

Woolworths set to build one of Australia's biggest liquor stores near dry Darwin Aboriginal communities

Territory rushes through laws to allow a Dan Murphy's outlet held back for several years by strong community opposition



Woolworths plans to build a large-scale Dan Murphy's outlet in suburban Darwin despite strong opposition.

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Woolworths is set to build one of Australia's biggest alcohol outlets within walking distance of Darwin's Aboriginal communities, after the Northern Territory government rushed through laws to allow it, raising the fury of health organisations who say it is "closing the gap of life expectancy in the wrong direction". Members of the NT's independent liquor commission, whose decisions have been sidelined by the new law, have also threatened to resign over the "debacle".

Woolworths' plan to build a large-scale Dan Murphy's outlet in suburban Darwin has been held back for several years by strong community opposition.

In 2019, the commission refused the application on the grounds that it would increase the risk of alcohol-related harm in the community. The commission also said it would be built too close to the dry Aboriginal community of Bagot, and in walking distance of two others, Kulaluk and Minmarama.

On Thursday the NT government passed legislation that will give the final decision on the application to its own director of liquor licensing, who will not be required to consider community impact.

“This bill ... will further our government’s red-tape-busting agenda,” the NT’s small business minister, Paul Kirby, told parliament on Thursday. “Businesses need certainty to invest and investment creates jobs.”

But Aboriginal health and community organisations are deeply angered by the latest moves.

The chief executive of the Danila Dilba health service, Olga Havnen, said it was “absolute hypocrisy” for Woolworths to build an alcohol outlet of this size while being a partner of Naidoc week and supporting reconciliation.

“It’s complete and utter hypocrisy,” Havnen said. “This is wilful and deliberate decision making, putting profit before people with no regard to the harm that it causes.

“Sixty per cent of the kids that we’ve got in Don Dale [juvenile detention centre] today would have at least one cognitive impairment, most of them two, and the chances are most of them are derived from alcohol. I am absolutely furious about it,” she said.

“Making alcohol more readily available, accessible and cheaper, we know from all of the research that’s been done, just creates more problems in terms of the health impacts, family violence, people ending up in hospitals, people ending up in prisons,” she said.

“This makes no sense whatsoever.”

On Thursday, Woolworths announced a plan to move the proposed outlet further away from Bagot. The proposed new site is 1km from the original location and, according to opponents, still within walking distance of the three dry Aboriginal communities.

Woolworths, through its subsidiary Endeavour, which owns Dan Murphy’s, said the new site “will help to alleviate some of the key concerns” and indicated that some local people supported the move.

Endeavour’s general manager of corporate service, Shane Tremble, said: “We have spent a lot of time having meaningful conversations with local communities to understand their views, listen to any concerns they may have and to address them.”

Havnen and the chief executive of the NT’s Aboriginal medical services, John Paterson, have written to the chair of Woolworths, Gordon Cairns, saying they do not approve of the new location and their views have been misrepresented.

“To be very clear – our organisations do not support you putting one of the biggest bottle shops in Australia within walking distance of three dry Aboriginal communities.

“We do not support the current proposed location on Bagot Road and Osgood Drive, and we certainly do not support the new location which has only just been revealed.

“To misrepresent our organisations and our concerns during Naidoc week is particularly disappointing.

“Naidoc is a time to celebrate the history, culture and achievements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It is not a time to try to gain corporate traction through misrepresenting our voices.”

The chair of the independent liquor commission, Richard Coates, said many of its 13 members had considered resigning over the “debacle”.

“I think when they first saw the legislation, yes,” Coates said. “And maybe some of them still are. I’m not going to blame anyone, if that was their view.

“The liquor commission has 13 members, doctors and paramedics, social workers, community representatives and lawyers, all from quite diverse views and backgrounds. So we’re quite fortunate with the calibre of the people on the commission, who bring their experience and their skills in determining all these matters.”

He said the government’s decision to legislate to fast track the Dan Murphy’s approval was “not a good look”.

“It brings with it a bit of political pain every time that you embark upon one of these special changing of the rules. It’s not an easy process, and it draws a lot of attention. It’s not a good look to be doing this. One would hope that it’s not going to happen again. But it does diminish trust in the process.

“The Northern Territory’s got more problems with grog than anywhere else in Australia, and our consumption rates, although declining, are still about 20% higher than the rest of Australia,” Coates said.

“And the cost of misuse of alcohol in the Northern Territory is huge, and estimates [put it at] \$7,000 per head per year.”

Coates said he wasn’t sure whether the proposed new site was a better option.

“I think the main point is that it still isn’t being given the proper rigour that any other application would be given in terms of meeting the public interest.”