

I write on behalf of my Husband and I with regards to the proposed Richard Gill School.

We purchased our property, which backs onto the current Council land in September last year and moved in to the property in October. Prior to settlement, we contacted Muswellbrook Shire Council regarding the Council land behind our house to enquire as to any planned works for the land. We were advised by the Council Planning Division that there were no planned works for this land and it was zoned as reserve. Therefore, the Proposal for the new School has come as a complete shock to us, as we would not have purchased this house if we knew we could ultimately end up with a school behind us. We are not happy that we have been lied to by the Council, because I note in media documentation regarding the proposed School that it had received endorsement from the Council dating back to 2018, therefore it was obviously in the works when we made our enquiries. How can the Planning Division of the Council be unaware of proposed works to this scale? When we subsequently called the Council following receiving the initial letterbox drop from Chris English, the Principal, we were told it was a surprise to them and they were completely unaware also. The lines of communication don't appear to be open within the Council or that there are only the "higher powers" who are privy to this information. Given this also meant a relocation for staff at the Council, you would expect they also have a right to know.

It appears that the School has been a secretive project between the Mayor and senior members of the Council, a number of whom appear to have direct links to the School (for instance Kim Williams being Chair of the National Music Academy Ltd, the supposedly "independent Board"). This is evidenced by the fact that the Council has held closed meetings on numerous occasions and kept it incredibly quiet between certain parties, which begs the question as to why? We, as rate and tax payers, have a right to not only have a voice with regards to how our rates/taxes are spent; but to know where our money is going and also be informed of any development works which may impact our property either financially or physically or impact our quality of life. It also begs the question as to the conflict of interest with Kim Williams being a Councillor for Muswellbrook Council and also the Chairman of the Board because the Council have a vested interest in providing the building and land to the School when they are members of the Board. How is this an independent Board?

The quote from the Development Application states "At the time of publishing this advertisement, the Minister for Planning and Public Spaces has not directed that a public hearing should be held". Why is this the case if the whole process is supposedly transparent and supported by the Community? I was advised by Chris English that is a lot of support from the Community, however there have only been minimal applications for students to attend the School? How much money will the rate or tax payers be paying to run the School and pay the staff salaries for a couple of students, not to mention works that will be required to prepare for the School?

The fact that a public hearing is not going to be held further highlights the case for this being decided by the Council, possibly with the backing of the State Government as it is reputed to be a State Government initiative, without any input from the Muswellbrook residents. The SEARs report states that the relevant stakeholders, including residents, will be consulted; however this has not been the case. The residents have not been consulted on the process in any way, we have only been given the opportunity to provide feedback after it appears the decision has been made.

In addition, please explain why signage has been erected and all documentation being produced with regards to the School lists the current Muswellbrook Shire Council building address, however the School is only now in Development Application stage. This appears that the Submission process is a technicality only and the residents objecting to the proposal will not be given an opportunity to formally have their say or potentially prevent the School being constructed. The current school website also states that there is "zero chance" that the School will go ahead.

We find it interesting that the School website has already listed the address for the School when, as yet, it hasn't progressed through the relevant channels for approval. Whilst it may have the support of Muswellbrook Shire Council, this does not mean that the School has been approved. I understand it is a State Government initiative and appears to have gone through some sort of back-door process to not only have the land re-zoned from reserve to residential in order to be able to build the School on the land, but also to attempt to use fast-track legislation to expedite the process.

In addition to the above, we have a number of concerns, which I will outline below:

Zoning as reserve – residents were advised that this land was re-zoned as reserve, after a previously unsuccessful attempt to build residential units, following strong protest against the proposal from residents at a Council meeting. How has this land now been changed to be zoned as residential? I believe that there is a requirement for a certain amount of land to be zoned as reserve, therefore I am concerned as to how this has been changed.

Flora and Fauna - the land has a number of well-established native trees, which are home to a large number of native wildlife. The land is planned to be an oval for the School and therefore the trees will need to be removed. I would like to see the extensive planning permission required by Council for each tree, justifying why the trees should be removed. This would also significantly impact the native wildlife (and potentially also mean that snakes might re-home into neighbouring properties). I note that the environmental impact study only accounts for the immediate area surrounding the current building. This is not sufficient, as the surrounding area of the building is mostly car park and hard surfaces, therefore it does not provide adequate information on the environmental impact because it does not cover the entire land included in the development. It seems like this is a convenient way of getting around an issue which may prove a problem for the proposed development.

Fence line – we, along with the majority of residents who back onto this land, have a caravan and access the land for back access to our property. In addition to having back access to our properties for this reason, a number of the residents backing onto the land and nearby residents use the land as a walking track or to cut through from the main road to nearby houses. This would potentially mean that all residents would need to park their caravans either on the street or on their front lawn, if possible, creating further issues such as obscuring vision for traffic and taking up parking spaces for other residents. We are also extremely unhappy that we will end up with a complete eyesore of a fence where we currently look out over the reserve.

Lighting – we are assuming for security purposes that there will be lighting at night surrounding the boundaries of the school? This would no doubt mean it would illuminate all the residents' bedrooms at night and make it difficult to sleep.

Traffic impact – we're concerned about the impact to the traffic on the main road, in addition to surrounding streets. There is obviously going to be a significant number of cars dropping children off to School and this will have a negative impact on the flow of traffic, potentially causing traffic jams, delays or accidents. We would also assume the speed limit will be reduced to 40km for a school zone, further causing traffic build-up. The Traffic Impact Statement and SEARs Request do not provide accurate information regarding the volume of traffic, also taking into account the reduction to traffic because of COVID-19 (how was the perceived 10% difference calculated?). The Council's figures of traffic coming and going from the site are grossly inflated. We back onto the property and can see the number of vehicles coming and going all day and there is no way that there are vehicles leaving up to 100-200 times per day, nor the volume of traffic prior to peak hour, the majority of vehicles on the premises are during usual business hours. Clearly the figures have been inflated to attempt to show minimal disruption to the residents by stating there will only be approximately 53 cars at most.

Noise - there is going to be significant noise from school children, impacting the residents who back onto the school. This will be further exacerbated by the fact that it will be a music and sporting school, therefore the noise will be even greater. There is contradiction within the documents for the Development Application, with some stating there will be a maximum of 50 students and others stating 165 students. The majority of residents surrounding the school are shift-workers or work from home, therefore this will be a major problem for people trying to sleep or work in a quiet environment during school hours. In addition to the residents who are retired and trying to enjoy a quiet life! As someone who suffers from an aggressive form of Multiple Sclerosis, for health reasons I am required to minimise stress in my life and manage my fatigue levels. This will not be possible with the stress the noise from a school (and potential future building works) will present.

Future building works – there is mention of future building works for the School. We have major concerns around this, as it will pose additional issues with excessive noise and other factors such as dust/pollution to surrounding houses.

Intake up to Year 12 – I note from the proposal we received in our letterbox that it states the School is only for children up to year 6, however the School's website states that there will be future intakes up to Year 12. This means there will be an even greater volume of school children attending the school and the noise will be even greater. The proposal notes that the existing building will be used, however with an intake of students up to Year 12, the existing infrastructure will not accommodate this. It appears this has been conveniently excluded from the original proposal to secure the site in the interim and then propose further building works down the track.

We appreciate what the relevant parties are trying to achieve with the School and wish them well with it, however not in this location. We have every intention of fighting to ensure that the proposed School is not built on this land and we can continue to enjoy the quiet life we moved here for. Having discussed this with numerous neighbours, who have also submitted feedback to try to prevent the School being built, it is clear that the School does not have the backing of local residents.