

## **A mix-up at the airport**

Sydney Morning Herald – Editorial 8 March 2006

Sydney's airports are no longer mere centres of aviation. They are valuable real estate opportunities, several in prime locations.

Residents of Mascot - and Sydney's planners - have had a while to get used to the idea that Sydney Airport is soon to blossom into a retail wonderland entirely outside NSW planning controls. Now it is Bankstown's turn.

Bankstown Airport used to boast it was the world's busiest for general aviation. But that was in the 1980s. It was sold in 2003 to a consortium led by property developers and, hardly surprisingly, the needs of aviation are not in the forefront of their minds. The airport is temptingly close to the M5 and in the centre of prosperous stretches of suburbia. The lessees say they have exciting plans - but, like those at Sydney, these have little to do with aviation. Bulk-goods retailing is already moving in, with Bunnings and Aldi having opened outlets and other retailers apparently keen to follow them.

The primary purpose of an airport should be so obvious as to need no restatement. In the era of privatisation that is no longer the case. Aviation businesses at Bankstown are finding some of the airport's taxiways have been fenced off for development. Their rents have risen sharply, too. Development is happening so fast and the plans are so exciting that aviation is getting in the way. The push is on to move the operators out to Camden airport. What do the residents of Camden think about that? What of the pilots and the air industry? Bankstown City Council is sanguine about what is planned now for the airport, but it is wondering what the future holds. In particular, will the airport developers be tempted to follow Sydney into retail developments that may draw business away from Bankstown's established centres? Those questions should have been the first to be answered when the present development was considered - but, as things stand, no authority even has to ask them. What the people of Bankstown and Camden want or need is irrelevant, as are the needs of the Sydney metropolitan area. Bankstown Airport is federal property and not subject to NSW planning powers. The developers can do what they like, as long as they have the

approval - and they do - of the federal Transport Minister. The situation is an utter shambles, and it has been caused by a disgraceful abuse of Commonwealth powers. The federal Transport Minister should control aviation; he should have no say in where Sydney's retail outlets, offices and shopping centres will be built.

Sydney people have good reason to be suspicious of private management of government functions. Some projects work; others fail. The Cross City Tunnel fails because the interests of its management (to make a profit out of motorists using one road) run counter to the interests of the community (to be able to use all roads freely). Bankstown Airport is now managed at similar cross-purposes. The community's need for access to air services cannot be served properly if its airports are run primarily to generate real estate profits.