



The proposed development would wrap around the Young & Jackson pub and potentially cast shadows over the neighbouring Flinders Street Station. Photo: Ruby Alexander

# City, residents left powerless as developer asks minister to approve tower despite height limit

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City editor

A proposed high-rise project more than double the maximum height limit for its part of the CBD would tower over Flinders Street Station and St Paul's Cathedral, and residents and the council are powerless to stop it.

Lendlease's proposed Town Hall Place development of four connected commercial towers across from the train station entrance would rise as high as 76.6 metres, soaring above the 40-metre maximum height limit for the area.

Residents of nearby buildings are worried the towers, slated to wrap around two sides of the Young & Jackson pub, would affect their light and amenity and are furious they are unable to formally object to the development, as it is not subject to normal planning controls.

Lendlease had approval for a 10-storey building but now wants to build a 16-storey building "to better align with the current market".

Residents learnt of the revised plans for the site after receiving a letter last week flagging the proposed planning scheme amendment to facilitate "a major commercial development" of almost 25,000 square metres, including shops, food and drink businesses, offices, a place of assembly and an education centre.

The letter, a copy of which has been provided to *The Age*, notes that on May 21 this year Lendlease wrote to Planning Minister Sonya Kilkenny asking her to use ministerial powers under the Planning and Environment Act to fast-track the updated development application.

Jamie Wdziekonski lives next to the Town Hall Metro Tunnel site and said residents were being stripped of their right to object through the City of Melbourne planning process or lodge an appeal with VCAT.

"My east-facing apartment on a lower floor will lose all morning sunlight," he said. "I'll need to turn lights on the moment I wake up."

Wdziekonski said he was most concerned the buildings would cast shadows over Flinders Street Station, whose main entrance is the most photographed corner in Melbourne. "The iconic clocks, the Federation architecture, the steps where generations of Melburnians have met for over a century," he said, "all of it sitting in the shadow of a commercial tower that Melbourne may not even need."

Residents have until July 1 to respond to the letter.

Ian Wight, chair of the heritage committee of the Royal Historical

Society of Victoria, said he was worried the development would overwhelm nearby heritage buildings.

"It would be most unfortunate to slap up against the famous state heritage-listed Young & Jackson Hotel, and would be seriously out of context with such a significant intersection, which includes St Paul's Cathedral, Federation Square and Flinders Street Station," he said.

Shadow diagrams prepared by the developers show the tower would overshadow the Flinders Street Station clocks during the afternoon at certain times of the year. Lendlease would not provide further details of the overshadowing.

Michael Griffiths, chief executive of community building Ross House on Flinders Lane, said Lendlease's original plans were for a height of 40 metres, the height of the adjacent heritage-listed Nicholas Building and the maximum height limit in Melbourne's retail district.

"It seems like Lendlease can't make enough money off the original design and so has said it needs to add in a lot more levels," Griffiths said. "I'm not sure it's the best way to make policy decisions."

A spokeswoman for Lendlease declined to comment on concerns about the project's height and the potential overshadowing.

"The proposal is focused on supporting jobs, investment and economic activity, contributing to the continued growth of Melbourne's CBD," the spokeswoman said.

More than a century ago the City of Melbourne placed a notional 40-metre height limit on what it called the retail core, becoming mandatory in the early 1980s. The idea was to bring light into Melbourne's major shopping precincts and mitigate the wind-tunnel effect of rows of skyscrapers.

However, the height limit has been under increasing pressure

from developers keen to build taller buildings to maximise their value.

Committee for Melbourne chief executive Scott Veenker said Melbourne needed to invest in high-quality commercial office space in order to remain competitive.

"Investment in the CBD supports jobs, productivity and the long-term vitality of our city centre," he said. "Any and all development must respect Melbourne's unique heritage and public spaces. Achieving the right balance is critical."

Melbourne University associate professor of architecture Rory Hyde said while it was sensible to concentrate development near stations, this was "a big chunk of building in a very sensitive corner".

Hyde said it was concerning Lendlease was seeking to capitalise on the exception created by the Metro Tunnel to circumvent local planning restrictions and go straight to Kilkenny for approval.

The City of Melbourne did not receive the proposed amendment until last week, and a spokesman said the final decision would be made by the planning minister.

"If you've got a good project, you should be able to bring it to the right forum, and it should be approved," Hyde said. "If you're trying to duck that process and that's your approach then you're probably not doing something that you think people will agree with."

A spokeswoman for the state government declined to comment on whether it would receive any benefit from approving the application. She said all applicants were able to submit proposals for the minister to consider.



An impression of the development (left); Ross House CEO Michael Griffiths. Photos: Supplied, Ruby Alexander