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18 October 2019

The Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works

Committee Members

Introduction

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the proposed works under the HMAS Watson Redevelopment Project. Defence's web sites identify HMAS Watson as the home the Training Authority Maritime Warfare that provides a range of warfare training courses for the Navy. The published materiel infers that the establishment has no other purpose than to undertake this training.

The proposed project has six work elements at a total cost of \$430.5 Million (ex GST). The first of these elements being the new Maritime Warfare Training Precinct and the remaining five elements are works to supporting infrastructure. Essentially, this project is about a new Maritime Warfare Training Precinct.

I would like to submit comment on the following aspects of the project:

- a. the stated purpose of the proposed work and its suitability for that purpose, and
- b. the cost-effectiveness of the proposal.

Suitability

The suitability of the HMAS Watson is questionable from a number of different perspectives. These include environmental, public value of the site, and future viability.

The Department of Defence's Submission states that HMAS Watson is surrounded Sydney Harbour National Park, parklands, foreshore, and residential properties. The project also has restrictions in term of historic and aboriginal heritage.

The Submission makes light of any environmental issues stating 'that the works are proposed to be constructed in a highly developed area with limited ecological value.' This assertion differs from the Navy web site with states that the HMAS Watson 'is surrounded by a National Park which is home to much native Australian fauna and flora.'

The Committee might wish to note the large number of sites around Sydney, such as the former Quarantine Station and School of Artillery at North Head, which now belong to the Harbour Trust or the Sydney Harbour National Park. There are many similarities between some of those sites and HMAS Watson.

There is a very large number of people that utilise the National Park and the Sydney Harbour walking tracks in a nearby area. This is also an area used by large numbers of national and international visitors, and highly valued by the community.

The Department's submission has not adequately addressed suitability of a military establishment in an area of high environmental and community value, and the potential Community benefits of relocating this training Precinct and reverting the base to public use. The Committee should consider the environmental and community value to the Nation and whether relocating this Training Precinct to an alternate Defence site would be of greater value to both the Department and the Community.

The need to maintain a Navy presence at the Watsons Bay site has not been seriously challenged in the Department's submission. The main point in maintaining a military presence at the Watson's Bay site appears to be 'strong interdependencies and functional linkages between HMAS *Watson*' and other Sydney based Navy units.

Whilst that may be a correct ascertain, the Maritime Warfare Training Precinct would also have strong interdependencies and functional linkages with units like:

- a. Major Fleet Unit vessels and capabilities based in Western Australia, Darwin, and Cairns;
- b. Navy's premier training establishment, HMAS Cerberus, Victoria; and
- c. The Royal Australian Naval College and the School of Survivability and Ship's Safety at HMAS Creswell.

At face value, the discussion on proximity to other Sydney based Navy units does not hold up. Should that argument become clearer, then the Department should provide public discussion on whether this Maritime Warfare Training Precinct could be better located at other Defence locations such as Holsworthy, Orchard Hills, or Richmond.

Finally, the Department's submission acknowledges limitation in space and a 'very constrained and restricted HMAS Watson site' (para 50). It appears that the site has little or no capacity to house any additional units or functions. From a future viability perspective, Defence should provide commentary on impacts from the delivery of new capabilities, or potential to locate additional units to the site.

Cost

Many Government Departments are consolidating property and assets to provide taxpayers with greater surety that every dollar is being spent efficiently. With a \$430m (ex GST) price tag, this project should demonstrate value to the Australian Tax Payer.

The Department's submission does not provide a breakdown of costs for the Training Precinct and the various elements of the civil works. This makes an assessment of the value of the project difficult to comment on. The breakdown of costs should be provided.

There would appear to be value in relocating the Maritime Warfare Training Precinct to a Defence Establishment where the Base security, utilities, Messes, and other infrastructure have already been updated, or are about to be upgraded. This would either negate the need for the additional base works, or enable sharing of the costs with other projects.

Similarly, relocating this training precinct to an exiting base will reduce running costs in terms of staff and services to operate Officers, Senior Sailors, and Junior Sailors messes, medical and administrative services.

In summary, the information provided does not support any discussion of cost effectiveness. Greater transparency of the cost breakdown is needed and a discussion of relocation cost options, both Capital & operating costs, should be provided.

Submission

I respectfully submit to the Committee that:

- a. due to the environmental, heritage, and public value of the HMAS Watson site, more suitable sites in the Sydney area should be considered for the proposed new Maritime Warfare Training Precinct;
- b. proper consideration be given to returning HMAS Watson to public use as part of the Sydney Harbour National Park; and
- c. greater transparency of the cost breakdown is needed and a discussion of relocation cost options, both Capital & Operating Costs, should be provided to enable assessment of cost effectiveness.

Thank you

Terrence Stamp

