

State must deal with community dust concerns

It's a worrying frontier for regulators, writes Greg Piper

Somersby residents won a great victory when the Government rejected the Somersby Fields sandmine. It would have been 200 metres from Somersby School and close to 500 residents of Lake Macquarie and Gosford electorates.

The project's application identified a number of major issues, but public concern about health impacts of silica dust ultimately became the decider. Silica dust is something that many haven't heard of, but it's as dangerous as asbestos.

The World Health Organisation says workplace exposure to respirable crystalline silica is associated not only with silicosis, but also lung cancer, pulmonary tuberculosis and airway diseases. It also says control actions for workplace hazards should consider possible impacts on surrounding communities.

The Somersby community, through the Somersby Action Group, commissioned independent testing and found current air quality fails to meet international standards for silica dust. This has been linked to six other sand mines already in the area, so new any development increasing people's exposure deserved the closest of scrutiny.

The existing air quality problem wasn't even considered in the Somersby Fields proposal, and with that knowledge the Government couldn't approve a development that would increase the risk for so many.

The community of Somersby wanted the project delayed while further air quality tests were conducted. This would have been justifiable for a project that would increase levels of dangerous respirable silica. However, other forces prompted a quick decision by the Government.

A motion opposing the development was moved in the Legislative Council (the Upper House) by Greens MLC Lee Rhiannon and supported by the Opposition.

The Minister for Planning rejected the project on 9 August, soon after I publicly stated my intention to move a similar motion in the Legislative Assembly. The decision was very welcome news to local residents. Gosford Council followed quickly to seek an amendment to its local environment plan preventing further such quarries.

It's great that this contentious proposal has been laid to rest, but the problem of air quality remains for Somersby, as it does elsewhere. There is still a compelling case for the Government to pay more attention to air quality in all dust-affected communities.

The potential impact of dust was a major factor in community opposition to a recent proposal for a surface auger coalmine at Blackalls Park, now abandoned.

I'm sure it's no coincidence that Singleton was the venue for the Clean Air Society of Australia & New Zealand's workshop earlier this month. There is much to learn about this region's dust problems and the next steps are overdue. The problem of fine respirable particles is a new frontier for government regulators and it's important that suitable standards are adopted.

Greg Piper is the Mayor and state member for Lake Macquarie