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NSW arts minister defends Powerhouse Parramatta museum days after giving it the green light

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New South Wales' largest cultural capital works project since the Sydney Opera House will go ahead at a cost of at least \$950m, with the state government finally approving the Powerhouse Parramatta museum after a five-year controversy.

But the project is contingent upon the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences – better known as the Powerhouse Museum in Ultimo – raising \$75m of the total cost from philanthropic donations.

Planning minister, Rob Stokes, and arts minister, Don Harwin, announced the green light for the museum late on Friday, three days before a parliamentary inquiry into the government's management of museums and other cultural institutions was scheduled to hold its fifth hearing.

Giving evidence at that inquiry on Monday, Harwin said he was "entirely comfortable" with the progress the museum's campaign team, established in November 2019, had made in raising donations for the now approved project.

Greens MP, David Shoebridge, asked Harwin how much of the \$75m had so far been secured after a year and a half of fundraising. "None of it's in the bank yet but they're making excellent progress," Harwin said.

Shoebridge replied: "You have to get \$75 million. You haven't got one single cent, how can you say that's going well?"

Harwin said the NSW government had a solid track record in raising philanthropic funds for cultural projects.

"When we say we are going to do this, we will do this," the arts minister said. "And when I say that I am comfortable with the progress that's being made I know what I'm talking about. I have every reason to be confident about how that is going."

The Powerhouse Museum's executive director, Lisa Havilah, told the inquiry the drive for donations was "on track".

"You haven't received one dollar. And how is that on track?" Shoebridge asked her.

"We've made very significant progress and that progress is confidential until the government and the trust are ready to make an announcement about it," Havilah responded.

Harwin told the inquiry Powerhouse Parramatta would inject "hundreds of millions of dollars" into western Sydney's economy and create 4,000 jobs.

He dismissed allegations from Shoebridge and Labor MP, Walt Secord, that the 188 conditions placed on the planning consent could cause the total cost of the project to blow out to \$1.5b.

Among the conditions is the still un-costed plan to dismantle the Victorian Italianate mansion, Willow Grove, on the proposed museum site and reassemble it elsewhere in Parramatta, in what Shoebridge described as a “Las Vegas-style” copy of the original.



▲
Dharug custodians and knowledge holders Julie Jones (left) and Michelle Locke in front of Willow Grove in Parramatta.
Photograph: David Maurice Smith/The Guardian

Harwin said the historic mansion would be “sensitively” demolished and rebuilt, but he would not be drawn on the cost of the relocation project.

The secretary of the Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union NSW, Darren Greenfield, told the inquiry that as long as the NSW government adhered to its plans to demolish Willow Grove, the union’s green ban would remain, effectively preventing any construction on the new museum.

The CFMEU [placed the green ban on the project in November last year](#), in support of the traditional owners of the land, the Dharug people, who say Willow Grove and the land it sits on hold deep cultural significance for the local Indigenous community.

“The Dharug people [place] a lot of value in the land itself out there,” Greenfield said. “To remove the house you remove everything ... it’s the property, the house, the trees, it means a lot to them and to the community.”

Greenfield said the three construction companies shortlisted by the NSW government to construct the museum all operated under CFMEU enterprise bargaining agreements and the union's members would adhere to the green ban.

Havilah told the inquiry work on the museum site began at 7.30am on Monday.

Protest signs and memorabilia, including photographs of babies born at Willow Grove during its time as a maternity hospital in the 20th century, were removed from the site in recent days.

The new museum's site, on the flood-prone banks of Parramatta River, was problematic from an environmental as well as cultural and heritage perspective, the inquiry heard.

Giving evidence on Monday, natural hazards consultant, Steven Molino, said while modifications to the Moreau Kusunoki and Genton design had largely mitigated the risk of loss of life in the event of flooding, there was still a 12% chance of the museum's priceless collection being damaged by flood water in the presumed 100-year lifespan of the building.