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Opinion

It's time to rethink who holds sway in the decision-making process regarding the balance between development and conservation

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📍 505 Minmi Road, Fletcher

Recent headlines detailing the shrinking vacancy rates for rental properties across the nation are a stark reminder of the prevailing housing crisis. Simultaneously, reports of soaring house prices highlight the dire shortage of housing supply.

The Hunter region is far from immune to these challenges, with our community bearing the brunt of the housing crisis's grim social repercussions.

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the federal government's recent pledge to provide 1.2 million new homes. However, to meet this ambitious target, NSW must deliver a staggering 75,000 homes annually for five years, no small feat considering that our current rate is about half that.

Here in the Hunter, where will these houses be located? According to the Hunter Regional Plan, published in December 2022, within Greater Newcastle, 80 per cent of this will be located where there is existing development (infill) while 20 per cent where no development currently exists (green field). In total Greater Newcastle needs to deliver, 4350 dwellings every year to meet the expected demand, of which 20 per cent or 870 dwellings every year need to be delivered in greenfield areas. Generally, detached housing is delivered in greenfield areas. While the strategy recommends 870 dwellings, which is 20 per cent of future dwellings, the demand is likely to be far stronger, given that detached housing currently makes up 69 per cent of existing dwellings. In other words, Novocastrians still like their backyards.

These targets were before the federal government pledge of 1.2 million homes. We will need to deliver substantially more housing than predicted in the Hunter Strategy to meet the federal government's expectations.

A significant portion of this greenfield housing will be concentrated in the western corridor stretching from Killingworth to Minmi. About a decade ago, the Department of Planning estimated that this corridor could accommodate around 8000 houses alongside environmental corridors, job opportunities, and necessary infrastructure.

However, the only viable approach to making the Western Corridor housing plan successful is carefully balancing housing needs with environmental considerations.



blanket approval for extensive development. Site investigations rarely yield outcomes favouring wall-to-wall development. Similarly, disregarding the site's potential for housing in an area already serviced by substantial housing and associated amenities does nothing to address the housing crisis.

The current proposal for 505 Minmi Road suggests a balanced approach, allocating half of the site for conservation and half for housing. This plan is grounded in extensive studies and technical advice, ensuring that both environmental preservation and housing provision are achieved.

Perhaps it's time to rethink who holds sway in the decision-making process regarding the balance between development and conservation. Shouldn't those in the greatest need of housing have a say in these matters rather than those who already have homes? Notably, the current average occupancy per dwelling in Australia is 2.52 people. Suppose we aim to provide 1.2 million houses in the next five years. That equates to just over 3 million people—many of whom may be immigrants or require affordable or specialised housing, often without a strong voice, or no voice, in the decision-making process.

The voices of those who are already housed are always heard loud and clear, as they represent the existing constituents of politicians. However, if we solely heed their perspectives and neglect the voices of future residents, we stand little chance of resolving the ongoing housing crisis.

Every person deserves to have a place to call home. Unless there is a commitment to see areas identified for housing in strategic plans developed to deliver housing in a balanced way, we will see the current poor social outcomes associated with a housing crisis severely exacerbated.

