

OPINION

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EDITORIAL

Toondah proposal delays raise questions

MANY people have complained about the proposed \$1.3 billion redevelopment of Toondah Harbour.

It is pretty hard to find anyone who opposes the redevelopment itself. Rather, complaints are almost always about the project's size and, because of that, its undeniable impacts on the environment.

The latest shellacking has been from bird watchers and scientists they employ.

Generally, it would be hard to find a more conservative group than bird watchers. They usually are happier standing around in swamps being bitten by mosquitoes and midges than getting up on the hustings.

Anyway, they are stirred up now. The sixth delay to federal government assessments of the proposal at the behest of proponent Walker Corp was the trigger.

People want to know why this has occurred but few details have been forthcoming from Walker Corp. There has been no information from Environment Minister Josh Frydenberg but, admittedly, there is not much he can say while the developer is still formulating his position.

These repeated delays raise legitimate questions. How much rope should this development be given? Is the developer struggling to show the federal government how this major project will not impact on endangered species? Is the project being delayed for other reasons?

Is the federal government starting to worry just how it will meet its international obligations to protect the place?

One thing is clear, if conservationists delay a project like this, they cop a media thrashing by government and industry.

Rare and endangered species will be put at risk by the proposal. These species are listed under what is known as the Ramsar Convention, an international undertaking to care for species like eastern curlews.

Maybe it's time for a rethink on the project because it makes little sense for governments to be a party to this convention if they have no intention of honoring it.

Where the line is in terms of Walker Corp making a reasonable profit and public expectations being met is unclear. A fly in the ointment is that the state government has made Toondah a priority project - usually an indication it will be approved.

There is a notable exception. In 2013, the previous state government knocked back a Cape York bauxite mine after declaring it a significant project. Could Deputy Premier Jackie Trad follow this precedent?