Lobby group backs Smiths Beach plans as political storm nears

Investors could be 'scared away' by inquiry

An artist's impression of the Smiths Beach development.

SIMONE GROGAN

WA's peak property lobby has backed in developer Adrian Fini's Smiths Beach project ahead of a looming probe into land deals and development decisions, arguing the political exercise could "scare investment away" from the State.

Members of a select committee spearheaded by the WA Liberal's shadow planning minister met in recent weeks for the first time, and will be "seeking submissions shortly from right across Western Australia" for an inquiry.

Neil Thomson MLC said the committee was looking forward to "engaging with all parties involved in the land development and planning process in WA".

After passing the Upper House, the six-person committee's remit has been set around probing the "optimality, efficiency, integrity and probity" of planning decisions made by the State Government and its agencies.

The committee also named three "high-profile development decisions" it plans to grill; namely the State Government's controversial Burswood Motorsports Facility development, the $7 billion Westport Project to replace the increasingly constrained port of Fremantle, and the Smiths Beach resort development.

The move to scrutinise decisions being made in the sector was promptly branded by the WA Planning Minister John Carey as "nonsensical" and an attempt to "create distrust in the planning system" when it passed on August 13.

The State's two leading development lobbies, who count many high-profile WA property developers as members, are broadly united in supporting efforts to make land-use access and planning systems more effective.

But Property Council WA executive director Nicola Brischetto is concerned running such a committee could descend into a political point scoring exercise. Ms Brischetto took umbrage in particular that the inquiry planned to call a private development currently being assessed by State regulators into question.

A verdict from the Environmental Protection Authority of WA on whether the Smiths Beach development at Yallingup is recommended for ministerial approval is due before the end of the year. Resort proponent Smiths 2014 Pty Ltd, of which Adrian Fini is the sole director, only last week submitted a variation to its application with the Federal environment and water department to remove a controversial concrete seawall structure that was to be built on the beach. The variation also increases the resort's native vegetation clearance by another 0.28 hectares to a total 9.43ha.

The proposed holiday home and residential development has drawn substantial backlash from locals and been stuck in approvals limbo for several years. That's despite it being assessed by the State Development Assessment Unit, which was touted as a means of slashing bureaucracy in development and bringing on significant developments faster.

"We cannot afford for the select committee to become a mechanism for political point scoring and NIMBYism in our parliament," Ms Brischetto told The West Australian. "We are particularly concerned that the select committee's terms of reference looks to inquire into a private development currently undergoing an independent and statutory decision-making process. This potential interference sends a terrible signal to the private sector and risks scaring investment away from WA."

Urban Development Institute of WA chief executive Tanya Steinbeck said members welcomed an "evidence-based discussion on how to improve the planning system".

"Developers respond to the housing demands of a rapidly growing population, taking significant commercial risk in navigating an overly complex and duplicative regulatory framework across three levels of government," Ms Steinbeck said. "Industry welcomes clarity and certainty but not at the expense of greater cost and complexity which exacerbates supply and affordability pressures."

Both groups said they would present to the committee if called.

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