Opinion

**NSW's new motor sports bill shows exactly who's in Newcastle 500 driver's seat**

By Christine Everingham and Therese Doyle,

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NEWCASTLE 500: A new motor sports bill has left Newcastle ratepayers out of the loop.

On March 30, 2022, the NSW government quietly passed a new motor sports bill to govern all motor sports in NSW, including the Newcastle 500. It puts to rest any lingering notion that City of Newcastle has ever been in a partnership arrangement with Destination NSW and Supercars. Remember this?

"City of Newcastle (CN) has voted to support a partnership with DNSW and Virgin Australia Supercars on a bid to bring the annual season-ending round of the Australian Supercars Championships to the city from next year."

Unbeknown to elected councillors at the time, the idea of a "partnership" relationship was a myth designed to encourage CN to sign up to the five-year rights fee deal without the necessity of a business case. Two years later, after numerous freedom-of-information requests and a successful court appeal, the Newcastle East Residents Group (NERG) discovered that there was no partnership. Instead, CN was simply a Supercars' services provider, a secret jealously guarded by Supercars. A confidentiality clause prevented even the elected councillors from knowing what these services were or how much they cost.

The idea of a partnership arrangement is very seductive. It implies that despite outlaying untold millions on this event, Newcastle ratepayers would share in its benefits. Years later we learned the extent to which these benefits were [deliberately inflated](https://www.newcastleherald.com.au/story/5759554/newcastle-council-commissioned-report-at-odds-with-supercars-crowd-figure/).

Yet, the grandiose and discredited claims of motor racing promoters continued to be extolled as justification for staging these events in the future, as speaker after speaker stood up in parliament to support the bill. The disruption and negative impact on local businesses was mentioned briefly, but this didn't stop both main parties supporting a bill that prevented anyone negatively impacted from claiming compensation. As the Greens' MLC David Shoebridge said, the opposite was true: "(this bill) is effectively a 'get out of jail free' card for motorsports from pretty much every environmental, social and heritage protection that would normally apply to a planned activity under the planning, heritage and environmental protection laws".

These acts were able to be pushed aside by Supercars in the past to allow them to run the event in the city's historic east end. While the heritage act must still be observed, damage done to historic homes and buildings during past events shows that many of the conditions set down by the event authority to protect our heritage were ignored and not enforced.

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Under this bill, the difference is that the state government has added the crowns land act to the list of acts pushed aside to stage the event. The Foreshore Park is on significant areas of Crown Land, which has constrained Supercars' operational demands in the past - but this will no longer be the case. CN is preparing the Harbour Foreshore landscape masterplan. How will the bill affect the plan's design? What does it mean for community engagement in the process? There is another concerning clause in the bill, 55 (ii), which reveals the real relationship that the council has with Supercars and the NSW government. CN is simply a government agency that must provide ". . . resources or assistance in accordance with a request authorised by this Act or the regulation".

As Julia Finn, the shadow minister for sport, said: "The proposed section also enables the minister to give a written direction to a government sector agency, now including a local council, requiring it to comply with a request by the government coordinating agency in certain circumstances . . . This could be interpreted by some in the community as meaning that councils will be at the beck and call of the government".

While Finn did not believe this was the intention of the Minister for Tourism and Sport, Stuart Ayres, it is exactly how NERG reads this bill. CN must provide whatever resources the minister authorises on behalf of the promoter. He must first "consult" with CN, but NERG is concerned that consultation after the fact may have little influence on a minister well known for his enthusiasm for sporting organisations.

It appears CN is happy with the bill, since Hansard shows they were consulted by the minister before the bill was put to parliament - although this may be news to our elected councillors. Previously, the NSW government commandeered the Newcastle East peninsula on behalf of Supercars in great secrecy and with inordinate hype.

The new bill at least lays bare CN's real relationship to Supercars and the NSW government. It disproves any future claims CN might make about their power to refuse to take up the five-year option - or indeed to renegotiate the terms that the exorbitant demands of the services deed already make upon city ratepayers. And ominously, the new bill allows for up to two events a year.

**Dr Christine Everingham, on behalf of NERG,  with Therese Doyle, the author of *Wrong Track: What Drove Supercars to Newcastle***