

Masterchef Shannon Bennett's Dandenongs mansion revival causing stir among locals

By Liz Hobday

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PHOTO: Renowned chef Shannon Bennett outside the Burnham Beeches mansion at Sherbrooke, on the outskirts of Melbourne. (ABC News: Andrew Atree-Williams)

The latest business venture by celebrity chef Shannon Bennett is creating quite a stir in the Dandenongs, just east of Melbourne.

MAP: Sherbrooke 3789



The Vue de Monde restaurant owner and Masterchef identity's plans to redevelop the site of the crumbling Burnham Beeches mansion at Sherbrooke has got some locals worried it could ruin their quiet lifestyle.

Burnham Beeches was built for the Nicholas family, founders of the Aspro brand, in 1933.

Since then, it has had various incarnations; as a holiday home, children's hospital, science research facility, and hotel.

The new plans for the site include a luxury hotel, a brewery, two restaurants, a spa centre, a cooking school, an outdoor cinema, and 68 privately owned cabins, to be managed as part of the hotel.

Mr Bennett said he and his business partner, Adam Garrison, planned to create a world-class destination.

"Create something that's magical, create something that's aspirational for people to see, that's world class," Mr Bennett said.

But members of the 300-strong community of Sherbrooke are worried.

"There is a lot of concern in this community because there's no detail, there is just a case of 'trust us, we'll look after you', well it doesn't work that way," Yarra Ranges Shire councillor Noel Cliff said.



PHOTO: Locals fear works to restore the crumbling mansion could ruin their quiet lifestyle. (ABC News: Andrew Altree-Williams)

Mr Cliff is concerned the proposed cabins will be sold off, the property will be subdivided, and the land overdeveloped.

"They want to sell them off, so that means they've got to be on a separate title, and that's a subdivision," he said.

Although Burnham Beeches is zoned for "special use", the 22-hectare site is surrounded by land zoned green-wedge, appropriate for low density building.

"It would look like we've cut a slab of Knox out and just dropped it in there," Mr Cliff said.

But Mr Bennett said the money from selling the cabins was essential to finance the restoration of the Burnham Beeches mansion, which is expected to cost about \$22 million.

"The funds from that part of the development would go straight back into the hotel and we can spend our \$22 million and operate this hotel with minimal debt," he said.

Robert Ray's Sherbrooke property looks onto the back of Burnham Beeches.

He expected to live in the Dandenongs for just a year or two, but has become a long-term resident.

"It's a beautiful spot. We have all come up here for a reason - to get away from the hubbub of the inner-city and the traffic," he said.



PHOTO: Renovating the Burnham Beeches mansion is expected to cost about \$22 million. (ABC News: Andrew Altree-Williams)

Mr Ray said he would love to see the mansion restored, but he was opposed to Mr Bennett's proposal.

"It would be terrible to see a part of the Dandenongs sacrificed for the restoration of a house," Mr Ray said.

He also said there was no formal commitment from the developers to restore the historic house.

"They can sell up midway through and the deal can come undone - we don't really see any binding thing to restore the mansion, in fact we are very sceptical," Mr Ray said.

"It's going to be something that may never ever happen."

Mr Ray said he was also worried about fire risk.

"I've been here in the 1997 fires, and the Black Saturday fires, and it is a scary place to be," he said.

"The roads off the Dandenongs are really inadequate for the present residents to get off the mountain in an emergency, let alone another thousand."

Mr Bennett said he was working with the CFA to develop a fire plan.

"There are concerns about fire risk, there has definitely got to be a fire plan put in place. But if there was an extreme fire danger day, you wouldn't be opening," he said.

Several community meetings have been held in recent weeks, drawing hundreds of residents.

The Yarra Ranges Council knocked back the initial proposal to develop the site at a meeting earlier this month.

It decided the proposal lacked detail.

But it has given in-principle support to a tourism development at Burnham Beeches, if it means the property's historic mansion can be restored.

Topics: food-and-cooking, lifestyle-and-leisure, urban-development-and-planning, community-and-society, sherbrooke-3789

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