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Postcard from the future

How a New York-style 'high line' could revitalise North Sydney

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Holding the line

The battle continues for a bold walkway proposal that would ward off development creep and secure invaluable foreshore land as public green space, writes Greg Flynn

The Sydney Harbour HighLine concept is bold, the challenge is formidable and the prize for the public is the creation of an easily accessible walking trail stretching from Lavender Bay to Berrys Bay. In a canny chess move, the creation of the HighLine would also block property developers from securing government-owned foreshore land with eye-wateringly expansive and expensive water views.

Based on The High Line in New York – a walkway built on an elevated disused train track – the proposed Sydney version would run more than 3km from Luna Park to Waverton Station alongside the Lavender Bay railway sidings, wrapping around the harbour edge and through a curved rail tunnel.

Cheerleader for the Sydney HighLine is Ian Mutton, a newly re-elected North Sydney councillor and “golf mad” lawyer who has been beating the HighLine drum for years, attracting support from locals while fighting for the attention of Macquarie St politicians.

Sitting on a Lavender Bay Ferry Wharf bench, Mutton brings his passion for the golfing fairway to the new walkway, which would increase the district’s current green space by more than four hectares: “The HighLine is a clever mix of utilising the existing rail line, the adjacent land and the harbour to

reimagine this wonderful place.”

Discussing the difficulties the multimillion-dollar project faces, a frustrated Mutton holds up a North Shore community newsletter which scolds the state government for reneging on a 2017 commitment to start work on a “walking path [next to the sidings] where tracks have been removed”.



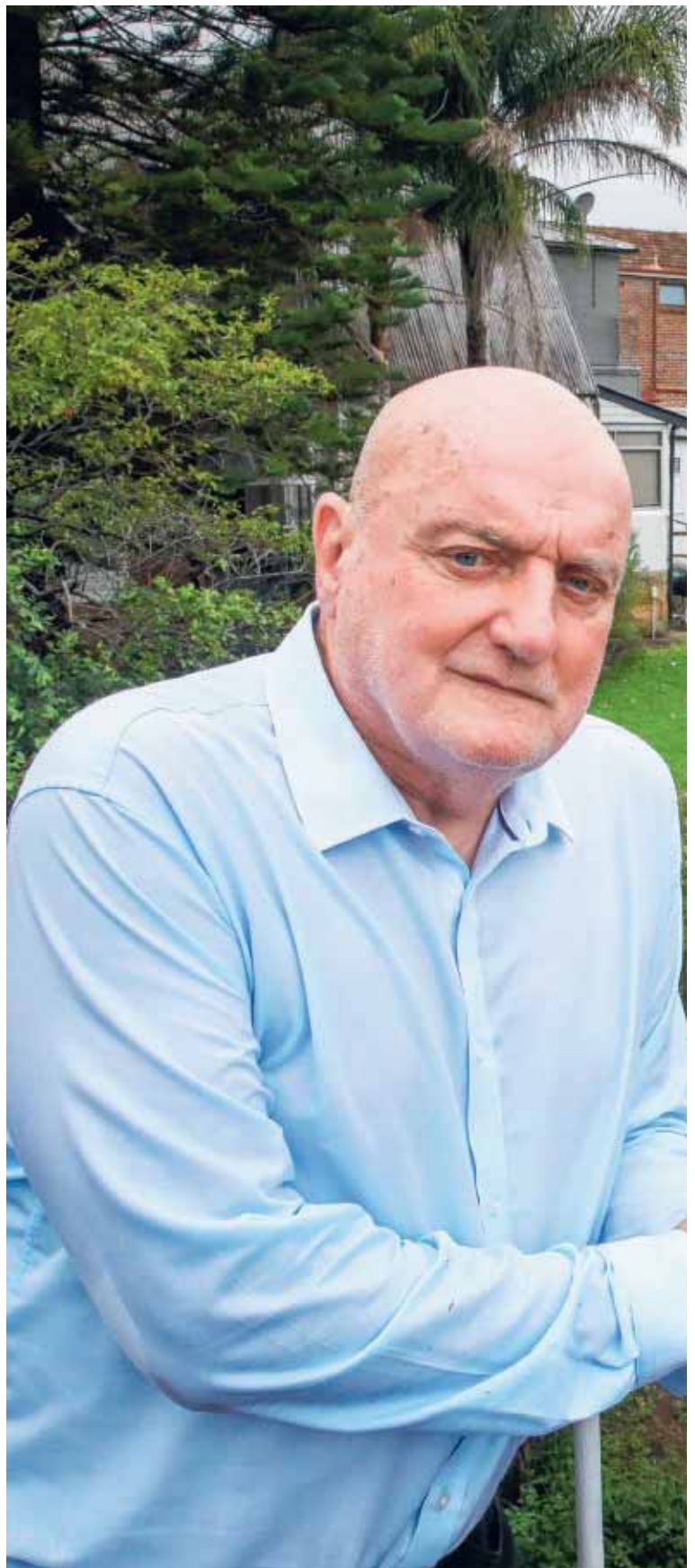
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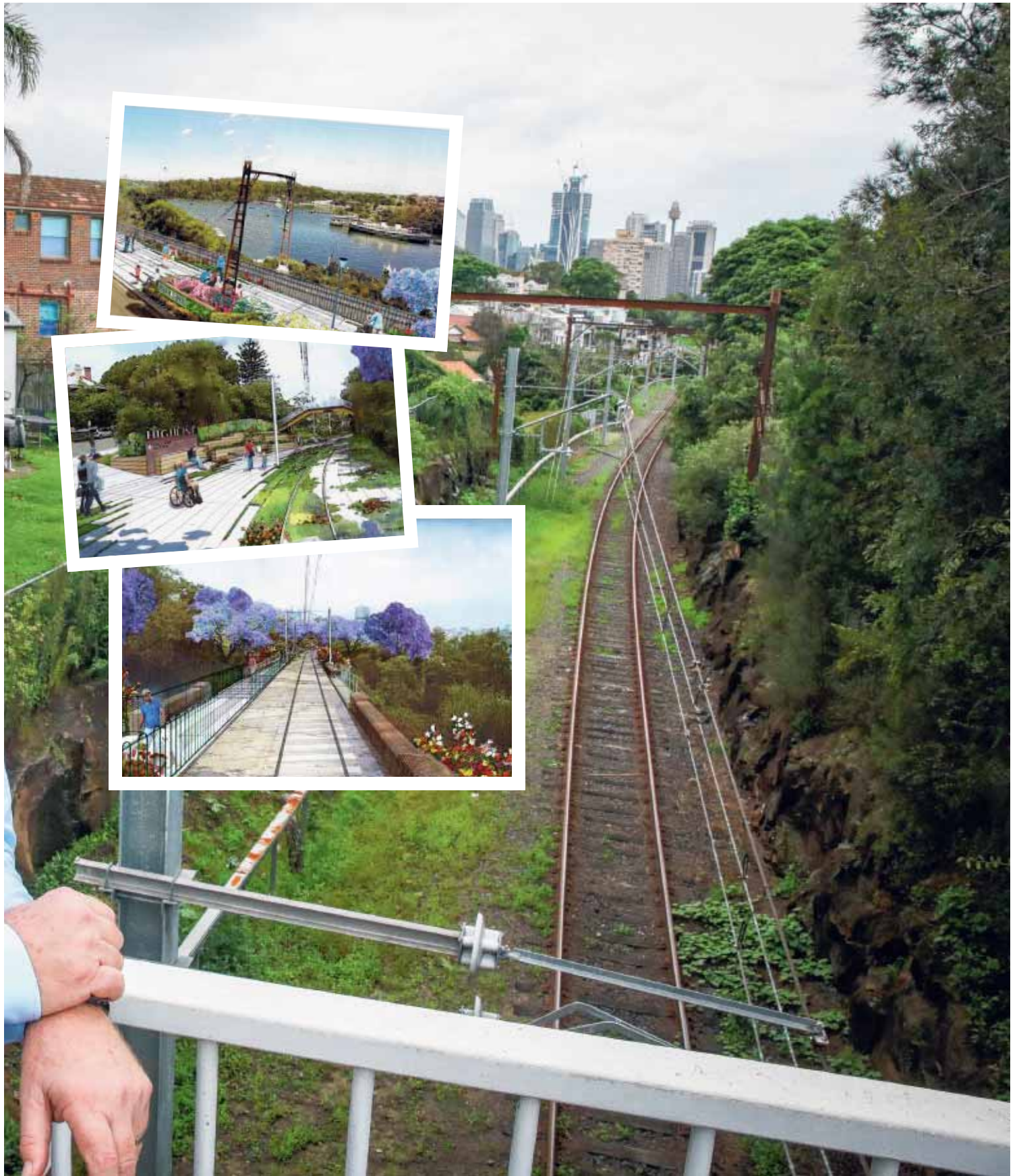
By 2019, the government’s position had shifted from being sympathetic to the HighLine to keeping all options open.

Given the government has handed property developer and construction behemoth Multiplex a 40-year lease over Luna Park, residents remain concerned.

Turn to page 9

North Sydney councillor Ian Mutton is behind the HighLine drive to convert the old train line to a walking trail; and, inset from top, artists impressions of the proposed HighLine at Dumbarton St, the Union St entrance and John St Bridge. Main picture: Renee Nowytarger





From page 6

Both Wendy Whiteley, who has lived at Lavender Bay for 50 years and whose “Secret Garden” is a major attraction, and her long-time neighbour Peter Kingston, an acclaimed landscape artist, are wary of “development creep” outside the confines of the Luna Park site. Whiteley and Kingston are adamant the harbourside must be kept in public hands.

As for the future, if it includes the HighLine, Mutton can see a time when the completed project becomes a significant destination for international tourists.

“This will be part of the excitement of Sydney,” he says.

He pictures a post-pandemic day when cruise ships finally return and passengers are drawn to the harbour’s icons, including the Opera House and the HighLine.

“We must make it welcoming, open space which appeals to visitors who might’ve been attracted to the Bondi coastal walk,” he says.

One of the advantages of the HighLine is that it would be relatively flat compared to the hilly Bondi-to-Coojee offering. To add to its allure, it would feature regular visits by historic trains and heritage boats which would puff, choof or sail to Lavender Bay, bringing sightseers and day-trippers.

There are hopes that Rob Stokes, the state’s first minister for active transport (aka, walking and cycling), will take an interest in the HighLine. At a Committee for Sydney event last month, the minister said active transport initiatives, while smaller than the city’s mega-projects, brought “big benefits.”

He pointed out that the impact and incidence of non-communicable diseases such as type 2 diabetes and heart disease were exacerbated by inactivity, and he saw a need to make it “easier and safer and more attractive for people to walk, stroll, run and ride”.

However, Sydney Trains – the government department responsible for the sidings – has flicked the railway signal light to red, effectively halting the HighLine plans for the time being. A spokesperson



An artist's impression, left, shows a proposed ramp pedestrians would access from Harbourview Crescent.

says: “For the foreseeable future, the Lavender Bay sidings will continue to be used for essential Sydney Trains operations, including as a train stabling facility, allowing for a more reliable network. Sydney Trains is working with the NSW government and the community to look at long-term options for this area when it is no longer required for rail purposes.”

They say Sydney Trains has “met with various stakeholders about this over the years”.

With ongoing interest from property developers, those government meetings with “stakeholders” do not reassure locals.

The ever-feisty Whiteley is keen to protect the waterfront: “Provid-

ing opportunities for people to share the harbourside is something I’ve advocated for decades. I’m a strong supporter of free green open spaces, particularly around the harbour shoreline.

“The HighLine is a great idea and there are ambitious plans and designs for the project.

“However, the HighLine does face challenges, including the fact that trains are still using the Lavender Bay sidings. It’s unclear just what Sydney Trains’ long-term plans are for those sidings.

“In addition, the costs of creating the HighLine and maintaining it need careful consideration.

Turn to page 11

A word from Luna Park’s operators

Brookfield Multiplex, the operator of Luna Park says: “Luna Park forms an integral, and esteemed, part of the Sydney community and has done so since opening in 1935.

“We are proud of the very significant contribution Luna Park makes to local employment and the local economy, and most importantly, the lifelong memories and fun had by families every single year.

“We have supported and invested in Luna Park under our stewardship, including a recent refresh and upgrade that supported local jobs at a critical



time. We would welcome the opportunity to consider greater connectivity to the Luna Park precinct for the people of Sydney and further enhanced activation.”

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From page 9

“The cost of upkeep for the current public domain is also crucially important. North Sydney Council must ensure that it has the funding available to care for the green spaces it is already responsible for.”

The urbane and understated Kingston, who describes his Lavender Bay home as “ramshackle”, says he feels “under terrible siege” from developers.

A Lavender Bay resident for almost 30 years, he is recovering from lung cancer and has an exhibition of his works scheduled for the Australian Galleries in Sydney later this year. A boardwalk on the foreshore is named in his honour, showcasing several of his exquisite mini sculptures of comic book characters such as Ginger Meggs.

“

Most of the population of Sydney is all cooped up and here we're in a very privileged but vulnerable position

Kingston is concerned about “horrific” development in the area: “People feel entitled to go down into the precious Sydney sandstone to make ‘wellness rooms’ ... and they want to have parking for four cars.”

His own water views come with a feeling of “dread”: “Most of the population of Sydney is all cooped up and here we're in a very privileged but vulnerable position.”

Kingston campaigned with his artist friend Martin Sharp to protect Luna Park but “sometimes you don't get what you wish for”. He now sees the entertainment complex as a “Clayton's Luna Park – the sort of Luna Park you have

when you're not having one.”

One development he does back is the HighLine – “it's a positive, good thing”. He says he's well aware the HighLine would attract more people to the area but he believes it's worthwhile to share the beauty of the bay with other Sydneysiders and visitors.”

According to Mutton, current costings for the HighLine range between \$10m and \$12m for a “basic” project, stretching up to \$20m for a more enhanced outcome.

When the NSW government walked back its earlier commitment to allow the HighLine to go ahead, Mutton and his fellow proponents in the Sydney Harbour HighLine Association began a concerted advocacy campaign. Among the tactics is to add further appeal to the project by augmenting elements within the proposal. For example, Mutton brought Anthony Bastic, Vivid's former curator and festival director of light, on to the team last year.

Creative lighting will dramatise the interior of the 310m railway tunnel, described by Kingston as “ghostly” because the curved design allows you to see soft light at both ends. The tunnel has two rail tracks and, being built in the steam era, a high ceiling to provide enough clearance for smoke from the locomotives' chimneys to dissipate.

What isn't dissipating is the heat from the community's battle to ensure the land around the rail sidings eventually becomes public domain. Mutton sees it as a “once-in-a-lifetime asset”. As for the sidings, he says: “You don't often get a piece of government-owned infrastructure that can be repurposed to introduce so much green space to the harbourfront.”

Currently it's a waiting game: for residents, developers and visitors. And then there's the Wendy Whiteley factor. A quick question for decision-makers within the state government: have they met the formidable Whiteley? With her track record, it may be unwise to underestimate her determination and capability to fight for free, green and open spaces.



Lavender Bay resident Wendy Whiteley has long been an advocate for free green open spaces. Picture: AAP Image

JUGGLE ST. | J

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It's no secret that schooling this year has been severely disrupted and top-notch online tutors have never been as sought after as they are in 2020.

But finding experienced and qualified tutors who click with your child can seem a daunting and time-consuming process.

Juggle Street has recently launched an update to their popular babysitting

platform that allows parents to find the best tutor for their child from the thousands of qualified tutors registered on the platform.

“My son needed some extra help with his maths” said Mosman resident, Dani. “We found a wonderful tutor who lives around the corner. He's studying Primary School teaching and is starting to make a difference to my

son's confidence after only a couple of sessions.”

Juggle Street founder David James, “Juggle Street is about building supportive community networks. We hope this release can help ease some of the stress on parents, help kids get back on track with their schoolwork and provide an avenue for out-of-work educators to find some income.”

To find a suitable tutor for your child, visit jugglestreet.com.au



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