

Lismore council returning land to traditional owners despite opposition

Attempt to pause historic handback of NSW land defeated, but lack of prior consultation leaves 'bad taste' in many people's mouths



Michael Paul-Ryan, known as Uncle Mickey, a Wiyabul man and chairman of the Bundjalung Elders Council, stands on Sleeping Lizard Hill, also called North Lismore Plateau.

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It was a historic land handback decision that established Lismore city council as a regional leader in reconciliation with First Nations people.

But after a contentious motion by a newly elected councillor to halt the handback of 37 hectares at the southern end of Sleeping Lizard Hill, or North Lismore Plateau, what was seen as a significant step in the healing journey for Aboriginal Australians seems a little less sure-footed.



The view looking south from the top of Sleeping Lizard Hill, also called North Lismore Plateau.

For the Widjabal Wia-bal people, and a community highly active in environmental issues and social justice, the hope is that the attempt to overturn a commitment towards healing the wounds of the past will be the last.

At the council's first meeting of the year, a newly elected councillor, Big Rob, proposed that council take no further action in relation to its decision of July 2021 to hand back the land while it explored financial options and issues.

In response more than 20,000 people signed a change.org petition to support the handback and a crowd of 450 people assembled in front of the council chambers on the night.

After much debate and numerous calls to order, Big Rob's motion was defeated 10-1, with the council resolving to hold a workshop with the traditional custodians to determine the best way forward.

Jenny Smith, a traditional custodian, told the council the lack of consultation prior to the motion "left a bad taste" in a lot of people's mouths.

The chairman of the Bundjalung Elders Council, uncle Mickey Ryan, said the move to turn back the clock was a strong reminder of the great injustice, dispossession and cultural genocide that is still at large.



Lismore City councillor Big Rob.

“Giving the land back to us is part of the healing process,” he said.

“Sleeping Lizard Hill is part of the Bundjalung people’s dreaming and a totem for Lismore.

“There are spiritual consequences if it isn’t looked after properly. Artefacts have been found all over the mountain and there’s burials up there too.”

In fact, the area features six sacred sites as well as significant flora and fauna.

“We’re going to keep fighting,” Ryan told Guardian Australia, when asked about any future moves to sandbag the handover.

“It’s so important for the mountain to be protected and saved for our future generations.”

A longtime and vocal advocate for preservation of culturally and environmentally sensitive sites in the area, he has also been involved in fighting housing development of other sections of Sleeping Lizard Hill with the North Lismore Plateau Protection Group.

The former mayor and current councillor, Vanessa Ekins, who championed the original motion in 2021, said the move by Big Rob had devastated the Lismore community.

“When the motion was supported last year, we were the first council to do it and there was so much joy,” she said.

“Since then, I believe that other councils around Australia have resolved to hand over land.

“The only conversation we need to have now is what does handback look like and that’s a discussion we will have with the traditional custodians.”

Sue Higginson, an environmental law expert and former Greens candidate, said the original handback decision was “spectacular and proactive” and a “profound moment in the Lismore community”.

“It is a relatively small parcel of land being handed back, but it is a strong and powerful step in a much bigger process of reconciliation.”



Vanessa Ekins in her home in Lismore. Ekins is a Lismore City councillor and former mayor who successfully moved a motion to hand over land with cultural significance to the Widjabul Wia-bal people.

Higginson said Big Rob’s motion was clearly divisive and would have been a backward step for the community.

“Fortunately, democratic processes prevailed. The community came out to uphold the handback.”

She said the council’s original decision had not been made without recognition that some pioneering processes, as well as time, money and consideration, would be required.

Ekins confirmed that council staff under her leadership had been asked to prepare a brief for councillors to examine not only how the land would be returned, but possible time frames and the impact on council's budget.

At the time, the federal member for Page and National Party representative, Kevin Hogan, suggested through social media that a council that was in debt was not in a financial position to give away a \$5m asset.

Ekins said that the 37 hectares was listed on council's books at value of \$500,000.

Hogan has been contacted by Guardian Australia for comment.

Meanwhile, Big Rob, a qualified lawyer, has called out those who opposed his motion for making it "such a big racial issue", insisting that it was about "funding and safety".

"I was completely misunderstood," he said.

His website notes that his key policies including strongly advocating against prejudice, discrimination and racism and "facilitating social inclusion for all members of our community".



Looking North from Sleeping Lizard Hill, also called North Lismore Plateau.

"The main reason I put forward the motion is that there are issues with that land including a big quarry on that site and a high cliff face which does not have a fence, as well as a mine there and potentially detonators.

“We cannot give the land back unless we rehabilitate and regenerate it and clear up all the problems.”

Uncle Ryan said that local people had climbed the quarry walls as children and, today, the whole floor of the land had been cleared of anything dangerous.

“The Westpac Rescue Helicopter crew even does training in the quarry.”

The Guardian was unable to contact the new mayor, Steve Krieg, but he told the council meeting that the issue for him was not about renegeing on a promise, but process and getting things right.

“We’re going to keep fighting,” said Ryan, of the community’s hopes for the eventual hand over of the site.

“We’re Northies, and Northies don’t give up.”

- *Helen Hawkes is a freelance journalist and author based in Kyogle*