



Brian Corr is head of Hobart Not Highrise, a lobby group fighting proposed city skyscrapers. *Photo: Adam Gibson*

Right now, Hobart stands on the precipice; the very qualities that draw people here are at risk of being compromised. What's striking is how rapidly new arrivals assume guardianship of their adopted city. Irish-born Brian Corr moved to Hobart two years ago from Perth; in under a year he was president of the community lobby group Hobart Not Highrise, which mobilised in response to two skyscrapers being proposed by the Singapore-based Fragrance Group.

We meet outside the popular Harbour Lights cafe down on the waterfront, the sun beaming down and a fresh breeze blowing. The voice of Frank Sinatra spills onto the street from the cafe's speakers, competing with raucous seagulls. You could describe Corr and his wife as "climate refugees" from the WA heat, but he also left the West Australian capital because he was tired of living in a city where the dollar was king.

“Best move we ever made, it really is,” Corr says, his Irish burr still strong. “Hobart’s just a fantastic city, and it’s to do with people.” He adds: “It’s very like Dublin.”

Corr wants to keep it that way. He’s now on the frontline defending Hobart from what he sees as inappropriate development. As a retiree, he has the time and he enjoys the work. Skyscrapers, he argues, will ruin the city’s unique character, and there are plenty who agree with him. Outraged by the Fragrance Group’s proposed high-rise hotels, more than 6500 people have now signed the petition against them begun last April on the group’s website. Notably, nearly 400 of the group’s supporters are from the mainland. “We didn’t create the anger, we channelled it,” Corr says.

Two packed public meetings – at the Town Hall and the Hotel Grand Chancellor – made clear the level of opposition against concrete colossi. Hobart Not Highrise wants nothing less than skyscrapers banned. “You allow one, it’s a precedent,” Corr says. “You have to stop the first one ... the best cities in Europe don’t have high-rise.”

Hobart's skyline has never risen beyond the 73 metres of the Roy Grounds-designed Wrest Point Casino, which opened in February 1973. At 210 metres, one of Fragrance Group's proposed towers is almost three times the height of Wrest Point; the other, at 94 metres, is 34 metres taller than the Tasman Bridge. Both buildings are proposed for the Sullivans Cove precinct which has a height limit of 18 metres – plus discretion.

“Now, regarding discretion, I always like to use the word reasonable,” Corr says. “If you put 210 metres in an 18-metre area, that’s not reasonable.”

Singaporean interest in Hobart is strong, with Fragrance Group having four hotel developments in the pipeline, including one on a midtown 3500-square-metre site that cost less than \$4 million. Another Singapore-based company is building the 63-metre-high Palace Hotel in Elizabeth Street, near the bus mall. The CBD limit is ostensibly 45 metres, but Hobart City Council approved the hotel after the developer knocked the height down from 73 metres.

The planned Fragrance towers are at the city's edge, near main roads, in areas which could perhaps support high-rise. "It's a precedent," Corr stresses. "Put one in and you can't stop the next one. The council has lots of grounds to say no. The problem then would be if the state government declared it a major project and said yes."

The future skyline of Hobart is shaping up as another key issue at the March 3 state election. Hobart Not Highrise is concerned that the state government's proposed major projects' law is so broad and poorly defined that it hands the planning minister the power to bypass councils, allowing skyscrapers to be built by canny developers exploiting loopholes.



The cruise ship Ovation of the Seas arrives in Hobart in 2016; such tourist-filled vessels are a boon for Tasmania's economy. *Photo: Supplied*

On my return to Melbourne, I ring the Tasmanian Liberal Premier, Will Hodgman, and ask, among other matters, about the pressure being brought to bear on Hobart's skyline by international developers. "It's symptomatic of an economy that's strong," he says. "When we came into government we proudly declared that the state was open for business, and it's not surprising given the high levels of confidence and interest in our state that international investors are looking to Tasmania. We need to strike the right balance, work with developers, understand their needs but also convey our very strong view that what makes Tasmania so special is worth protecting."

In the space of a few years, Tasmania has gone from Apple Isle to Isle of Dreams. The question, now, is whose dreams will prevail?

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