

Coastal dream moves closer to reality

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Alfred Zammit and wife Maryann at the site they have always wanted to call home.

Photo: Simon O'Dwyer

Once it was a desolate coastal strip touted as Victoria's Surfers Paradise. Today it is . . . well, a desolate coastal strip. But that may change, reports Jewel Topsfield.

In 1962 a real estate agent offered Alfred Zammit the opportunity to buy the great migrant dream – a piece of Australia. A block of land along the majestic Ninety Mile Beach was a great investment, fetching big money later, the agent enthused.

A lavish drawing on thick parchment, titled Golden Beach Club Estate, depicted a massive subdivision, with streets with exotic names like Bermuda Avenue and Florida Way.

"We'd been told it was going to be a holiday resort . . . the Surfers Paradise of Victoria," Mr Zammit said.

The Ninety Mile Beach allotments were sold by Willmore and Randell Real Estate Developers, on behalf of Westcoast Builders, who carried out a door-to-door sales campaign in the late 1950s and early '60s. The estate agents chased inner-city suburbs such as Prahran, Richmond and Abbotsford and new suburbs such as Springvale, where there were high numbers of migrants, many lured to Australia by the dream of owning their own home.

For Mr Zammit, the opportunity was too good to resist. The factory worker, who had migrated from Malta in 1951, he could never have afforded property in his home country. In this new country with a bright future, he bought 2530 Malibu Road, Golden Beach, for £168. Meeting the monthly repayments was a struggle, but he dreamed of building his holiday home in the Surfers Paradise of Victoria.

Forty-three years later, it remains a desolate, wind-swept stretch of coast, 30 kilometres south of Sale. The only thing Golden Beach has in common with Surfers Paradise is that they are both near the ocean. The subdivision is overgrown with dense tea-tree thickets and hairy spinifex and the only occupants of Malibu Road are waterfowl, swamp wallabies and savage mosquitoes. The golf course, country club house, swimming pool and shops promised during the intoxicating sales campaign of the early 1960s were never built.

The dreams of Mr Zammit and thousands of others – mainly migrants – who bought blocks between The Honeysuckles and Paradise Beach have dispersed like wind-blown sand. Soon after signing up, the buyers of a 12,000 allotments along a 27-kilometre stretch of the Ninety Mile Beach, learnt they would be forbidden to build. The State Government deemed the environmentally sensitive sand dune and wetland allotments – which if built could house up to 35,000 people – unsuitable for development.

Suddenly the land titles were not worth the paper they were written on. The vast majority of sites have never been built on – some people managed to build before the ban was imposed in 1973 – and thousands continue to pay for land they cannot live on.

But after stalling for more than four decades – largely because of the cost of compensating victims – the local council and the State Government could finally do something. The Wellington Shire Council is considering allowing residential and commercial development on part of the subdivision.

Under its proposal, people who own land at the hamlets of Paradise Beach, Golden Beach and The Honeysuckles will be allowed to build. The council may even consider blocks of apartments.

However, development bans would remain on the rest of the subdivision. The council is considering asking the Government to buy out these landowners.

One factor driving the proposal to develop the three hamlets is the desire by Victorians to find a patch of coast on their own – the so-called sea change phenomenon.

Booming coastal property values has brought demands for action from families that own land in the ghost subdivision.

Among them is Rozsika Hayes-Marshall, whose father Bela Guba bought a quarter-acre block at Letts Beach for £248 in 1963. Mr Guba, a Hungarian migrant, took 10 years to pay off the land he bought for his children. Ms Hayes-Marshall said: "Mum and Dad used to be so happy . . . this was a means for them to own some land. They felt proud in Australia."

However, in the late 1970s Mr Guba learnt that he could build on the site only if he bought the three adjoining properties. "I was really angry and disappointed that his dream had fallen through," Ms Hayes-Marshall said.

Despite the building ban, Ms Hayes-Marshall said Wellington Shire charged \$156 a year for water services and sewerage. "Every time I pay the rates I think, what for?"

The subdivision was approved by the former Rosedale Shire in the late 1950s, when there was no planning scheme. But in 1973, the Government froze building on the subdivision, saying the sand dunes were potentially unstable. Low-lying areas around Lake Reeve were flood-prone.

A Town and Country Planning Board report in 1975 said even partial development could damage the fragile dune system. It said a subdivision "of this type and magnitude should never have been created".

Almost two-thirds of owners of blocks at Golden Beach, Letts Beach, Glomar Beach, The Honeysuckles and Paradise Beach were told they would now need to buy four blocks before they could build. Most owners could not afford another three blocks or neighbouring owners refused to sell.

An additional 4000 owners, including Mr Zammit, were told in 1978 by the Ministry for Planning and Environment that their block was on swampy land that was subject to flooding from Lake Reeve. A document sent to landowners said: "As development . . . will be prohibited because of the unsuitable condition of this land, no compensation is payable to the owners. While the Government regrets that people purchased land with such difficulties, they did so at their own risk."

Mr Zammit, 69, of Springvale, believes owners should be compensated for their worthless land.

"The land is subdivided to build houses and when you buy it you can't build a house? What the hell!"

– with Royce Millar