

SUNDAY TELEGRAPH

Arise and take action

Citizen Power is the final defence against bad development

- Wendy Harmer
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I HEAR developers are lining up outside Barry O'Farrell's office, complaining that they didn't get a fair go under Labor.

It's rubbish, of course. During the past 16 years, almost every corner of the state was eyed off for sprawling housing estates, residential towers, shopping centres, retirement villages, mines, marinas and fancy resorts.

Good King Barry says the free-for-all won't continue, but forgive me if I'm sceptical.

Mere days after the election, prominent property developers were pushing hard for an even bigger Sydney and saying growth in NSW was "sluggish".

All of which means there are probably big changes coming to your patch soon.

I'm not anti-development per se.

I like a new and beautiful thing. But I hate it when rotten development is foisted on communities that don't want it, and I know inept planning when I see it.

You may never have contemplated being in a residents' action group, but there's nothing like the spectre of a crappy, six-storey block of flats looming over your back fence, or the loss of your beloved local green space, to get you off the couch and marching in the street.

As a proud member of various anarchist rabbles (aka residents' groups) protesting against bad and mad over-development, I've come up with a "bucket list" for anyone contemplating getting involved.

At least once in any such campaign, you should:

- Meet in a neighbour's lounge room to organise your strategy. If you're lucky, the person up the street is a lawyer, a community consultation professional, an IT specialist or a 17-year old who's into Facebook and YouTube. Hopefully, there's someone who will deliver leaflets and spray banners.

- Attend a local council meeting. It will probably be the first time you've ever set foot in the council chambers, apart from the time you lodged a 30-page document for your new carport. You'll be surprised how many people in the gallery are there for causes you've never heard of. At least you'll know you're not alone.

- Address a council meeting. This will be one of the most stressful things you've ever done. You have three minutes, and you'll work on your speech as if it were Barack Obama's address to the nation. Your legs will go wobbly when you're called to the microphone. During your address, you'll become aware that some councillors are texting on their mobiles, whispering, shuffling papers or doodling. Your time will be up before you even get to your best bit. Have you swayed opinion with your fine words? Probably not. But at least you've had a red-hot go.

- Write a letter to the local paper. You'll lavish hours on phrasing your case in fewer than 250 words, only to find you've been branded online as a selfish whinger by various anonymous idiots. Hopefully, one day they'll wake up to find an eight-lane freeway through their bedroom.

- Sell tickets for a fundraiser. Printing leaflets and bumper stickers, creating websites and employing QCs: it all costs big bucks. You may sell a few tickets for your group's trivia night, but inevitably you'll find yourself in a bleak community hall on a cold Saturday night as your mobile dings with apologies. Relax. Drink the prizes.

- Stage an action. Be it a rally, a march or a sit-in, you'll rent a public-address system that goes bung, have traffic problems that bring the police and have the size of your crowd underestimated by at least a thousand by the media. One of your supporters will be a nutter who either takes their clothes off or comes dressed as a wombat. This will be the dropkick who makes the TV news.

- Have your friends and family tell you to "get over it". Your phone bill will be enormous. Your email in-box will be full. While they're on the deck having Sunday lunch, you'll be poring over incomprehensible documents with a highlighter pen, trying to become an instant planning expert. They'll want you to give up. Tell 'em they're dreamin'.

- Think of running for office. I swear you will fantasise about being mayor, premier, prime minister or God - someone, anyone who could see your issue resolved in your favour. Don't despair. Keep going.

"When you come to the end of your rope, tie a knot in it and hang on," was Franklin D. Roosevelt's advice on this.

- Win or lose. If you lose, be prepared for the apathetic majority to be utterly shocked and appalled and say: "Why didn't someone do something?"

If you win, they'll say: "See? There was nothing to worry about."

You'll never get any thanks, but there'll be great personal satisfaction in knowing that everything you could have done for your community, you did. And you'll make some lifetime friends down there in the trenches.

More than two decades ago, Margaret Thatcher was given a standing ovation for her declaration: "The lady's not for turning."

Nor is this so-called clapped-out, washed-up, self-interested, greenie, leftie NIMBY.

Here, sign this petition.

Wendy Harmer is an author, a broadcaster and a mother. Her latest novel, Friends Like These, is in stores.