Authority have provided leadership in developing the strategic 'Access Plan' and managing the Access Program's activities. The relationship with our funding partners (Sydney Harbour Foreshore Authority and Waterways Authority), our project partners (Councils, registered clubs etc) and other management agencies is the key to achieving successful outcomes on the ground. These outcomes on the ground will in turn have huge benefits for the residents of greater Sydney and visitors to our magic harbour city.

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▶▶▶ For all enquiries, please contact:-

University of Western Sydney
Urban Frontiers Program
Building 22, Campbelltown Campus
Locked Bag 1797, Penrith South DC NSW 1797

Phone +61 2 4620 3443

Fax +61 2 4620 3447

Email urbanfrontiers@uws.edu.au

Web www.urbanfrontiers.uws.edu.au