



STOP THE GAS PLANT

Southern Highlands

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SUBMISSION - DRAFT STATEWIDE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION PLAN

1. About us

Stop the Gas Plant – Southern Highlands is a community campaign opposing a proposed gas-fired power station precinct at 30 Douglas Road, Moss Vale. The plant is designed to power a private data centre exclusively, with zero benefit to our community. We are local residents, medical professionals, and volunteers. **We write not to oppose all development, but because we have watched the current planning system fail our community in real time, and the proposed changes would institutionalise those failures.**

2. What we've seen: a case study

This proposal has been fragmented: two stages have been submitted through the council's development application pathway, and a third (the main proposal) through the State Significant Development pathway. The total site build-out was not apparent when the first 14MW stage (SQE1) was approved in April 2024. A second 16MW stage (SQE2) is currently before the NSW Land and Environment Court. The larger State Significant Development component has had SEARs issued by the Department of Planning and we are awaiting the Environmental Impact Statement. This project will culminate in 21 industrial generation halls across the property when all proposals are considered, which is out of all proportion with the development originally approved in 2024.

When the Department issued the SEARs, key agencies including the EPA, NSW Health, Endeavour Energy, and Wingecarribee Shire Council were not consulted. Community members only discovered this through a GIPA application, from which key internal documents were withheld.

Our community learned the truth about this proposal through sustained volunteer research. That is not how a well-functioning participation system should work. **The proposed reforms move in the wrong direction.**

3. Removing exhibition from 'low-impact' development types

We have direct experience of how smaller approvals can precede and enable a much larger proposal on the same site. What looks low-impact in isolation can be the first stage of something significant.

We ask the Department to:

- Retain exhibition requirements for development adjacent to residential areas, regardless of how it is categorised.
- Introduce clear provisions requiring cumulative impacts to be considered where a site has multiple successive approvals.
- Explain clearly how communities can challenge a categorisation decision they believe is wrong.

4. Removing re-exhibition at the rezoning stage

A masterplan is a vision. A rezoning is a legal entitlement. They are different decisions with different consequences. Removing re-exhibition because consultation happened earlier assumes that people were paying attention during the masterplan stage – and in regional communities, many were not. **Regional residents are less resourced, less connected to planning processes, and more reliant on direct notification.**

Compressing participation at the rezoning stage hurts these communities the most. **Re-exhibition at the planning proposal stage should remain the default.** Exceptions should require the Department to explain, specifically, why earlier consultation was adequate.

5. The regional equity problem

These reforms will land differently depending on where you live. Urban communities have access to planning lawyers, environment groups, and established objector networks. Regional communities rely on volunteers and word of mouth. **Shorter notification periods hurt them most.**

This community has lived through this twice. **The Hume Coal project** – a proposed underground coal mine 7km northwest of Moss Vale – took nearly a decade to defeat. It required public hearings before the Independent Planning Commission after the Department of Planning twice recommended refusal.

Plasrefine/RePoly – one of Australia's largest proposed plastics recycling facilities, proposed for the edge of Moss Vale – was refused by the IPC in January 2025 after close to 3,000 submissions and over 130 speakers at public meetings. The proponent immediately appealed to the Land and Environment Court. That appeal is still underway.

In both cases, meaningful participation was fought for, not given. It cost residents years of time and significant money. The proposed reforms would make that fight harder. Specifically, the Department's plan to lock the public exhibition window for complex State Significant Developments (SSDs) at a rigid 28 days is completely inadequate for regional volunteer groups. Before finalising these changes, the Department should publish a comprehensive regional equity impact assessment. Speed is an understood goal. **A system that is faster for developers and harder for everyone else is not fairer.**

6. What we support

We want to be constructive. **We support:**

- Extending minimum exhibition for strategic planning to 60 days. This is a genuine improvement, particularly for regional communities.
- Introducing a parallel 60-to-90-day mandatory minimum exhibition window for high-impact, complex State Significant Developments (SSDs).
- Standardising notification requirements across councils, so a community's rights don't depend on which side of a boundary they live on.
- Better plain-English guidance on how people can engage, object, and appeal.

7. Summary

We ask the Department to:

- Retain public exhibition for development near residential areas, with cumulative impact provisions.
- Abandon the rigid 28-day timeframe for State Significant Developments, mandating a 60-to-90-day window for complex, high-impact regional proposals.
- Keep re-exhibition at the planning proposal stage as the default, with exceptions requiring justification.
- Provide accessible submission pathways (such as direct email or a simple form) and remove the requirement to navigate the NSW Planning Portal which acts as a barrier to genuine public participation.
- Publish a regional equity assessment before the plan is finalised.
- Provide clear guidance on how communities can challenge categorisation decisions.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute. We are available to discuss any aspect of this submission.

[Signatories redacted for online publication]