4 April 2008

The Hon Peter Garrett AM MP  
Minister for the Environment, Heritage and the Arts  
Comment on the proposed Nobbys Lighthouse Redevelopment  
Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts  
GPO Box 787  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Minister

Comment on the Proposed Nobbys Lighthouse Redevelopment

The Hunter Chapter of the Property Council of Australia welcomes the opportunity to provide comment on the proposed Nobbys Lighthouse Redevelopment.

Adaptive reuse of heritage structures
The Property Council strongly supports the adaptive reuse of heritage structures such as the proposed Nobbys Lighthouse development. Sensible and sympathetic proposals for adaptive reuse of the ever increasing stock of often redundant heritage buildings and sites must be an imperative given the lack of resources available elsewhere to assist to preserve historic building fabric.

Newcastle has a number of central business district and beach heritage assets that are now in varying stages of disrepair, principally due to a lack of resources to adequately maintain the facilities. This issue has long been a source of concern and often heated debate within the Hunter Region. The weight of feeling behind the current situation with Nobbys Lighthouse is a case in point.

Nobbys Lighthouse is readily identifiable as the entry point to the largest coal port in the world. It features prominently in all publications intended to attract visitors the region, yet remains inaccessible to the regional community and visitors. In the absence of positive steps to improve and upgrade the facility, there is a risk that it will too be redundant and closed off for safety reasons.

In our view the proposal seems to be a very sympathetic adaptive reuse of a heritage icon of the region and should be supported.

Development application process
The Property Council is concerned that the lengthy and convoluted process this particular proposal has undergone over a five year period does nothing to provide certainty for the applicant, potential future investors, the community and stakeholders.
The proposal has already been approved by Newcastle City Council, the NSW Department of Planning and the NSW Heritage Council and recommended for approval by the Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts. It is our understanding that during this process the applicant has met all necessary requirements, made appropriate changes and yet until recently the outcome remained unclear.

Clearly, the Commonwealth responsibilities need to be discharged appropriately; however it is disappointing this decision has occurred so late in the process. This system will act as a significant deterrent to investors to restore heritage properties. For a site burdened with such a huge range of constraints, the outcome, a compromise ultimately, seemed innovative and accommodating under the circumstances.

The obstacles that have been faced in this instance are an example of the red tape complexities that still exist when a proponent is seeking to navigate through the local, state and federal agency concurrences. The risk and uncertainty associated with the reuse of a regionally significant site such as Nobbys is discouraging development, business activity and economic growth.

The Property Council understands that the recommendation from the Commonwealth Department of the Environment, Water, Heritage and the Arts to approve the proposal was based on the assessment of substantial benefits to the community, including public access, social, economic and tourism benefits. It is our view that where proposals are clearly compliant and on the balance of the evidence and information put forward meet code objectives and strategic requirements, they should be approved.

We trust you and the Department have sufficient information before you to deal with the matter and look forward to the matter being determined accordingly. We would welcome the opportunity to meet and brief you with regard to our concerns and issues.

The Property Council thanks you for the opportunity to provide input and comment on this matter.

Yours faithfully,

Bob Hawes
Chair, Hunter Chapter