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National Trust calls on Peter Garrett to save Catherine Hill Bay

The National Trust today called on Federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett to save Catherine Hill Bay in the light of the decision by NSW Planning Minister Frank Sartor to allow the development of nearly 800 dwellings in the area by property developer Rose Group.

Catherine Hill Bay is an idyllic coastal mining village 30km south of Newcastle. It comprises around 100 historic buildings dating to the 1870s, set on a beach surrounded by natural bushland rich in threatened species. It is a very rare example of an intact coastal company mining town.

"Why would a Minister purported to be in the last hours of his tenure in the planning portfolio push through a highly contentious and inappropriate development for a developer who is a known donor to the Labor Party?" asked National Trust (NSW) Executive Director John Neish.

"Our last port of call is now the Commonwealth. We urge the Federal Minister to act to stop the inappropriate development at Catherine Hill Bay".

Due to the presence of threatened species at Catherine Hill Bay, development has been deemed a 'controlled action' under the Commonwealth Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act. Final development approval is required from the Commonwealth Minister for the Environment, Peter Garrett.

Additionally, the Trust has nominated Catherine Hill Bay for the National Heritage List on the basis of its environmental and built heritage significance. Minister Garrett may decline development approval under the Act or place an emergency National Heritage Listing on the site to protect it.

Condemning Minister Sartor's decision to approve the development, Mr Neish said, "The Trust is not anti-development but the nature and scale of this proposal is completely inappropriate. It will overwhelm the cultural heritage and environmental values of the tiny coastal hamlet and increase the size of the township by up to tenfold."

The development of Catherine Hill Bay also sets a dangerous precedent, Mr Neish said. "If this level of development can occur in a high heritage value coastal area zoned for conservation, then all protected land up and down the NSW coast will also be vulnerable."

In May 2006 a NSW Department of Planning report recommended that no development occur at Catherine Hill Bay. The local council has zoned the township as a conservation area and it has been nominated for state heritage listing. The community has vocally opposed the proposal. The Trust listed Catherine Hill Bay in 1983. Yet Minister Sartor used Part 3(A) of the NSW Planning Act to override heritage and environmental controls and the community's wishes, and green-light Rose Group's plans.

"We have written to Minister Garrett today asking him to use his powers at the Commonwealth level to save the Bay. Mr Garrett has a real opportunity now to act in the interests of the whole community and preserve this extraordinary place for future generations", said Mr Neish.

"We will also continue to work closely at the grassroots level with the Catherine Hill Bay Progress association and Save the Bay campaign patron Jack Munday. The community has been disempowered by this decision, and we support the residents' call to place green bans on the site."

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John Neish is available for interview. Media contact: Kathy Scott: 0415 764 159