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Your Submission to the TPC Review: Department of Justice
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Dear Sir/Madam

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Review of The Tasmanian Planning Commission.

I really appreciate and trust the Commission's ability to act as an independent decision maker regarding Tasmanian planning matters. The Tasmanian Planning Commission has extensive experience in planning matters and this depth of experience and knowledge is an important resource for our State. So that it can carry out its role, the TPC must be adequately staffed and resourced. It is also vital that it remains at arm's length from Government and external influence so that it can operate with fairness and transparency.

I do not want any of its planning functions to be taken over by the State Government as there is a real risk that planning processes will be less fair, transparent and ethical because unfortunately Governments have a history of hiding decision making, blocking FOI requests for information and for making decisions without adequate community input. As a member of the public with no qualifications in law or professional planning, I have found the TPC's website and processes to be fair, transparent and accessible and also informative. I am worried that if State government took over more roles of the TPC that decisions would not be fair or just, as political parties in Tasmania are not currently required to declare donations as they are immediately made and can be subject to conflict of interest pressures so that they can be re-elected. .

It is vitally important that the TPC remains independent from Government and that no representatives from any State Government departments, sit on the Panel. State Government departments reporting to the panel will ensure that decisions are made at arm's length from Government.

I note that members of the TPC are required to have specific skills and expertise. I would like an expansion of the bodies available to nominate a Commissioner for appointment by the Minister. Perhaps Tasmania's professional planning peak body and The Law Society of Tasmania can nominate a Commissioner(s) with expertise in planning and environmental law. The Tasmanian Council of Social Service (TASCOSS) can nominate a Commissioner(s) with expertise in social impact assessments and social needs analysis. I do think it is also important to have a Commissioner with expertise in Natural Resource management and demography. I also think that it is important for Commissioners and staff or other's delegated to undertake tasks for the TPC, to participate in regular professional development as required by their Professional Associations.

I would like the TPC to retain its existing role in planning policy development and to have some of its previous roles restored so it is the entity responsible for making planning scheme controls and amendments. The TPC should be able to develop Tasmania's land use strategies and to keep its function to assess projects of State and Regional significance.

I'm very concerned that there is currently a perception that the State Government is making planning decisions on the run, especially in regard to National Parks and reserves without a proper transparent process and regard to previously established management plans, standards and conventions. I therefore would like the TPC to have a function to review and draft Management Plans for National Parks, Reserves and our World Heritage areas.

I would be very concerned if Tasmania's State of the Environment Report was not delivered by the Tasmanian Planning Commission. Our environment is too important, especially in a world with a rapidly changing climate, to leave the State of Environment Report to State Government. Sadly, history has shown us that State Governments regularly fail to act to proactively protect the environment.

I've looked on the TPC website and note its code of conduct and grievance procedures. I fully support the TPC's existing code of conduct and commitment to uphold ethical behaviour. I do not believe that a high standard of ethical conduct or commitment to behave and make planning decisions with no conflict(s) of interest can be achieved if any of the TPC's roles are transferred to the Tasmanian Government and associated Minister. Governments have too many pressures on them to be re-elected and this creates potential for conflicts of interest.

Members of my community have lodged planning concerns with our Local Government, Hobart City Council, and at times matters have proceeded to the Tasmanian Planning Commission. I have been very grateful that an independent "umpire" and decision maker is available. I've also noted some specific planning guidelines (standards for developments in bushfire prone areas for example); developed by the TPC relevant for my local area, and this will be beneficial and protective for people in my local area for the future.

What does Tasmania need? Excellent planning, mediocre she'll be right planning or planning on the run to cater for specific interest groups, mates, short term greed and political agendas? All approaches have radically different outcomes. Tasmania would notice the absence of the TPC if its role was further whittled away. The role of the TPC has the potential to influence our lives in many ways in the present and into the future; including if we can live in a healthy environment, grow food in the future, have the infrastructure that we require and can act to meet the demands of our population in the years to come. I would like to live in a State with excellence in planning, and I think that the best way to achieve this is to retain and strengthen the role of our existing trusted and highly ethical Tasmanian Planning Commission. I'm very grateful that I live in a State with an independent planning commission, and regard it as one of the checks and balances on excessive State power and undue influence from entities that could be potentially concerned with their own narrow interests rather than the wellbeing of our wider society and environment.

Yours sincerely

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May 15th 2020

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