

City's loony lobby law

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THE city's ailing building industry has been hit by a new Gold Coast City Council policy that demands anyone involved in a development must register as a lobbyist.

The decision, relating to its interpretation of the Integrity Act 2009, has been branded "bureaucracy gone mad" by groups like the Urban Development Institute of Australia and Sustainable Development Gold Coast.

A host of professions – including planners, engineers, landscape architects, surveyors – may not be able to call or meet council planning staff unless they are registered lobbyists. The consultants also believe there



Paul Lucas is seeking legal advice on the council's decision

will be an impact on everyday residents wanting to put in a pool or extend their house because private certifiers would also have to register as a lobbyist. Deputy Premier Paul Lucas expressed concern about the council's action yesterday. "I don't want any confusion in this regard slowing down any development or building matters on the

Gold Coast," he said. "The Government is seeking advice from the Gold Coast City Council about why this decision has been made and is also seeking legal advice."

UDIA Queensland CEO Brian Stewart, who is also a lawyer, called an urgent meeting about the issue with the State Government yesterday when he heard about the rule. "We do not believe council has interpreted the Act correctly," he said.

"And you have to ask the question about why Gold Coast City Council is the only council to have moved on this."

According to the Integrity Commissioner's website, the Integrity Act 2009 is designed to ensure professional lobbyists act transparently and honestly when they "make con-

tact with government representatives in an effort to influence their decision making".

It states the Act is not there to control the actions of those who are "incidentally lobbyists", like planners and architects.

Gold Coast architect Greg Forgan-Smith said the industry was stunned by the council's action and the rule would not just apply to professional staff.

"If people are looking at putting a pool in, extend their house or build a caport, their builder or private certifier will also have to register as a lobbyist if they want to have any contact with council about a development," he said.

Sustainable Development Gold Coast president Chris Kogler said this was just another example of the

council holding up building and introducing "unnecessary complications".

"It is also quite demeaning to the professionals involved," he said.

"Taking this step is just ludicrous – it is bureaucracy gone mad.

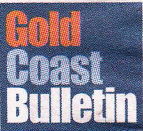
"You have to wonder how council officers could read the Act and come up with this conclusion."

Gold Coast City Council claims it is "endeavouring to comply with the State Government legislation" and is "seeking clarification from the Integrity Commission".

A council spokesman confirmed consultants would be required to make applications to the Integrity Commission for registration as a lobbyist.

Editorial

What were they thinking in city hall?



TOTAL shock is the only possible reaction to the news that from Monday our city council was suddenly only going to deal with regis-

tered lobbyists.

On the face of it the decision is incomprehensible and raises fundamental questions about the way our council goes about its business.

First news of this fundamental change came from a "critical alert" from the Urban Development Institute of Australia, dated yesterday, saying the GCCC "will not be accepting contact from consultants not registered as a lobbyist in relation to development applications".

The alert pointed out that planners, engineers, landscape architects, surveyors, ecologists – to name but a few involved in maintaining the lifeblood of this city – would no longer be able to deal directly with council.

The alert said council bureaucrats had even circulated a memo banning council staff from speaking to these professionals if they did not possess a lobbyist registration number.

The chaos this intemperate and precipitous decision would have created on Monday morning had the Bulletin not pointed out to council the madness in its method is hard to gauge.

Following urgent inquiries from the Bulletin, the council issued an alert of its own yesterday saying that it would not be following its own rules.

It also said it would seek clarification from the Integrity Commission on who needs to be registered as a lobbyist.

If it was not so serious, this Keystone Kops approach to local government would be funny.

Bringing a corps of lobbyists into local government adds yet another bottleneck in council decision-making and adds another layer of red tape insulating the council from the community it purports to serve.

The first of many crucial questions the issue begs is: why didn't council itself bother to inform its community of this decision in the first place?

Why has no other council made such a decision? Did the fact that this move would hamstring all development applications in the city escape the sleepy nest of bureaucrats that infest city hall?

Or was the decision simply regarded as unimportant?