

Shire calls for inquiry to scrutinise Ballina land deals

Ben Hills

Ballina Shire Council has called for an independent investigation into the sale and rezoning of land in projects worth more than \$100 million.

The North Coast council voted this week to ask the Director-General of Local Government, Garry Payne, to drill down into the deals to see if they should be referred to the Pecuniary Interest Tribunal or the consumer watchdog.

The Mayor of Ballina, Phillip Silver, told the council that he was extremely concerned about issues concerning the deals, first raised in the *Herald* last Saturday, because of the potential damage to the council's reputation.

At the vote, one councillor, Margaret Howes, called for the cancellation of a \$10 million sale of council land at North Angels Beach for a housing development, claiming collusive tendering. She was unsuccessful.

The 4.8 hectares of council

land was sold to a firm controlled by a Ballina developer and publican, Christopher Condon, and two other developers.

A cosy relationship exists between the council and Mr Condon, who says he has 31 projects worth \$140 million in the shire. The wife of one councillor, Peter Moore, is a director and equity partner in one of Mr Condon's companies, which is planning a \$50 million redevelopment of a caravan park in the shire. The councillor declared

last year, before voting on one of Mr Condon's schemes, that his wife and Mr Condon's wife were partners a townhouse development, and that, according to legal advice, this was not a conflict of interest. Last month he declared an interest in the redevelopment of the caravan park and did not vote on the matter.

Greg Trent, the shire's former engineer, resigned last year to work with Mr Condon and holds equity stakes in two of Mr Condon's developments. He says

he had no role in any of Mr Condon's rezoning applications.

As well, Mr Condon released documents this week showing he had donated \$5000 to the ALP, with a covering letter saying the money was for the state election campaign of the Labor candidate and Ballina councillor Sue Dakin.

Ms Dakin, who told the *Herald* in a heated phone call that she lost the election because of Saturday's article, issued a statement saying that as of Tuesday the NSW ALP had not received the \$5000. She

has said she declined Mr Condon's donation to her campaign and told him he could make an unconditional donation to the ALP.

Most controversial of all is the \$10 million sale at North Angels Beach to Mr Condon's company for subdivision. Mr Condon said he and the two other bidders had agreed before putting in tenders to cut each other in on the deal if they were successful. He denied this was collusive tendering.

The subdivision, he said, could yield a profit of \$13 million. Cr

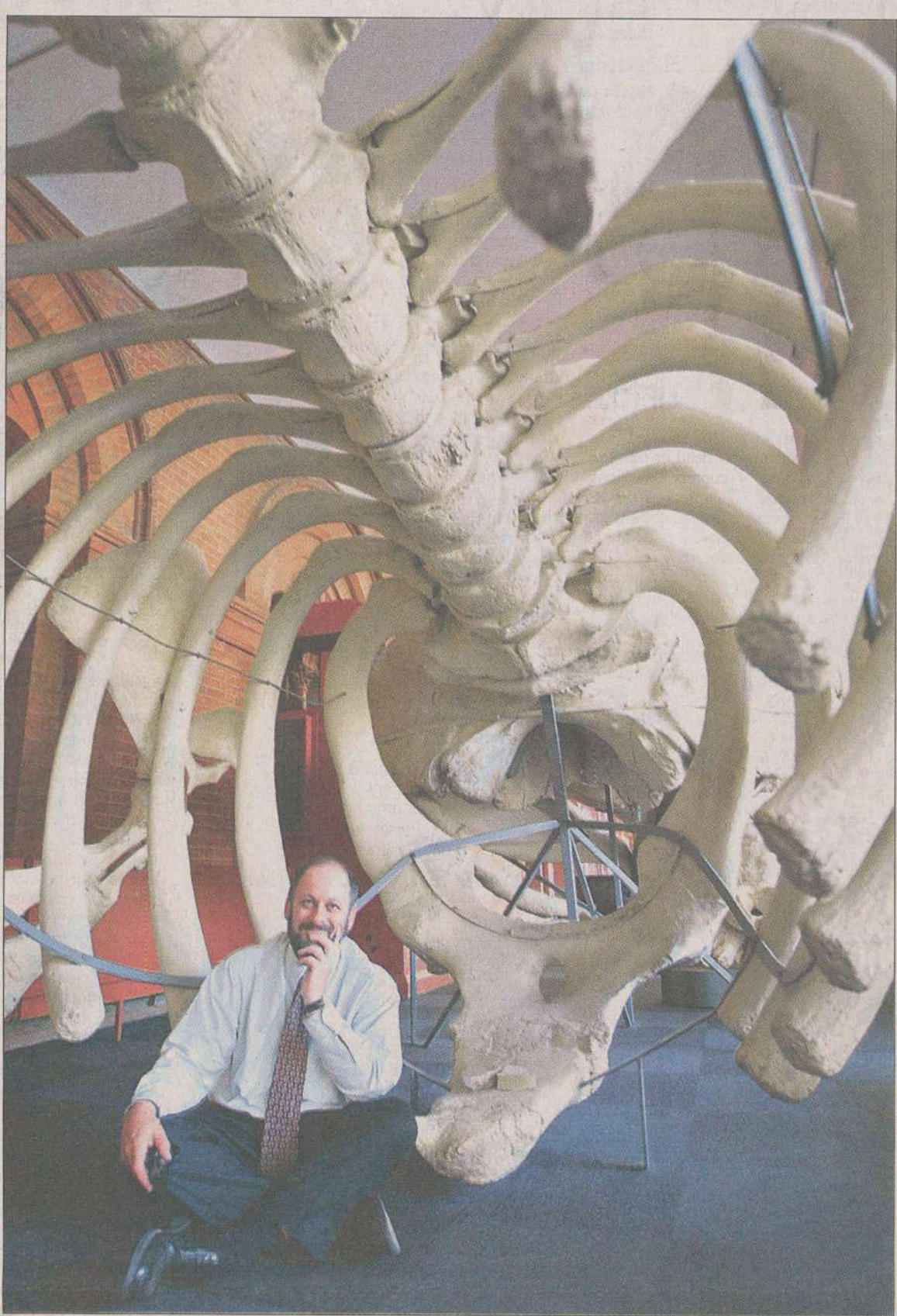
Howes, who is locked in legal dispute with Mr Condon, says this is money the council could have made if it had undertaken the subdivision itself.

Cr Silver said that the council had not developed the land itself because of sensitive indigenous issues. He thought the sale was an excellent result.

Mr Condon's legal battle with Cr Howes, which stems from a confrontation the two had outside council chambers in January, also continued this week.

Mr Condon claims Cr Howes called him corrupt and told him: "I'm going to get you." Cr Howes says Mr Condon said: "I'm going to pay someone to get rid of you." Both deny the allegations, and the matter was adjourned to Lismore court on April 7.

Mr Condon also says Cr Howes and another councillor, Alan Rich, are biased against his developments. The council has referred his complaint to the Independent Commission Against Corruption.



"A lot of unacceptably woolly thinking" . . . Tim Flannery at his museum yesterday. Photo: Peter Mathew

Eat whale . . . and save the planet

James Woodford

Less intelligent whale species are much like sheep and should be sustainably hunted, says one of the nation's most influential environmental scientists, Tim Flannery.

In a controversial paper to be published in next week's *Quarterly Essay*, Dr Flannery, author, mammalogist and director of the South Australian Museum, says whale protection has departed from "environmental logic".

His essay, *Beautiful Lies*, is a damning critique of the management of Australia's diverse ecosystems.

He condemns the environmental harm of such massive infrastructure projects as the Snowy Hydro-electric Scheme and the damage unleashed by population growth. But there are many surprises: one of the foremost environmental lies, he contends, is that cats send native species extinct.

"There has been a lot of unacceptably woolly thinking about the environmental crisis in Australia," Dr Flannery writes. "If we are to take Australia's environmental crisis ser-

iously and, as I will suggest here, fight it as if we are fighting a war, we must base our action plan on the best science we have rather than prejudices or assertions . . . the woolliness extends to the heads of some of those who lead the Australian environmental movement."

Among his many targets are "save the whale" campaigns. Australia has been a world leader in the fight to protect whales from hunting and a push for a whale sanctuary.

"What people fail to realise is that the Cetacea (the group to which whales and dolphins belong) is an extraordinarily diverse group of mammals," Dr Flannery writes. "It includes relatively large-brained hunters like dolphins and killer whales (which have the demonstrable intelligence of land-based hunters such as dogs) and tiny-brained filter feeders such as the blue whale. These leviathans are aquatic vacuum-cleaners, whose need for intellectual power is slight indeed."

Dr Flannery says it is the filter feeders rather than the hunters that

the Japanese and Norwegian target. "If these animals are closer in intelligence to the sheep than the dog, is it morally wrong to eat them if they can be harvested sustainably? My view is that at present the anti-whaling lobby is frustrating the attempt to develop a sustainable industry based on these creatures, and is therefore frustrating good management of marine resources."

He argues that recent rises in the populations of species such as the southern right whale may not be due to anti-whaling campaigns; it may be that hunting has depleted the populations of the southern right's competitors.

Speaking yesterday, Dr Flannery said: "I think the Japanese are right. They are actually trying to create a sustainable whaling industry."

Michael Kennedy, director of Humane Society International in Australia, said: "Flannery's argument only has friends in Japanese, Norwegian and Icelandic circles." Lies and the landscape - Page 51

Is it OK to eat whales? Poll at smh.com.au