

Sutherland Shire Council

Local government was not compulsory in NSW, until its voluntary system was overturned in 1905. Further reforms were introduced the following year, creating local government areas called shires, designed for rural areas.

In 1906 Sutherland Shire Council became one of these new shires, with the village of Sutherland its administrative centre. The chief elected officer was the shire president while the chief administrative officer was the shire clerk, until the local government reforms of 1993 when the shire president became the mayor. The shire clerk was called the general manager, and later the chief executive officer.

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In the early 20th century, the majority of New South Wales citizens had no gas, electricity, sewerage, garbage collection or reticulated water system and many roads were in a woeful condition. This was because less than one per cent of the state was incorporated: local government was not compulsory.

After years of debate on the question of local government reform, the voluntary system was finally overturned in 1905 with the *Local Government (Shires) Act*. Then further reforms were introduced the following year with the *Local Government Extension Act*. As a result, the unincorporated parts of New South Wales – except for the Western Division – were divided into local government areas called shires, a new unit of local government designed for rural areas, over which the state government had ultimate power. This was also the case with the urban municipalities.

In 1906 Sutherland Shire Council was one of these new units and the village of Sutherland – where there were 90 houses and ten business places within a mile of Sutherland post office – became the administrative centre of the district. Sutherland had developed from a railway workers' camp established prior to the first train arriving in 1885. It wasn't long before land surrounding the railway station was subdivided and auctioned, and a few years later Sutherland was a thriving centre. With a rail connection to Sydney and Wollongong, this was 'the premier town in the district'.

In the new shires the chief elected officer was called the shire president while the chief administrative officer was the shire clerk. This was the case until the local government reforms of 1993 when the shire clerk became the general manager – and later chief executive officer – while the shire president is now called the mayor. The first Sutherland Shire president was William Judd and the inaugural shire clerk was JW MacFarlane.

Scandal – dodgy land deals and bad roads

Unlike a number of NSW councils, Sutherland Shire Council has never been dismissed by the state government. Over the years there have been many highlights and achievements, but also some low points which are not unique to Sutherland Shire. Two incidents in particular reflect the problems common to outer suburban areas that experienced sudden and exponential growth in the 1950s and 1960s.

One crisis in the mid-1950s occurred at a time when Sutherland Shire Council opposed the state government's County of Cumberland Planning Scheme. Proposals such as the reservation of land around the Port Hacking waterfront were controversial, as was the creation of a 'Green Belt' of non-urban land, a 'girdle of countryside', as a buffer around Sydney's urban centre.

Sutherland Shire's Green Belt, condemned by some as interfering with the rights of private property, took in farming areas in the eastern part of the Shire, most of the area west of the Woronora River and also extended from the suburb of Sutherland to the southern outskirts of the local government area. In retrospect, this was a sound idea – until speculators moved in.

One of these was Sutherland Shire engineer AM Bailey. Over a mere 15 months, he made an astounding profit of more than 25 times the purchase price from the sale of a parcel of former Green Belt land near the village of Heathcote. A few months after his purchase in 1953, Sutherland Shire Council had voted to remove an area of land – including Bailey's – from the Green Belt, enabling him to subdivide and sell the land for housing. RD Mackie, the president of the Kurnell Progress Association, claimed this was the tip of the iceberg and that land speculation was 'rife' in Sutherland Shire. Certainly, a murky shadow was cast over the whole Council which failed to dissipate even after Bailey resigned.

Another dispute occurred in 1965 when Sutherland Shire Council suspended its long-serving and well-regarded engineer, Bill Wood. This was a politically divided council in which the Liberal Party dominated when Shire president Keith Bates decided to implement what was called the 'one coat tar seal program', designed to overcome the backlog of Sutherland Shire's unsealed roads. Bill Wood deemed this a perfunctory short-term fix and a waste of money, but despite an inquiry under Section 99 of the Local Government Act which completely exonerated him, Sutherland Shire Council sacked Wood. In December 1965, after the ALP – with the support of independents – took control of the Council, Wood was reinstated.

Once again, this affair harmed the Council's reputation for probity. The unqualified support Wood received from local residents, members of staff and his union/professional association, the Local Government Engineers' Association indicates that his dismissal was perceived as unfair. This case had an impact on the professional self-image of many engineers: its injustice was long remembered.

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