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GLIMMER OF HOPE

Potential lifeline offered to Heritage Estate owners

By **GLENN ELLARD**

AFTER years of prolonged battles and seemingly endless frustration, a smile is finally starting to appear on June Esposito's face.

The Shoalhaven Landowners Association president is one of more than 1000 landowners at the controversial Heritage Estate paper subdivision who has been given a glimmer of hope they might get some return on property bought decades ago.

Years of battles, negotiations and planning discussions came crashing down two years ago when federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett used his powers to block a plan prepared by Shoalhaven City Council and the state government to rezone 730 of the estate's 1100 blocks for residential development.

While Mr Garrett said at the time the land was too environmentally sensitive to accommodate homes, the federal government refused to buy the 180 hectares from the individual owners to incorporate it into the national park system.

However, Shoalhaven City

Council is making moves to ensure the land is finally paid for and protected.

"The land contains habitat for a range of threatened species but is under threat from illegal dumping, trail bike and four-wheel drive use and firewood collection," said Shoalhaven Mayor Paul Green.

"Addition of the land to the national park would deliver significant social and environmental benefits.

"It would allow sensitive habitat to be managed by the National Parks and Wildlife Service, strengthen the regionally important habitat corridor between Booderee National Park and the Jervis Bay National Park, and provide closure for the many landowners."

Mrs Esposito said closure was something many of the landowners needed, particularly as they collectively had paid millions of dollars in rates after spending a total of about \$20 million to buy their blocks.

"The government has not taken responsibility properly," she said.

"If they think it's so important then they should pay us for it.

"It's just a sad thing that the people who wanted to live down there couldn't do that."

Cr Green said council had spent the past two years trying to convince the state and federal governments to buy the land, however a new opportunity had opened under the Commonwealth Caring for Our Country program.

Under the scheme the government can provide up to two thirds of the purchase price for property on the condition that partner organisations including government, conservation organisations and community groups contribute the rest.

Council is looking at preparing a joint application in partnership with the NSW Parks and Wildlife Service and any other bodies such as the Foundation for National Parks and Wildlife, by the deadline of May 30.

Letters of support from the community will be added to the application if received by the deadline.