

Lankarama Buddhist Youth Group (LBYG)
Lankarama Buddhist Temple
35 Oak Street
Scholfields
NSW 2762

Wednesday, 2 September 2015

The Honourable Robert Gordon Stokes, MP
Minister for planning (New South Wales)
Level 34, Governor Macquarie Tower
1 Ferrer Place
Sydney, NSW 2000

Dear Honourable Minister Stokes,

Re: Proposed rezoning of the Lankarama Buddhist Temple site at 35 Oak Street Schofields, NSW 2762

We are writing to you on behalf of the Lankarama Buddhist Youth Group to raise our concerns about the proposed rezoning of the land on which our Buddhist temple, Lankarama Buddhist temple, is built upon. We believe that the proposed rezoning was drafted without the understanding of the importance of the enormous service Lankarama temple provides in serving many thousands of Sri Lankan and Non Sri Lankan Buddhist people in the Sydney region.

In this letter, we would like to outline the religious significance of the temple grounds and its structures particularly from a youth perspective and the journey we, as a community, have taken to get to where we are. Honourable Minister, we would like to urge you to take into kind consideration following facts and allow the temple site to be rezoned in a way that would allow these valuable services to continue and to allow the Lankarama temple to grow and service the wider community.

The Lankarama temple was established in 1991, and since its inception, has continually provided a range of invaluable services to the community. With the primary objective of sharing the message of peace and harmony, as taught by Buddha, Lankarama Buddhist temple has promoted Buddhist Way of Life within the multicultural Australian community for over 20 years. Lankarama Buddhist temple has made a tremendous impact on lives of Sri Lankan and Non-Sri Lankan adults, youth and Children associated with the temple through a number of regular religious, social and youth development programs.

One of the programs aimed at the youth was the Lankarama Buddhist Youth Group (LBYG). It was established to serve and involve the young Buddhist youths under the guidance of the Venerable Dhammagavesi Thero, the chief Abbot of Lankarama temple, and the support of the Sri Lankan Buddhist Vihara Association (SLBVA). Lankarama Buddhist Youth Group has been established for over 10+ years and have a membership of more than 125 with more than 1000+ alumni members.

Some of the specialised programs for youths organised through the LBYG, include Vesak celebrations (Celebrating Buddha's enlightenment), meditation retreats and dhamma discussions with monks from the temple and many guest speakers. Through these sessions, we gain insight and learn how to live our lives in peace, harmony, friendship and wisdom. We also hold a family day annually where we celebrate the Buddhist family values and encourage social interaction between our members.

Additionally, the LBYG publishes an annual publication called Footprints in which we exchange ideas, advice and learn more about Buddhist way of life. LBYG also participate in food fairs with the help of wider Buddhist community to collect funds for the maintenance and development the Lankarama temple.

Through these activities Lankarama temple promotes in our youth community a life free from violence, drugs and alcohol and other negative factors and help our youth cultivate strong family values, integrated community values, and high moral values within themselves. These specialised programs for children and youth provide much needed spiritual guidance and support to help enrich their lives and develop high moral values.

Lankarama Buddhist temple has contributed immensely to help younger generations to understand the value of peaceful and happy co-existence with fellow human beings. With such upbringing many of our LBYG members who participated in our programs are now serving the community as successful doctors, nurses, engineers and in other professional capacities. One of the main factors why youth have been so well engaged in these programs have been the location of the temple. With easy access to the M2 / M7 and being close to Hills District, the temple has allowed youth from all over the Sydney region to participate easily in its programs.

Additionally, the youth and adults alike get a sense of peace and harmony from the temple grounds that they would not get from any other environment in their lives. The reason for this is the establishment of the unique and sacred sites within the Lankarama temple giving anyone who enters

the temple grounds a sense of tranquillity, peace and calm. There are two main sacred sites within the temple grounds. The first of these sites is the Bodhi Tree (Tree of Enlightenment) which is a Sacred tree as it is born from a sapling of the same tree under which Buddha gained his enlightenment. The second is the Stupa which had its official opening on the November 12th 2006.

For Buddhists, the Bodhi tree represents the real life Buddha. We worship the Bodhi tree as if we are worshipping Lord Buddha himself. For many of us younger generations, who have been either born or raised in Australia, it is a very rare to see or worship such a sacred tree. We are very fortunate that we have a Bodhi tree that has been established for the last 18 years at the Lankarama temple site. For some of us in the youth group, the Bodhi tree is where we were first brought when we were born and we have grown with the tree. For others, we have seen the Bodhi tree grow from our height to the structure we see today. For many of our older members, we bring our own children as they are born and grow up so that they too may worship the Bodhi tree and hence worship Buddha.

The second site of sacred site in the Lankarama temple is the sacred stupa structure adjacent to the Bodhi tree. The significance of the sacred stupa is that it has enshrined within it the relics of Buddha and some of the leading monks from the time of Buddha. These relics are very rare and very sacred for all Buddhists, and we are very fortunate that our stupa has these relics enshrined within it.

The Lankarama Buddhist Youth Group was actively involved in helping with the construction of the stupa at Lankarama temple. Our Stupa was officially enshrined in 2006. The land on which the stupa was built was also blessed by Indigenous elders of the area during this auspicious occasion. This once in a lifetime event was attended to by over 5000 visitors and over 60 monks from across Australia. The stupa opening was even recognised by the Prime Minister of Australia at the time, Mr. John Howard. Additionally the opening ceremony was congratulated upon by the Premier of New South Wales at the time, Mr. Morris Iemma and also by the Mayor of Blacktown City Council at that time, Mr. Leo Kelly. It was an extremely proud and special moment in our lives as it signified a great milestone in our community's efforts to establish the Buddhist culture for our future generations in Australia. It marked a day that many of the youths and adults will remember for the rest of our lives.

In Sri Lanka and around the world, some stupas that were built for Buddha more than 2000 years ago are still remain standing due to the care and attention by the Buddhist devotees and due to the support shown through the governments, kings and queens at the time. It is our hope that, with your support, we can preserve the stupa at Lankarama to be a symbol of our dedication to Buddha for many generations to come.

After the stupa opening, the stupa and paved area around it has been especially segregated as a sacred site to allow the ordination of monks (ceremony for new monks) to take place. Such a sacred site is called 'Sima Malakaya'. According to Buddhist tradition, this is done through a special ceremony involving more than 30 Buddhist monks. This unique site makes Lankarama Buddhist temple one of the few Buddhist temples in Australia that new monks can be ordained according to the customs.

In addition to the sacred sites at the Lankarama Buddhist temple, the site has been made sacred in many other ways. For instance, the resident monks in Lankarama have recited Buddhist chanting every day and every night at the temple for the past 18 years. This traditional Buddhist chanting creates a blessing not only to the temple site but also to the entire surrounding area. Many Buddhists go to temple to receive these blessings at every significant step in their lives, including (but not limited to) exams, first job / interviews, before getting married, before the birth of children, in sickness and even when loved ones have passed away. The Lankarama temple and the temple grounds have been interconnected with our lives in so many different ways that it is hard to imagine it being in any other way.

Lankarama Buddhist temple is not just a place of worship. For many Sri Lankan and non Sri Lankan Buddhists it is the heart and soul of our lives. It is a unique asset for the entire New South Wales region. It is a shining jewel that bring together three main factors of Buddhism, the Lord Buddha (our teacher), Dhamma (Buddha's teachings) and Sangha (Monks). The entire Sri Lankan Buddhist community in Sydney has worked tirelessly to build this unique asset for the benefit of all the Buddhist and Non-Buddhist community in New South Wales.

Much of the work in constructing the Stupa, the Dhamma hall and landscaping the surrounding areas were done by volunteers including those from the LBYG. All of the funds required for construction was raised through public donations, community food fairs and fund raising events. These are not efforts of a single individual, but efforts of a large community, who have dedicated their lives into building and growing the temple for all of us and our future generations.

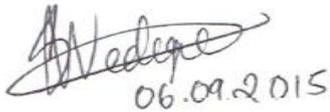
Lankarama Buddhist Temple brings to everyone associated with it a sense of joy, peace and happiness that gives our lives a meaning and a higher purpose of living a life full of love and compassion. As a youth group, this is something invaluable as we shape the hearts and minds of Australia's future generations with a more positive and kind sense of purpose. Many hundreds of children, young students, working professionals and families visit the temple regularly and enjoy doing so. The

traditional celebrations held throughout each year, verdant surrounding and the placid atmosphere brings peace and happiness to the hearts of all those who visit the temple grounds.

We thank you for your kind attention to the facts that we have raised in this submission. Given the above points, Honourable Minister, we request your understanding of the significance of the site and the effect it has had on the Sri Lankan Buddhist community in New South Wales. As such we earnestly urge you to reconsider and alter the proposed rezoning to allow our Buddhist temple to function as it currently is serving many hundreds and thousands of Buddhist (Sri Lankan and Non-Sri Lankan) in the Sydney region and beyond for many years to come.

Thanking you.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, which appears to read "Wedage", is written over a horizontal line. Below the signature, the date "06.09.2015" is written in the same ink.

Shashika Dinushi Wedage Don,

President LBYG,

On Behalf of Lankarama Buddhist Youth Group