

Mt Wellington cable car: Ups and downs of Hobart's most controversial development proposal

A pie in Hobart's sky, a tourist-pulling money spinner or an environmentally destructive eyesore?

For as long as anyone in Hobart can remember, debate has raged over the idea of a cable car on *Mount Wellington*, which rises magestically 1,300 metres behind Tasmania's capital city.



[Photo: Ever since 1906, the Cascade Brewery has been regarded as the ideal launching pad. \(Supplied: TAHO\)](#)

Supporters and opponents are divided along the state's familiar "environment versus development" battle line.

Yet despite all the talk, bluster and fancy videos, we are not actually that much closer to a fully operating cable car than we were in the early 1990s.

There's no development application, no planning approval or even permission from one of the key landholders.

Still, the latest proponent hopes to have a cableway zooming up Mt Wellington by 2020.

This saga has produced some interesting characters, bizarre antics, false promises and planning headaches.

This cable car business goes back a century

MOUNT WELLINGTON AERIAL RAILWAY.

NOTICE IS HEREBY GIVEN that it is the intention of ARNOLD WERTHEIMER, of Bellerive, in Tasmania, to apply to the Parliament of Tasmania during the session to be holden in the year of one thousand nine hundred and five for leave to bring in a Bill, of which the following are the general objects, namely:—

1. To authorise the said Arnold Wertheimer to construct an aerial or other system of railway for the purpose of carrying passengers to and from the Springs, Mount Wellington, and the Pinnacle, Mount Wellington.

2. To provide for a lease of the land necessary for the construction of the said aerial or other system of railway, and to apply thereto the provisions of the Railways Clauses Consolidation Act, 1901.

The said Bill will contain all clauses usual in Bills of the like nature, or deemed proper for enabling the said Arnold Wertheimer to carry out the purposes and objects of the said Bill, and all matters relating thereto.

Dated this 22nd day of May, one thou.

[Photo: The very first plan in 1905 was for the cable car to run from the Springs to the Pinnacle. \(Supplied: Trove\)](#)

Riding a cable car to the top of Mt Wellington has been a dream for more than a century.

The idea was first proposed in 1905, even before a road was built to the Summit.

In 1931, a fresh proposal aimed to run an "aerial cable tramway" from *The Springs*, a site about halfway up the mountain, and fancied Hobart being touted as a skiing destination.

But given the recent Depression, the promoters figured the plan was best deferred.

Fifty-six years later, enter Hobart engineer Tim Burbury who, backed by a Swiss manufacturer, spruiked the "Skyway" cable car launching from the historic Cascade Brewery site.

Visitors could stay at a summit hotel, dine out and in winter carve some turns on a new ski field. Opponents quickly mobilised with an angry town hall meeting.

In 1994, as the long-running stoush continued, the stones of the famous Keen's Curry sign on the hillside of South Hobart were rearranged to read "No Cable Car".

As tensions flared, sneaky tactics were used to win the public relations battle.

When a "confidential document" detailing cable car plans was produced by opponents, Mr. Burbury claimed he planted it in his rubbish to prove his rivals were going through his bins.

Mr. Burbury revised his plan in 2004 but it remained unrealised on his death in 2010.

Carrying the baton now is Adrian Bold's *Mount Wellington Cableway Company*, proposing an eight-seat gondola to a mid-station clearing at Golden Gully Park, featuring a zip line and BBQ facilities.

Then it's a 3.5-kilometre trip to the summit in an "aerial tramway", with the whole journey taking 11 minutes.

For a local family, the ride would cost about \$60, Mr. Bold has said.

It, too, starts from the *Cascade Brewery*.

The windswept and rocky top would be transformed with a tourism hub including a visitor centre, restaurant and wine and whisky bar, but alas no ski field.

Mr. Bold said his plan was to remove the existing viewing shelter.

"Our intention has always been to replace the existing shelter with another that is sympathetic to the skyline, warm and less exposed to the prevailing wind," he said.

*"Whether we are allowed to do so will depend on the planning conditions."
The whole project is expected to cost more than \$50 million.*

Who's the (latest) man with the plan?

Development consultant Mr. Bold first came on the cable car scene in 2012 as a man with a new - well newish - idea.

Soon he was spruiking a ready team of Canadian investors – a country full of cable care – with about \$30 million ready to splash.oon he was spruiking a ready team of Canadian investors – a country full of cable

cars – with about \$30 million ready to splash.



[Photo: The present lookout will be knocked down if Adrian Bold's plan is approved. \(ABC News: Gregor Salmon\)](#)

Things started well when laws were passed clearing the way for commercial development at the top of the mountain, although with some pesky caveats.

Mr. Bold's company had a feasibility study done by October 2013, which gave him the confidence to tell reporters at the time the Project would be up and running in 2017.

But that hope faded as Mr. Bold bounced between the Mountain's caretaker, *the Wellington Park Management Trust*, and Council's multitude of approvals.



[Photo: Adrian Bold hopes to have the cable car up and running by 2020. \(ABC News: Stephen Smiley\)](#)

By the start of this year he needed a win and the Tasmanian Liberal Government delivered, vowing to take control of land on *Mount Wellington* needed to build the cable car.

This means Mr. Bold can get the all-important "landholder consent" from the State Government rather than the *Hobart City Council*.

He would then have to return to face a hostile council that has the final say on his much-awaited DA.

But if their arguments to reject it aren't in accordance with planning law, Mr. Bold can appeal to the state's planning tribunal.

In the past five years, Mr. Bold has faced a number of questions over the Project's visual impact and viability.

Leaked plans showed the height of the towers may reach 75 metres, horrifying those who feared the infrastructure would ruin the Mountain vista.

The proponents now assure the highest towers will not surpass 30 metres.

Last year, eyebrows were raised when *Carlton United Breweries* (CUB), which owns the Cascade site, revealed it had not given any support to the cable car project.

This was at odds with Mr. Bold's reassurances at the time the Brewery was on side.

Like many, CUB is still waiting on the development application.

During that time the Canadians disappeared, but Mr. Bold assures Australian investors have since filled the void.

So who's up for a monorail, er, cable car?

Some of the state's most powerful people have long supported the cable car, many coming from the Liberal Party which Mr. Bold openly supports.

In the late 1980s, opponents rubbished Mr. Burbury's proposal as, then, Premier Robin Gray's "monorail".

Tasmania's present-day leader Will Hodgman, a personal friend of Mr. Bold, has trumpeted the cableway for more than a decade.

His colleague, Environment Minister, Matthew Groom, pushed its case in his first speech to Parliament in 2010.

State Labor, on the other hand, has been noticeably absent from the long-running debate, but recently said the Project should be put out to tender.

The Tasmanian Tourism Council has long prosecuted the cable car's case, arguing the current *Mount Wellington* tourism experience was far from world class.

Current Hobart Mayor, Sue Hickey, and former Mayor, Damon Thomas, also like the idea and have copped plenty of flack for it.

Even *Lonely Planet* has got in on the act, describing the proposal as a "breathtaking attraction".

Overall, supporters argue more tourists means more money for Hobart with one analysis putting the broader economic benefit at up to \$100 million a year.

In short, they think the business case stacks up.

And who wants to shoot it down?



[Before the cable car development \(Supplied\)](#)



[After the cable car development \(Supplied\)](#)

Those fighting the cableway argue it tramples on *Mt. Wellington* environmentally, culturally and visually.

For starters, the majority of aldermen on the *Hobart City Council* are uneasy about the project at best.

In 2013, Indigenous leader, Heather Sculthorpe, was infuriated cable car proponents registered the Mountain's Indigenous name - "kunanyi" - as an internet domain name in an attempt to promote the Project.



[Photo: In 1994, the Keen's Mustard sign in South Hobart was rearranged to read 'No Cable Car'. \(ABC\)](#)

She accused Mr. Bold of ripping off Aboriginal culture - and pronouncing the name incorrectly - and has since vowed to fight the cable car to its end.

The Tasmanian Conservation Trust and the *Tasmanian Greens* vehemently oppose the cable car for being a potential foothold for "unfettered" development, intruding on the mountain's ecological landscape.

Community groups *Respect the Mountain*, *No Cable Car*, and *Residents Opposed to the Cable Car* (ROCC) have fought the Project at every turn.

ROCC spokesman

Ted Cutlan, who has been at it since the early 1990s, fears the Mountain will be ruined by a tourism hub at the top.

When it was pointed out that the Summit was already dotted with "eyesores" in the form of transmission towers, he said he hoped technological advancements would consign the towers to the scrapheap, allowing the Pinnacle to be returned to its "unadorned state".

"It's that visual impact on the mountain that most upsets me. The fact that something's there now does not mean to say we should keep adding stuff,"

Mr. Cutlan said.

Over the past two decades it's been difficult to pin down exactly where the weight of public opinion sits.

But in 2013, about 200 of more than 260 submissions to a master plan for the mountain were against the idea.

Inevitable or never ever?

Some opponents see the cable car as a looming financial failure, a potentially abandoned rusting reminder of a bad idea.

The proponents say if the venture fails, a capital reserve trust fund will pay for the cable car to be dismantled and parts sold off on the global second-hand ski-field market.



[Photo: Taking in the view from the summit is high on the tourist to-do list. \(ABC News: Gregor Salmon\)](#)

But the *Mount Wellington Cableway Company* will not release financial modelling, a break-even analysis and the business plan for commercial reasons.

Its website says there's a waiting list of Australian investors and the most recent capital raise achieved a "32 per cent oversubscribed result".

But does that assurance answer the basic question - is there enough cash to build the thing?

Mr. Bold declined to address any cost-related questions the ABC emailed to him.

But respected economist, Saul Eslake, said there's nothing "underhand" or "dodgy" about keeping those financial details from the public.

"The [oversubscribed result] shows the company is not having any trouble thus far raising the money needed to progress the project to this point," he said.

"Though that amount would be a fraction of what's needed once the project is approved."

Seems it's here to stay, real or imagined

If one looked into a crystal ball and saw *Mount Wellington* in 2030 what would they see?

Will a cable car be going full steam, capitalising on Tasmania's tourism boom, delivering millions of dollars to the wider economy?

Will opponents concede it's not quite as bad as they thought?

Or will the Mountain be as it is today, and on top standing a much greyer Mr. Bold promising to a press pack no more delays, this time for real a 2033 opening date - financed by a new round of investors, wait for it from New Zealand.