

Fighting on the beaches as council orders retreat from climate change 'threat'



PICTURES: DAN HIMBRECHTS

Russell and Anne Secombe, who retired by the sea, are alarmed their home is part of the 'planned retreat'. Below, Kylie Outtrim, a resident sharing the same fate



IAN HIGGINS

LIKE many working couples, Anne and Russell Secombe decided to find a place by the sea where they would eventually retire to live out the rest of their lives pursuing simple pleasures.

In the 1970s, the couple, in their 80s, found it, a modest single-level brick house at 23 Illaroo Rd, Lake Cathie, a town on the NSW mid-north coast.

It's simple bliss. Anne, a retired clerk, spends time keeping up her neat garden; Russell, a retired mechanic, angles on the beach for

blackfish, flathead and bream. But yesterday the Secombes' sense of hard-earned stability collapsed when they discovered they could be among the first victims in Australia to be dispossessed of their home.

Not because of any existing environmental threat, but because the local council believes climate change could pose one by the end of the century.

In a move that struck incredulity, alarm and fear among locals, Port Macquarie Hastings Council put a study on the council website recommending that council enforce a "planned

retreat" for the owners of the 17 houses on Illaroo Rd. The area is one of 15 "hot spots" identified by the NSW government as being vulnerable to the effects of sea level rises due to climate change, as outlined by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change.

For Illaroo Rd residents Kylie Outtrim, a nurse, and Stephen Hunt, a financial planner, yesterday marked "D Day" for making a property already devalued by council actions now unsellable.

Illaroo Rd is about seven metres above mean sea level, so there's no danger of flooding.

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Council forces coastal residents into retreat



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But the council's concern is that if IPCC projections of climate change and sea level rises come true, increased erosion will progressively undermine the road and then the houses.

The council's plan would mean the Secombes and their neighbours would, over an unspecified period of time, be expected or required to sell their house to the council and move out.

"We don't want to shift, no way," Mr Secombe told *The Weekend Australian* yesterday.

Ms Outtrim tells of their frustration at not being able to renovate the 1970s, two-storey brick house they bought five years ago because of the council's stance.

After the couple bought the house with a plan to renovate it and retire in it, the council imposed a ban on Illaroo Road owners doing any redevelopments on their properties.

Council's action has reduced property values on Illaroo Road by between a third and a half, according to local observers.

The report commissioned by the council and prepared by the Snowy Mountains Engineering Corporation says the "planned retreat" option would be the best of four to deal with a threat of erosion projected to emerge for a forecast rise of 0.4 of a metre by 2050 and a rise of 0.9 of a metre in sea level by the turn of the century.

The report estimates the cost of acquiring the 17 houses at \$10.5 million but says it would be preferable to building a protective wall called a revetment, at a cost of \$3m which they define as a "technically feasible option" that would "provide certifiable protection from erosion risks".

SMEC also found the other

two options — "beach renourishment" involving bringing in sand to replenish that lost by erosion, and building groynes (long breakwaters built into the sea) — would not be feasible. But getting rid of the houses would work because, SMEC reasons, if they are not there any more, they can't be threatened with climate change.

Long-term locals such as the Secombes point out that while erosion can be a problem, it has been a natural ebb and flow over the decades. "A few years ago there was an eight- or ten-foot cliff on the other side of the road, then three months on, it was back to a full beach," Mr Secombe said.

The council's head of development and environment services, Matt Rogers, yesterday agreed that this was the case and that "the erosion was much worse a few years ago than it is today".

Mr Rogers also agreed that since the road is about 7m above mean sea level, there's no danger of flooding.

The owners of the Illaroo Road houses say they are happy to take the risk of climate change themselves, but resent the council imposing a solution on them that will cost them dearly.

The owners of Illaroo Road houses, and others behind it who face less immediate and severe restrictions, have banded together to fight the SMEC proposal, and to urge council to adopt the revetment option. If the administrator of the council, Neil Porter, accepts the council officers' recommendation, the plan prepared by SMEC will go on public display for 10 weeks during which there will be public consultation.

The council officers will then prepare a plan to recommend to council by June. It is not clear whether it will be Mr Porter who will decide whether to approve it, or a new council to be elected in September.

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ANNABEL HEPWORTH
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ELECTRICITY prices could be varied according to the time of day or the season, and consumers could allow their power provider to remotely switch off household appliances during peak times, under proposals aimed at deferring some of the \$240 billion in infrastructure needed by 2030.

In a paper released yesterday, Julia Gillard's top energy adviser, the Australian Energy Market Commission, declared that if consumers could reduce or cut their power consumption during high-demand periods — such as during heatwaves — this could help

avoid costly and potentially risky

About \$11 billion in infrastructure over 100 hours a year, the hottest and coldest of the AEMU.

The commission's price signals will vary with time, although the time that can meet demand free starting to peak.

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