

## TOWARDS A STRATEGIC PLAN

### Office towers, crowds, traffic...?

# FIVE BIG IDEAS FOR THE FUTURE CITY CENTRE

On 6 July 2020 the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces, Hon Rob Stokes MP, approved the Lendlease tower to be built above the Victoria Cross Metro station in North Sydney. On 7 July 2020, on behalf of Oxford Investa Property Partners, Bates Smart submitted a development application to demolish the locally-listed MLC Building and replace it with an office tower. On 31 July 2020 the government invited bids from potential development partners to build the western harbour tunnel.

Unless the three projects actively help transform the North Sydney city centre into a place for people, they will only make the city's windy, congested streets and spaces worse. In particular, the 'city shaping' western harbour tunnel affects the two CBDs of the 'Harbour City' very differently: the tunnel is planned as a 'bypass of the Sydney CBD', but it sucks regional traffic into the heart of the North Sydney CBD! This cannot be allowed to happen. **It's time to think about positive, imaginative, holistic alternatives for the city centre.**

The Committee for North Sydney supports the North Sydney Council in planning more improvements to the city centre, and invites all those with an interest in North Sydney to work together to fight for a better future.

This strategic planning overview presents a long-term vision for the city centre, based on five integrated ideas. The five ideas work together, to guide the city through this and subsequent waves of development, towards a transformation from 'an office park with through traffic' to a living 'place for people'. Here are the five ideas.

- 1 Less space for through traffic**
- 2 A great new civic space, now**
- 3 The highway becomes a boulevard**
- 4 The 'CBD' becomes a city centre**
- 5 The tunnel doesn't need Berry St!**

Formed in June 2018, the **Committee for North Sydney** is an independent group of eminent North Sydney people, experts and stakeholders, supported by an independent, member-governed incorporated Association that anyone can join. The Committee exists to facilitate public and expert contributions to the progressive improvement of North Sydney, through policy debate, public conversations and urban planning and design.

# 1 LESS SPACE FOR THROUGH TRAFFIC

## Can through-traffic be discouraged from the North Sydney city centre? Yes!

### Problems and challenges

- As a civic, community and business centre, the city centre has too few public and civic spaces.
- It has too much road space for traffic – more than is needed for a city centre.
- Despite this some streets are seen by Transport for NSW as nothing more than freeway ramps

### Strategies

Within the foreseeable future, traffic will begin to change fundamentally.

Yes, there will be many cars on the road.

Yes, there will also be buses, taxis, deliveries, freight, tradies, contractors, sales people, helpers, travellers and others – all on the road serving the public, or earning a living, or enjoying themselves.

BUT we already know that an ever increasing proportion of the vehicles will be *electric*, and that they will stabilise post-carbon energy systems. *Electric* also means capable of *autonomous* travel: eventually far safer, far more energy efficient, and far more efficient in the use of road space.

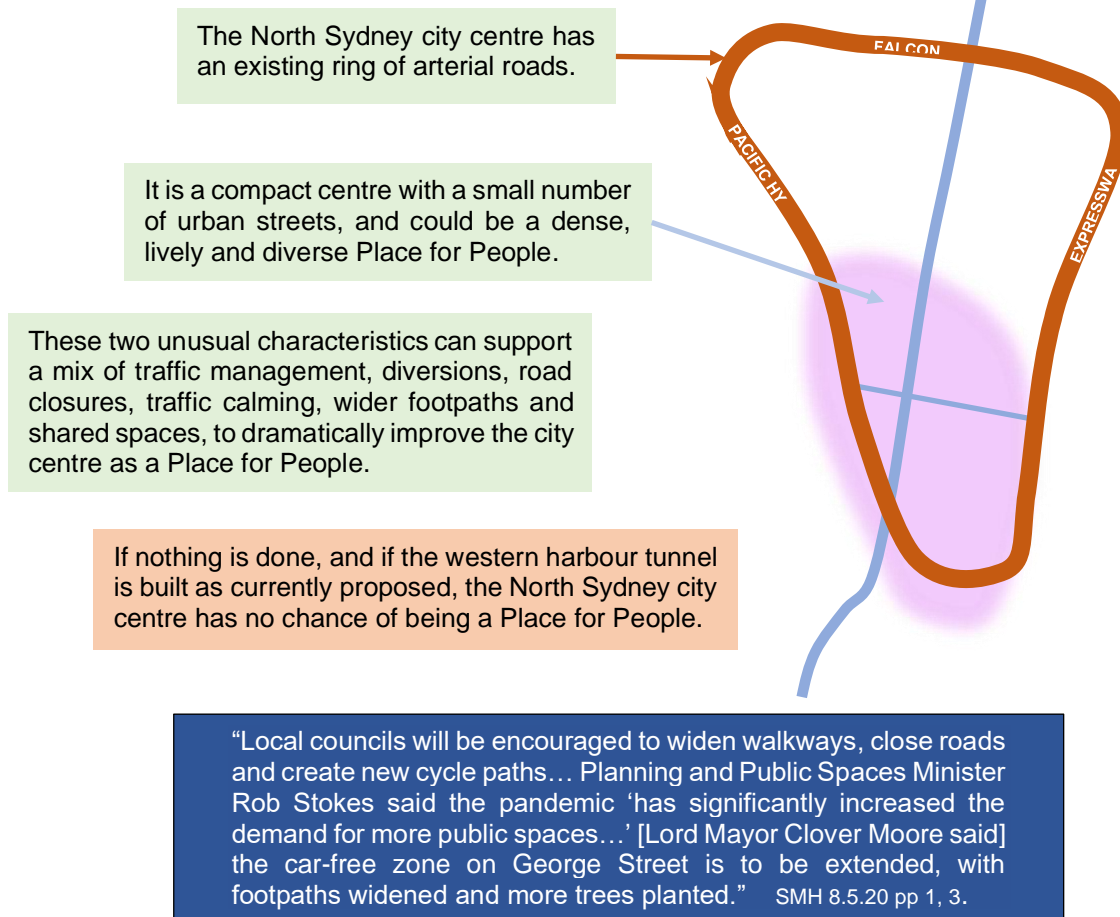
and parts of a convenient, cheap-and-easy transport interchange.

- This situation will become worse when the Metro starts. Worse again if B-line buses terminate in North Sydney. And intolerable if the western harbour tunnel is built and portals remain as currently proposed (see 5, below).

And we know that, as well as returning to public transport, more of us will *use* or *share* autonomous vehicles for our journeys, rather than *own* them.

So, in time, more trips but fewer vehicles, with each vehicle occupying far less road space. Our urban planning should anticipate these benefits NOW.

This White Paper is based on decades of research showing that it will be possible to *manage traffic down* while maintaining, even increasing, *mobility*. The community will value public transport, public spaces and better connections far more than kerbside parking, kerbside deliveries and 'access all areas' – see the blue box below.



**North Sydney deserves no less!**

## 2 A GREAT NEW CIVIC SPACE, NOW

### Keep parking meters in Miller Street – or create a city plaza?

#### Problems and challenges

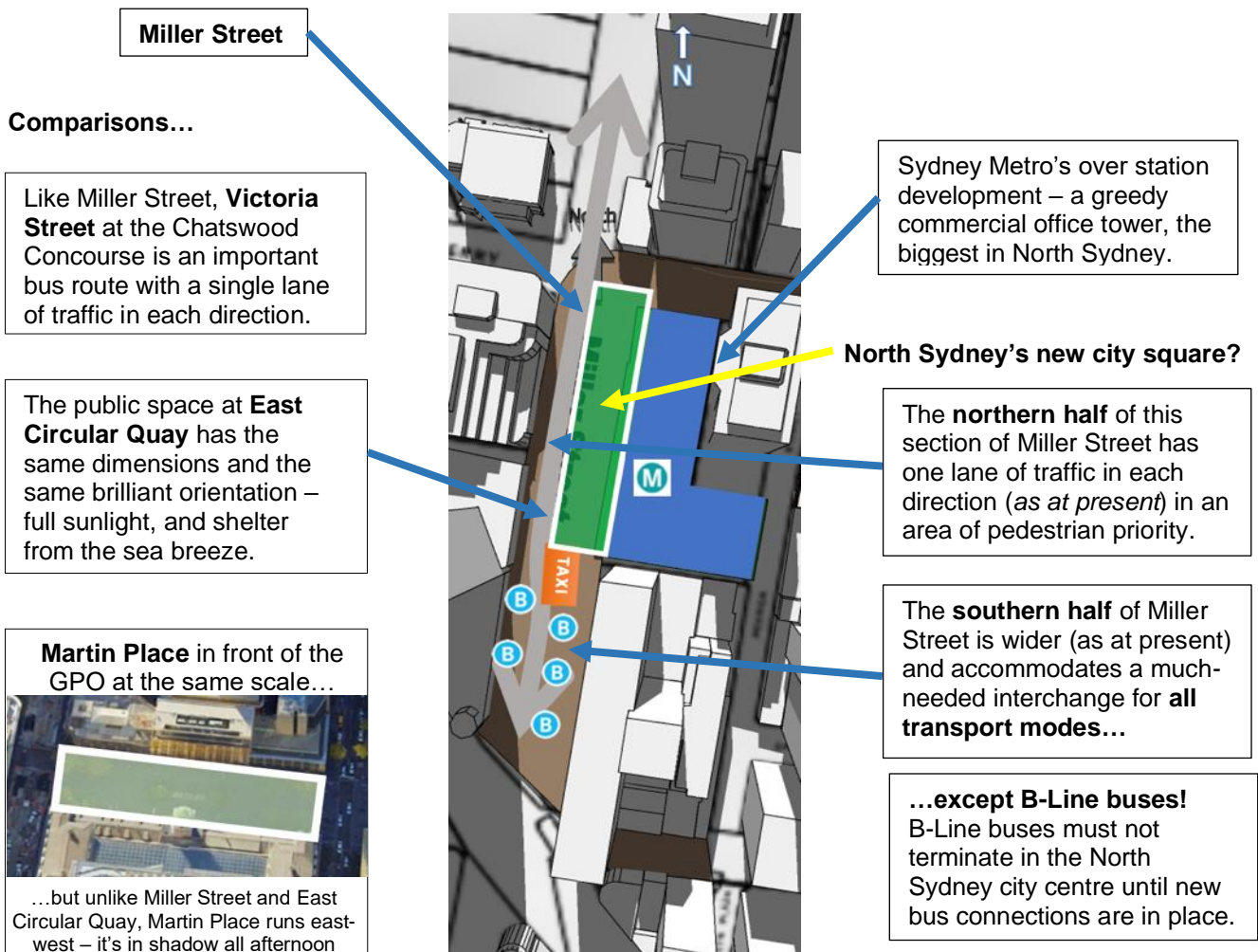
- The Victoria Cross metro station comes with an actual loss of public benefit.
- Sydney Metro extracts value from a tall dense commercial office occupying all of the site it compulsorily acquired, with none of the benefits of Tower Square, which it demolished.

#### There is a win-win solution

- Miller Street at Berry Street, in front of the new metro station, is the best site for a city plaza.
- It's not only the sunniest spot in the city centre, it's also sheltered from cold winds.
- This is the orientation – optimising sun and shelter – of popular East Circular Quay.
- North Sydney Council has plans for more civic space and proposes to close Miller Street.
- There would still be traffic – to office car parks and loading docks – but NO buses or taxis: they would be diverted to the Pacific Highway.
- **A better option:** remove kerbside parking bays, bus bays and loading bays in front of the metro, making space for two lanes of slow traffic (see below) and a new plaza of 2,500 square metres.

- Lendlease goes even further, planning to occupy and privatise the public space in front of the building, to extract more rent from tenants.
- What a terrible result from a government project! 7000 office workers onsite, projections of 42,000 metro passengers daily – yet a net loss in the quantity and quality of public space!

- **There are multiple public benefits.** The city's sunniest area becomes a plaza *on the scale of Martin Place*, right at the new metro station, and at just the place for a new city hall (see 4)...
- ...Access is maintained for buses, taxis and essential city-centre traffic; public transport is prioritised not downgraded; the city centre gets a plaza and a public transport interchange (in the shaded southern part of the street).
- A closed Miller Street doesn't deliver these benefits. It is unlikely to be approved by the state (or the community); it is too big; it is very expensive; it will be filled up with street furniture.
- The win-win solution (see below) can be seen as a partial closure, a trial, or even Stage 1. **Best of all it can happen now – all it takes is the removal of parking bays.**



# 3 THE HIGHWAY BECOMES A BOULEVARD

## Will Pacific Highway be a regional arterial or a great urban street?

### Problems and challenges

- As a regional connector, the Pacific Highway in the centre of North Sydney is over-scaled and unattractive. **It is a much bigger pedestrian barrier than it needs to be.**
- The intersection with Miller Street (Victoria Cross) is characterised by big, traffic-filled

spaces, long waits for pedestrians crowded onto inadequate spaces, and constant conflicts between pedestrians and traffic.

- It's a poor pedestrian environment: blank buildings, few active frontages, windswept spaces, misshapen trees, mostly hard surfaces.

### Strategies

There are grand urban streets in city centres everywhere, showing how it can be done well. They have wide footpaths, shade and shelter, high quality finishes, calmed traffic – most non-essential and through-traffic elects to use alternative routes.

The Committee for North Sydney is calling for a **plan of action for the Pacific Highway**, to be implemented over time in concert with other strategic improvements to the city centre.

The Committee is not proposing a ready-made solution. To explore options, and to engage the public, a **design competition** would allow the best strategies to emerge. Questions would include:

- Can kerbside parking be removed (see 1) and footpaths be doubled in width? Can deliveries be limited to times of low pedestrian activity? Can full-size trees be grown in a median strip?
- Can awnings be gradually installed with seating and pedestrian-friendly lighting and signs? Can active frontages be encouraged? Can stalls, pop-up markets and other local activities be encouraged to use the new spaces?
- Can Victoria Cross be humanised, with only two crossing lanes each way, no slip lanes, extensive pedestrian spaces with spreading trees, and pedestrian-friendly traffic lights?

This kilometre length of the Pacific Highway helps to define North Sydney – **negatively!**

It's now a heavy route for through traffic with excess capacity and serious adverse impacts.

There are many opportunities to reduce road space and increase the quantity and quality of pedestrian space.

This city section of Pacific Highway can be unified, using well planned and consistent trees and flowers, high quality surfaces, traffic calming, and reduced conflicts and turning.

The transformation is best if it takes time. Begin with a design competition to get everyone thinking about the possibilities, then organically evolve one kilometre of highway into one of Sydney's best urban streets.

Over time, life will return to the street, with new active frontages and civic functions – this grand urban street can become an iconic Place for People.



At the Miller Street intersection (Victoria Cross) 50% of the bitumen can become high quality pedestrian spaces and planting.

## 4 THE 'CBD' BECOMES A REAL CITY CENTRE

Can we have a town hall, galleries, theatres, cinemas, and free civic spaces?

### Problems and challenges

- The NSW Government has decided that the city centres of Sydney and North Sydney form a single city centre, called the '**Harbour City**' by the Greater Sydney Commission.
- In reality, the two city centres are integrated and complementary to some degree, but in many respects they are opposites.
- Planners and the property industry see North Sydney as the private-office annex of Sydney.
- The transport agencies see the city centre as a node in the regional transport systems, and its central streets as on-ramps and off-ramps to expressways.
- Just as bad: the streets of the city centre may become a quick and cheap interchange for regional and B Line buses, with all passengers transferring to rail and metro services.

### Opportunities

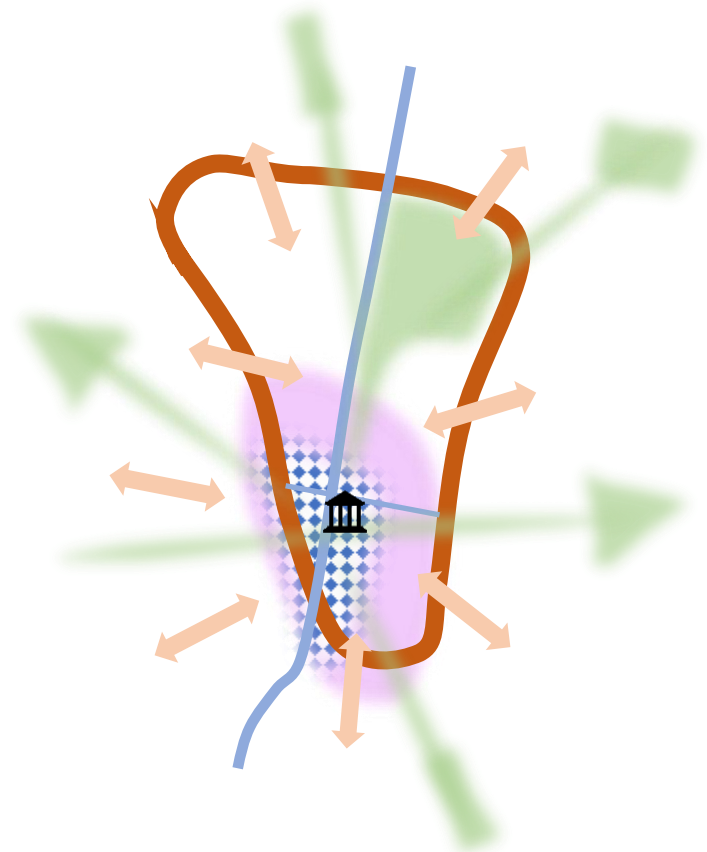
- Let's recognise the city centre's deficiencies – scale, slope, aspect, road patterns... – and be smarter in making more of its many under-developed assets (for instance see **3**, above).
- The city centre can and should be the northern quarter of the **Harbour City** with many of the same civic and cultural qualities as the larger centre on the other side of the bridge.
- This image prioritises connections to the many immediate neighbourhoods; pathways and bike paths to the local villages; and green corridors for nature and sustainable environments.
- The image highlights the absence of public spaces and civic functions – an absence that can be addressed through sustained action by governments and the community.

### Strategies

Many local governments with city centres much smaller than North Sydney's have pursued successful strategies to enrich their cities with civic, government, cultural, community and other civil-society functions and activities – often by leveraging commercial urban development through a variety of regulations, incentives and partnerships.

Until recently, North Sydney Council secured public benefits in this way but the recent wave of development in North Sydney seems to have left public life in the city diminished.

The immediate and best opportunity to '*rejuvenate*' the city centre (Lendlease's term) will come from negotiations with the Planning department, Transport for NSW, Sydney Metro and Lendlease for a well-designed plaza in front of the metro station, and a significant public presence **within** the Lendlease tower (see **2** above).



*To give one example: a good, extensive, double-height multipurpose space* in the Lendlease tower, if well designed and equipped, would enable the AGNSW, the MCA, the museums, regional galleries, performing arts companies, educational and other institutions, local schools and ad hoc groups to mount shows in the city and to include North Sydney in tours.

Such a 'city hall' – perfectly located at the new city plaza and the metro – has the potential to change perceptions of the city centre and to trigger widespread improvements and connections.

# 5 IF THE WHT IS BUILT, IT MUST HAVE ONE LESS ON-RAMP!

**Access to the western harbour tunnel can and must be from regional arterials, not Miller and Berry Streets**

## Problems and challenges

- The **western harbour tunnel (WHT)** connects the major roads of Sydney's *inner west* to the major roads of the *northside*, and possibly to the *peninsula* if the beaches link is built.
- The western harbour tunnel may or may not be a good idea for traffic to the northside and the peninsula (see 1 above) but one thing is clear:
- **It is not needed** to connect the **North Sydney city centre** to the inner west.
- For traffic and freight using the western harbour tunnel, the **North Sydney city centre** is **not** a significant origin or destination.
- Despite this fact, regional northside traffic and freight is intended to access the tunnel via Miller Street and Berry Street – urban streets in the heart of the city centre!
- Berry Street is already a hostile, one-way, congested on-ramp. Directing regional WHT traffic through the city centre to Berry Street ends any chance of the city centre as a place for people.
- The Committee for North Sydney strongly supports the North Sydney Council's policy to return Berry Street to its proper role as a pedestrian-friendly, city-centre street.

## Strategy

- **There is one essential strategy: regional access to the western harbour tunnel must be from regional arterials, and not from urban streets in the city centre.**
- Portals on regional arterials for access and egress are already planned. **The Berry Street on-ramp can be and must be scrapped.**

Regional traffic travelling to the inner west will have access to the western harbour tunnel from arterials to the north of the North Sydney city centre – access via Miller Street and Berry Street is not essential and not acceptable.

