



Clr. Nathan Zamprogno MTeach BA JP

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18<sup>th</sup> January 2021

TO: The Hon. Paul Toole MP,

In your role as the Member for Bathurst.

Dear Paul,

I wish to draw your attention to some concerns about the state of Jenolan Caves, laying within your electorate, and its future.

I have had a life-long association with Jenolan, as a spelunker with the Sydney Uni Speleological Society (SUSS), as a teacher, and as a protector of the Caves' globally significant environmental, cultural, and tourism values.

Regular visits, including within the last month have confirmed my sense that the precinct is becoming badly run down and neglected – even beyond the effects of the 2020 bushfire, flood and pandemic.

I am aware of the April 2018 announcement made jointly between you and the Deputy Premier for \$8.5M of funding to make various infrastructure improvements, and your media release<sup>1</sup> indicated all works would be finished in 2021. Instead, I see no evidence at all of *commencement*, let alone completion, and the scope of the works targeted by the funding would appear to fall short of more clearly more urgent needs.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/news/jenolan-caves-to-receive-8-and-a-half-million-dollar-facelift>

These issues, which I emphasise largely predate 2020, include:

- Many traditional cave tours no longer run – not because of a lack of patronage, but due to decay in the paths, rails and wiring in the Pool of Cerberus, Ribbon and Jubilee Caves – among the prettiest and historically significant caves in the system, and after having been shown continuously for many decades.
- Fewer staff having the opportunity to live in the Caves' valley precinct and having to commute long distances, destroying the sense of community, increasing turnover and destroying the 'brains trust' those staff kept.
- Staff accommodations formerly kept in good order now standing cordoned off, decayed and condemned, such as the Guide's accommodation below carpark #1.
- Closure of two key features, the Devil's Coach-house and associated self-guided Nettle Cave, for over three years despite no evidence the risk of rock-falls is elevated beyond the historical level, and despite an expensive redevelopment of Nettle for public access launched only in 2006.
- Closure of the Blue Lake walk for similar reasons.
- No repair of paths, twisted railings or clearing of debris caused by the post-bushfire flood after a whole year.
- Peeling paint and fixtures in the Caves House, especially in large public spaces like the Chisolm Dining room and hallways, along with cobweb infestations not cleared for years on external windows and crevices.

I am well aware of the *additional* catastrophic and delaying consequences of fire, flood and pandemic in 2020, which included:

- The loss of the much-loved Caver's Cottage on the hill, and whose peppercorn lease to the various Speleological societies enabled valuable exploration and scientific research of international significance.
- Reduced or cancelled access to the undeveloped caves in the McKeown Valley to speleological societies and supervised adventure cavers.
- Additional land-slippages on the Caves House Road and damage to the Blue Lake from flood debris.

A specific request I make is to seek assurances a replacement caver's cottage will be made available to Speleological groups – for the sake of future science at least, perhaps through the repurposing of one of the surviving cottages.

More significantly, discussions with multiple people indicate to me that long closures initially justified by the risks to safety and environmental damage are now sources of frustration to staff on the ground -- perceived as reflexive, bureaucratic, excessive, ass-covering, and damaging to the recovery of the precinct. I heard claims that risk-averse decision makers find it easier to keep something closed than to acknowledge that a cave is a natural environment with inherent risks, existing in a state of continuous, slow change. I'm told new geotechnical risk assessments and works programs to mitigate real risks – things that would permit re-opening, have not been completed, that hope fades for the funding promised in 2018, and that in any case, that funding would not target the more urgent needs I have listed.

There is no doubt that, properly maintained, and with key attractions re-opened, Jenolan would be a catalyst for a tourism-led revival of the Blue Mountains and Hawkesbury districts (which I represent on Council as a Liberal), and as your announcement said, also act as a gateway to tourism to Bathurst and the western plains.

I am calling on you to focus more attention on the neglect of the Jenolan precinct as part of the 2021 recovery, to advocate for a refocusing of funding, to review the operation of the Caves Trust, and to ask whether you are prepared to agree with my assessment.

In these endeavours I am at your disposal.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Nathan Zamprogno'.

Nathan Zamprogno,  
Hawkesbury City Councillor.  
Chair, Hawkesbury River County Council