

Golden 'dream' now a nightmare

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Price is not right: Vassily Afcouliotis and family say \$15,000 each for their seaside blocks would be fairer. *Photo: Angela Wylie*

Hundreds of Victorian families could receive just \$1500 for spectacular seaside blocks many have owned for more than half a century but have never been allowed to build on.

It has been described as Victoria's longest-running and most difficult planning dispute - the fate of more than 2000 blocks unscrupulously sold for urban development on a sliver of coastal sand along Gippsland's Ninety Mile Beach.

Not long after the sale of the blocks - mostly through the rapacious behaviour of real estate agents to newly arrived Italian and Greek migrants in the early 1960s - authorities declared the area unsuitable for the dense housing.

The planning dispute dragged on for 50 years and is now reaching an end with a recommendation from the local Wellington Shire Council to the state government to rezone the land, once touted as Victoria's "Gold Coast", for rural conservation - meaning landowners will never be able to build.

A recent report by an expert planning panel noted the blocks were on sandy soils or sand dunes and had no connection to reticulated water or sewerage systems. There were also concerns about native vegetation, biodiversity, flooding, erosion, bushfire and the impact of climate change.

Owners have been offered \$1500 to sell the blocks to the council, an amount the council says is an ex gratia payment.

Those who bought land between Glomar Beach and Golden Beach - a narrow sandy wedge between the Pacific Ocean and Lake Reeve - now have the choice of the money or a block of land on which they will never be allowed to build.

Many families are outraged by the \$1500 offer, others have accepted it and walked away from the planning nightmare.

Some say they have paid more than \$1500 in rates over the years.

One family, who bought a block at Flamingo beach in 1964, said the \$1500 offer was "a slap in the face" to many owners who struggled to buy the land.

Another, that of Vassily Afcouliotis, bought two blocks in 1971 and said they should be paid at least \$15,000 a block.

"My rights have been taken away from me. As an Australian citizen, I was given the right to buy the land, I was given a certificate of title, the title says I can build and I found out after 20 or 30 years I have nothing," he said.

"I won't sell them - I am not going to give them up," he said.

Block owners can camp or put a caravan on their land if they can access their block and not damage native vegetation.

Another owner, Giuseppe Taranto, said the land was subsiding and he had no intention of building on the land.

He has called for a royal commission on the sorry saga.

Mr Taranto said block owners should be paid for the land a similar price to the value of land in other coastal areas of Victoria.

"What I think would be fair and reasonable for what we have been through would be \$500,000," he said.

The voluntary \$1500 payment offer runs out in June 2015 and the council rejected a recommendation from an expert planning panel to compulsorily acquire the land after that.

So far, 560 lots have been transferred back to the council, which up to now has paid out \$2 million. Some owners, who joined three or four lots together to form one, are being paid more than the standard \$1500. But owners of the remaining single lots should expect a maximum of \$1500 a block. About 2000 blocks remain in private ownership.

Wellington Shire Council said the proposed planning changes were an attempt "to start drawing the whole difficult episode to a close". Councillor Darren McCubbin said the council had sympathy for the owners but the planning changes banning development would be final.

"This is not another transitional phase, this is the final step," he said. "They were sold a pup by developers," he said.

Planning controls for the area were non-existent at the time of the original sales.

"The developers were unscrupulous, rapacious, they preyed on people that were new to this country," he said.

The planning changes to zone the land for conservation have been sent to Attorney-General Robert Clark because Planning Minister Matthew Guy has excluded himself because he owns a holiday house at Golden Beach.

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