The ‘mystery man’ behind $20m apartment plan

The man behind Baybern Developments, Colin McKenna, together with Premier Denis Napthine and Warrnambool Mayor Michael Neoh, at Mr McKenna’s Midfield Meat complex earlier this year. Image: ABC South-West Victoria.

OPINION

[dropcap style=”font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;”] B [/dropcap]luestone can reveal what should be the worst kept secret in Warrnambool: the developer behind the $20 million, nine-storey “Sandilands” apartment complex is **Colin McKenna**, from the Midfield Meats empire.

Mr McKenna is listed as the current director of **Baybern Developments**, a company set up in February this year, which plans to build what will be the biggest apartment complex of its kind for Warrnambool on a prime spot at 1A Liebig St, on the corner of Gilles and Merri streets.

The plan involves demolishing the old Sandilands hotel, and building a nine-storey complex that will include 51 mixed-use apartments, penthouses and two-floors of retail space, overlooking sweeping views of Lake Pertobe and Lady Bay.

Yet for all of the animated discussion that is being generated by the project, there has been a weird shroud of secrecy over who is behind the plans…until now.

An artist's impression of the proposed nine-storey apartment and retail complex on the corner of Gilles and Merri streets.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] A [/dropcap] glowing editorial in the local newspaper today about the project, urged locals to embrace the "exciting and welcome new vision" and declared: "there would have to be excellent reasons for opposing a development such as this".

And then there was this strange line: "We're told that a consortium that includes a western Victorian developer is behind the plan, but it doesn't really matter who is building it or developing it as long as it gets done."

“We’re told”? “It doesn’t really matter”? “…as long as it gets done”?

The paper’s first story on the project was equally obtuse: “Baybern has been described by Tract (Consultants) as “western Victorian developers” which The Standard understands includes a Warrnambool entity.”

Surely the first question any eager newspaper wants to know is who is behind such a bold proposal, especially when that someone turns out to be one of, if not *the*, wealthiest local businessmen in town and an influential figure in our community.

And surely it is even more relevant to the wider public interest given Mr McKenna’s company, Midfield Meats, is behind the other most significant development in Warrnambool in the last five years with its proposed 10-storey milk processing plant in Merrivale.

That project, like the Sandilands development, has its own critics, particularly among the Merrivale community who don’t want to see even further industrialisation of their tiny patch.

So the question is not why the local newspaper didn’t find out who was behind Sandilands – of course they know – but why they are choosing not to report it?

We could only ponder, as we researched Baybern Developments ourselves.

The former Sandilands building, most recently occupied by Maddens Lawyers, which was built by local builder Ern Harris in 1940.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] T [/dropcap]he intrigue only adds to what is a long and fascinating story around the site.

Baybern Developments purchased the site earlier this year from Percy Properties, a company representing a cluster of lawyers from Madden's law firm, including former mayor **James Nicol, Brendan Pendergast, John Madden** and **Stan Carroll**, who occupied the building for many years after the Sandilands guest house closed. (The owner of Sandilands, **Katherine Plant**, sold the property to her solicitor, Dan Madden, after she retired).

Despite its name, Percy Properties was never interested in property development at 1A Liebig St. Its intention, first flagged in 2006, was to sell the site free of encumbrances to somebody else who would build a modern accommodation complex.

Permits to knock the building down, however, were stymied by an independent heritage assessment which found that the 1940s,

red brick, art-deco building that was built by local builder **Ern Harris,** had social and local historical significance.

Not to be deterred, Percy Properties fought on, and the Warrnambool City Council finally voted 4/3 in February 2009 to disregard the heritage report and allow demolition. (Those who wanted the building saved, by the way, were **Crs Michael Neoh, Jacinta Ermacora** and **John Harris**, while **Crs Rob Askew, Peter Hulin, Andrew Fawcett** and **Jennifer Lowe** voted against it.)

The Sandliands private hotel as it was in its prime. The hotel closed in the 1960s, after which the property was sold to Dan Madden.

[dropcap style="font-size: 60px; color: #A02F2F;"] I [/dropcap]t is such a familiar story for Warrnambool: when it comes to development, it is either all or nothing.

There is rarely room for creative compromises, like those seen in cities around the world, where heritage (ie. irreplaceable, character-filled buildings) and modern architecture combine.

And if you seek such a compromise, you are howled down as being "anti-progress".

Local architects were not involved in the design of the

Baybern proposal, in favour of Melbourne firm **ClarkeHopkinsClarke**, but there are already promises of 80-100 local jobs during its construction. (As an aside, there were 200 jobs promised in the Midfield Meats milk processing and cold storage project, but it has since been confirmed the milk factory will create only around 12.)

There is no doubt 1A Liebig St is ripe for something very special, but razing yet another piece of local history and replacing it with what Warrnambool Planning and Heritage Group president **Julie Eagles** so perfectly described as "plonk" archictecture – architecture that can go anywhere – does not seem very special at all.

The public have until October 29 to make comment on the proposal (Planning Permit #PP2014-0162), after which it will return to the council for consideration.

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