

Who is saving Thirroul?

The Flame caught up with Save Thirroul Village campaigners ahead of a Land and Environment Court site visit on 25 July

Front 2 rows, L to R: Murray Jones, Stephen Le Bas, Libby Gentle, Louise Wellington.
Back 2 rows, L to R: Annette Jones, Martin Gorrick, Donna Henderson, Linda Kara, Victoria Dawson, Ray Smith.



It takes a village – and a whole lot of time, energy and hard work – to save a village.

A group of volunteers, led by Thirroul residents Louise Wellington and Stephen Le Bas, have spent the past two years fighting the Thirroul Plaza DA. They believe in its current form the DA poses existential threats to the village character, escarpment views, street parking, small business, traffic flow and even live music.

“Over the past two and a bit years, Louise and I have probably invested around 1000 hours between us,” Stephen says. “We probably invested close to 100 hours between us in the run-up to the last DA exhibition period closing.”

Louise: “We’re pretty much on the phone like every day.”

Stephen: “Yep, there’s a lot of comms in the background. Louise tends to look after a lot of the social media stuff, I look after the website. We are always kicking ideas around, strategising, planning, Louise often talks to council.”

The Thirroul residents have run a professional campaign focused on playing the issues, not the people. They even created a stylish brand identity. The graphics for car stickers, flyers and the tees worn for the *Flame*’s photo shoot are the work of local designer Simon Perini.

“Every second car has a Save Thirroul Village sticker on it,” Louise says. “So the support from the broader community is there.”

Their success in mobilising the community is remarkable. “Apparently if you get 50 objections to a DA, it’s a good day,” Stephen says. “So we’ve got over 1000 – that’s in a population of about 5 or 6000 people. That’s a high percentage.”

Louise agrees: “It’s one of the most participated in DA exhibition processes – potentially in Wollongong’s history.”

Louise met Stephen online

Residents were chatting on Facebook, in the Thirroul Living group, about the first Plaza DA back in March 2020.

Louise – who has a Masters in Urban Management and Planning, and spent 16 years working as a planner – saw the topic was hot, and often misunderstood, so she decided to set up a dedicated discussion group.

What’s it called?

Stephen: “It’s a mouthful.”

Louise laughs: “It is my government bureaucratic language background – it’s called Thirroul Community for a Sustainable Town Centre.”

Stephen Le Bas and Louise Wellington.
All photos: Anthony Warry

The Facebook group attracted about 500 members in a month and now has more than 1500.

“I created that space so people could ask questions and share information because it really is the biggest development that I’ve seen in my 40 years here,” Louise says.

“I felt that the whole community needed to be informed and there needed to be capacity built in the community to be able to make an informed submission on the proposal.”

As a side win, the community was so well informed on issues surrounding street parking that last year when Transport for NSW proposed to solve traffic congestion by putting in clearways, residents swiftly mobilised to squash the idea.

Thirroul residents have all poured their time, energy and experience into the campaign.

“We have lulls [after exhibition periods],” Stephen says. “Louise and I have both got real jobs, so we relax.”

Louise, who grew up in Coledale, is now working as a photographer, but she remains passionate about sustainable urban design.

Stephen, a software professional by day, said he was driven to get involved after seeing how big the proposal was. “The more I saw of the plans, the bigger and bigger it was – well, this is just going to ruin the place. I didn’t move back down here to have a Bondi Junction by the Sea.”

Stephen grew up in Mt Keira and spent 40 years away in Melbourne and Sydney before returning to live in Thirroul. He was involved in a successful campaign in Bexley to save a local pool.

“Community action does work,” he says.

“Defeatism gets us nowhere. You’ve got to go out positively, thinking you can win.”

Stephen’s engineering background means he is very “systems focused”.

“That works well in terms of being able to project manage this campaign,” Louise says.

“Then there’s the human side, where Stephen has the passion and drive; he’s very motivated and energetic – whereas I’ll be a bit more, not conservative, but just a bit more measured, and sometimes think about the PR impacts.”

Stephen: “We work really well together. We don’t do anything without checking with each other first.

Louise: “I remember we spoke on the phone [before we met], because I was like, I’m going to suss this guy out, make sure he is not a nutter.”

She laughs. “It was a two-hour conversation. And I felt like we were on the same page.”

Stephen volunteered to act as a moderator. Zoom calls kicked off communications, then, once Covid rules permitted, residents began holding informal meetings at Thirroul Bowl.

Louise: “Then we just decided we should



probably call ourselves something a bit simpler.”

Stephen suggested Save Thirroul Village.

The term ‘village’ is correct, Louise says: “Under the DCP (Development Control Plan) it is classed as a village.”

Louise’s experience in planning has influenced her reactions to the Plaza DA.

“My first role was as a social planner. So often I have community well-being and cultural identity in mind when I think about planning matters.

“I was involved when the big Calderwood proposal was proposed out the back of Albion Park. The council opposed that and it went to court and unfortunately council lost and it went ahead. It is very different – it’s a greenfields versus an in-fill development. But in terms of the strain on existing infrastructure, it has similar sorts of issues.”

Years ago, Louise wrote an early version of Wollongong City Council’s community engagement policy. “That’s another reason why I feel so strongly about this proposal,” she says. “The philosophies behind best practice community engagement are about early engagement with the community. And that’s a collaborative process rather than – it’s almost like a parent-child relationship [with the Plaza development]. It’s like we are being told what we should have in the town rather than actually being asked.”

In two years of campaigning, their differences have proved a strength, Stephen says.

“We got to understand each other and respect

From L to R: Murray Jones, Annette Jones, Martin Gorrick and Ray Smith are members of the long-established Thirroul Village Committee, a separate community group that has supported the Save Thirroul Village campaign.



each other's differences and different skill sets."

They come from different age, academic and demographic backgrounds, he adds.

"And also the masculine-female. So we have a clash of heads sometimes."

Is there a chief?

Louise: "There's a good cop and bad cop."

Stephen: "I'm generally bad cop."

Perhaps due to their firm focus on the broader impacts for Thirroul, the word Nimby (Not In My Back Yard) hasn't been thrown around much.

"When people call us Nimbys we go straight to the bank – traffic, loss of live music. We go to the actual issues," Stephen says. "We don't have an issue about that site being developed. We have an issue with 80 units being there. If you can get 80 units there, not lose these escarpment views and not screw the traffic up ... well, we wouldn't have much to complain about."

The volunteers' efforts to involve the entire community are in contrast to those of the developers, whose engagement stretched to a few ads in the *Mercury*, Stephen says. "If that counts."

Louise says the developers haven't had a conversation with the community. "There's been no consultation whatsoever. We've even invited them to one of our recent meetings. They didn't come and it's just a shame."

She compares this to town centre developments in Western Sydney where the likes of Lendlease run "massive" engagement programs. "These people haven't even put a sign up in their complex about it, let alone had active engagement with people to see what their aspirations are for a town centre, which is essentially what they're creating."

"We are not anti-development. It's about making sure that it ties in with the existing character of the village and it adds value to the economic and social aspects of what makes Thirroul so terrific."

Long-term campaigning on controversial matters has taken a toll. Both agree it's been a distraction on the work front, with some stress spilling over into their personal lives.

"In the back of your mind is a mild concern for your own personal safety," Louise says.

"We have had our signs on the bridge stolen."

Stephen – who remembers his house being targeted, trees chopped down and letterbox vandalised when he was working the Bexley pool campaign in Sydney – says that a big part of his volunteer role is keeping things civil on Facebook.

"As soon as we see something which is a bit defamatory, we just take it down. Because that's not what we're about."

Despite the campaigners' efforts and the community's "extraordinary response", the battle hasn't been won. Stephen says: "One of the things that's frustrating is that you've got such enormous public opposition – yet there's a sense that may not carry weight, it could just be overruled by the state government planning processes."

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SAVE THIRROUL 25 July 2022

As part of the process determining the application for the redevelopment of Thirroul Plaza, the Land and Environment Court will be performing a site visit on Monday 25 July 2022.

This provides our community an opportunity to come together in an impactful way.

We're still working on plans for the day but please put 25 July in your calendar.

Make sure you follow our socials where we'll keep you updated about how you can get involved.



www.savethirroulvillage.com.au