

Parramatta Riverside Theatres Redevelopment

Submission by the Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue

April 2025

About the Dialogue

The Western Sydney Leadership Dialogue (the Dialogue) welcomes the opportunity to comment on City of Parramatta's proposal currently on exhibition for the redevelopment of the Riverside Theatres.

The Dialogue is fiercely committed to enhancing the future of the Greater Western Sydney (GWS) region and has cultivated an extensive network of Partners from within the community, private, and public sectors who share this goal. The GWS region is home to over half of Greater Sydney's population and functions as the third largest economy in Australia, and the infrastructure, or often the lack thereof, that makes up the region has direct implications for these Partners.

Since its inception, the Dialogue has been advocating for sensible, equitable, and transformative infrastructure for the residents of GWS. The Dialogue promotes sustainable development, infrastructure investment, and policy innovation to enhance the quality of life for GWS's residents. Through research, events, and strategic partnerships, it aims to shape a prosperous future for the region.

Overview Statement

The Dialogue supports the proposal submitted by City of Parramatta for the redevelopment of the Riverside Theatres to be considered under the State Significant Development pathway.

The Dialogue has been a vocal supporter of this project since its inception and will continue to advocate for funding contributions and government support to ensure that this re-imagined critical cultural facility for Western Sydney is fully realised.

The redevelopment will deliver a facility which will stand as a core element within the suite of transformative projects for Parramatta, the benefits of which will be felt across the region by current and future generations. The expansion of cultural life is no less transformative, especially in the context of a developing successful 24-hour economy precincts.

This started with the development of Parramatta Square with its vibrant integration of civic, dining and commercial spaces, the opening of the Light Rail at the end of 2024, and continues with the Parramatta Powerhouse due to open in 2026, and the Metro connection from central Sydney in 2032. Spun together, these elements will form the critical fabric that will support the future population, social and economic growth of Parramatta and Western Sydney.

Elements and Design

The revitalisation of this facility that staged its first productions and welcomed its first audiences in 1988 significantly increases its ability to deliver performances to a significant expanded audience, currently seeing around 180,000 visitors each year with an anticipated shift to 400,000 visitors per annum in the future.

This is the result of new, expanded and refurbished facilities, specifically:

- A new 1,500 Broadway-style lyric style theatre
- Refurbishment of the 761 Riverside Playhouse
- A new 324 new black-box drama theatre
- A new 100 seat state-of-the-art digital studio and cinema.

The addition of this new 1,500 lyric style theatre will fundamentally alter the dynamics of Parramatta, opening Western Sydney up to productions previously only able to be staged in central Sydney.

The retention and upgrading of the Riverside Playhouse Theatre is a sensible approach. Its integration into the wider design is a well-considered adaptation of space that can be enhanced with targeted upgrades, including around accessibility with enhanced access to upper levels in the future state.

We also note that there has been explicit consideration in the design which reflect a commitment to sustainability principles, as well as responding to advances in technology and integrating accessibility upgrades to improve physical access for people with varying mobility as well as the addition of listening and vision technologies and sensory-friendly spaces.

Cultural Economy

Currently home to the National Theatre of Parramatta and FORM dance projects, the Riverside Theatres redevelopment will have an important enduring legacy expanding cultural activity, community opportunity and the contribution of arts and cultural activities to the Western Sydney economy.

The capacity to further grow a strong local cohort of cultural workers into the future is a very important factor in support of this redevelopment. It also aligns strongly with Council's ambition for Parramatta to become an epicentre of cultural and creativity & beacon of cultural excellence for generations to come. This ambition highlights the value that the Council expects cultural and arts activity to bring to Parramatta in its emergent phase as a global city.

Parramatta City Council's idea to include the Creators Quarter in its global city vision is one element which has strong connectivity to deriving maximum value from the investment into Riverside Theatres. This proposed offering of fixed-term subsidised accommodation is for intended for artists and creatives. It works to support the integration of, and influence that artists draw from Parramatta, including those elements which exist well beyond key landmarks such as the Riverside Theatres. This is consistent with the Dialogue's recommendation in its submission to the Legislative Assembly Select Committee inquiry into Essential Worker Housing where we called for low-income workers in cultural and creative industries to be included in key worker definitions.

Engagement with public space

Riverside Theatres occupies a prominent location within Parramatta sitting between the Parramatta River and Prince Alfred Park and having a direct association with the historic Lennox Bridge.

We commend Council for its active consideration of developing an enhanced relationship between the Theatre and the riverfront, incorporating space for café to be utilised by visitors to the Theatres as well as walking or cycling along the riverfront which has and will continue to experience an uplift in activation and use. The design's facilitation of the return of street dining on its Church Street frontage is welcomed and consistent with the outdoor eating experiences available along Church Street.

Each of these elements have been considered in the context of the important work undertaken by the NSW Office of the 24-hour Economy Commissioner. Sitting between the Parramatta Powerhouse and CommBank stadium, and amongst Sydney Festival and Parramatta City Council activation sites for outdoor events, Riverside Theatres will become a literal beacon for those exploring the precinct across the day and night.