

History comes alive at WCPS Annual Dinner 2008

Justice David Kirby of the Supreme Court of NSW will be our speaker at this year's Annual Dinner of the Wolli Creek Preservation Society. He is a particularly appropriate guest for this occasion, as you can read below, and we hope that as many members as possible will come along and bring their friends. The dinner is on Friday October 24 and will cost \$40 a head.

It is 25 years since the Society was formed to fight the destruction of the Wolli Valley bushland. A key event in the whole process triggering the formation of the Society was the 1981 inquiry into establishing a road link between Kyeemagh and Chullora for the movement of containers from Port Botany, which examined the possibility of the Wolli Valley as a route.

That inquiry was chaired by Commissioner David Kirby, as he then was, and marked one of the earliest authoritative acknowledgements of the value of the Wolli Valley's bushland. We have invited Justice Kirby to reflect on the lively community participation in the Inquiry, on the processes involved in planning decisions at the time, and to offer any salient reminiscences that he might like to share about the specifics of the Inquiry and its aftermath.

The Kirby Inquiry comprehensively exposed the fact that, because traffic expands to fill the road space created, freeway building would only worsen traffic congestion and car-dependency. It was the first such intellectual exercise in Australia and for many vital years its findings acted as a quasi-legal bulwark against the M5 and delayed the onset of other freeway-style roads. It prevented Sydney from falling further and faster into the car-dependency trap.

Had the inquiry reached a pro-road conclusion (as it probably would have under a commissioner of less intellectual rigour and integrity) the road would certainly have gone ahead within a couple of years. Not only would this have resulted in Sydney sprawling all the way to Bowral, but it's very likely the East Hills line (which then ended at East Hills) would have been closed. In the result, the delay to the freeway allowed time for the line to be extended to Campbelltown and cemented its importance to the Sydney System.

The Inquiry recommended the compulsory movement of containers by rail, and the preservation of the Wolli Valley, with the road corridor between Tempe and Beverly Hills released as open space. It is a matter of history that the first recommendation was ignored, to our present and future cost, and that successive Governments proceeded with plans for an eight-lane motorway through the valley, proposed as the M5East.

That threat was partly averted by a massive community effort, led by the Society over many years, that saw, in 1999, the first four lanes of that road committed to the now-notorious M5East tunnel, but with the loss of the section from Bexley North to Beverly Hills, concreted over for an above-ground motorway.

In 2008, we are getting closer to both the gazettal of the Wolli Creek Regional Park to give longer-term protection to the bushland from Bexley North to Undercliffe and to the formal lifting of the RTA road reservation that still hangs over the valley. It has been a tortuously slow process, complicated by the number and variety of landholdings in the area, and we still remain anxious about its completion.

So, this year's dinner is an opportunity to reflect on some of the pre-history of the Society, and on what has been achieved to get us where we are today. But it is also a time to gather ourselves for further struggles, because threats to the valley never seem to end, as the need for the campaign this year against industrial development on the creek bank at Turrella has shown us.