

Why not allow high-rise housing development in the parklands on the northern side of Greenhill Rd? – Rex Jory



The banks of the River Torrens are part of Colonel Light's vision for the Adelaide Parklands.

THE state government is misreading public opinion by trying to amend planning laws to allow development in the Adelaide Parklands.

Turning over areas of open space in the parklands to private developers is reckless and irresponsible, and politically, morally and historically wrong. It verges on urban vandalism.

With an election in March, the government is spoiling for a fight it doesn't need and can't win. There are precious few votes to be gained in rezoning areas of the parklands and potentially tens of thousands that could be lost.

But this is not all about politics.

It is about trust. The government is the custodian of the parklands, not their real estate agent.

The parklands are not a common conversation in the front bar or at a Sunday barbecue.

But that doesn't mean South Australians – and particularly people living in Adelaide – aren't fiercely proud and protective of the parks surrounding the city and North Adelaide. The parklands are the city's backyard and front garden. They belong to the people. They are not the plaything of the state government or the Adelaide City Council.

Few cities in the world have such magnificent and diverse parks, gardens and playing fields so close to the most densely populated retail, commercial and residential areas.

Yet, since Colonel William Light's original design of Adelaide in 1837, they have been incrementally ransacked by governments. Originally the parklands covered 930ha (2300 acres). Straight away the West Terrace Cemetery snared 13ha. And since then, like mice at a cheese round, successive governments have gnawed away at the green belt.

Of the original 930ha of open parks about 230ha have been gobbled up for alternate uses.

Think of the Botanic Gardens, the Adelaide University, the North Tce cultural strip, Government House, Parliament House, Adelaide railway station, Adelaide High School, the police barracks, the Torrens Parade Ground, the Festival centre, Adelaide Oval and Memorial Drive.

And that's by no means the complete list.

Individually, these facilities can justify their place in the parklands and are valuable elements of Adelaide's history and infrastructure.

Others, like the proposed multistorey building on the festival centre concourse, clearly offend the vision Colonel Light had for a city set in a park.

Cafes and restaurants on Pinky Flat and other areas of the northern River Torrens frontage might sound attractive but would vandalise delicious sections of public open space. We can't replicate Melbourne's Southbank precinct and we don't need to try.

Now there are vague plans for multistorey residential towers near the proposed sporting complex on Port Rd and 15-storey commercial buildings near the planned Women's and Children's Hospital.

Areas of the historic police barracks on Port Rd are being eyed off for parking in the new hospital precinct. Enough is enough. This land is all part of the people's parklands.

If we are going to allow development of this magnitude, then the precedent is being established to turn even more of the parklands over to private developers.

Why not, for example, allow high-rise housing development in the parklands on the northern side of Greenhill Rd or along the eastern side of East Tce? What's good enough for Port Rd should be good enough for East Tce. And think of the revenue governments could reap for this prize real estate.

This might sound fanciful.

But if 230ha of the parklands can be sliced away for various developments, what harm can a few more hectares do? In 2008, federal environment minister Peter Garrett put the parklands on the Australian National Heritage List as an "enduring treasure for the people of South Australia and the nation as a whole".

There will be nothing enduring about the existing parklands if successive governments continue to eat away at what is left of this community treasure.

The government should rescind its plans to rezone areas of the parklands and put the genie back in the bottle.

It is a muddle-headed idea that would destroy a unique element of Adelaide's heritage.