



IRATE: Giralang residents Olga Calvert, Julie Nolan with children Kael, 8 months, and Sienna, 5, Sarah and Stephen Toaldo, with Michael, 6, and Belinda, 3, Bert and Kathy Kelly-Johnson, Avril Kelly, 14, Evan Kelly-Johnson, 7, Beryl Ross, Hilary Cameron, Sue and John Collins, with Rhiannon, 10, and Angus, 8, David Scoggins, Jim and Vicki McDonald with Rhianon, 11, and Leah, 9, Chris Martin with Alex, 7, and committee members Peter Nolan and Ross Calvert, front. Picture: MARTIN JONES

Residents plead for their ghost shops to live again

By Ian Warden

While a ghost town may have a kind of historical, nostalgic charm about it a ghost shopping centre, like Giralang's, is simply depressing. Members of the Giralang Residents Action Group met at the increasingly dilapidated centre yesterday (almost all its shops are closed now and are surrounded by strong, vandal-repelling wire fences) to continue their protest against what's become of their shopping centre and what they fear are plans to scrap it.

Although Planning Minister Simon Corbell doesn't yet have an application from the centre's lessees, the Nikias Property Group, for a redevelopment of the site for housing, the residents are sure this is about to happen. They allege the lessees have actively encouraged the closing of shops so the shopping centre's commercial failure makes a highly profitable housing redevelopment seem reasonable.

Mr Corbell said last week that lots of Canberra's shopping centres were planned and built in very different

demographic times in which wives stayed at home and did their shopping locally within pram-pushing distances. Those days were past.

Mr Corbell said that of course he was sympathetic to people's desires for viable local shopping centres, but that governments were powerless to do very much about demographic and market forces and couldn't compel lessees to keep unprofitable premises in shopping centres open.

However, it was because the Government really did recognise the "important social function" played by local shops, that normally a condition was made that where a retail centre was replaced with housing, the lessees must see that there was provision at the very least for a convenience store.

Yesterday at Giralang Peter Nolan said Mr Corbell's idea that residents' desires for a viable shopping centre were a "quaint notion" from the 1960s seemed strange, given that changes to the Territory Plan proposed in April this year for new suburbs in east Gungahlin included

recommendations that suburbs in Canberra should have access to local shops and a school.

"To suggest that suburbs don't need a heart, a shopping centre, as a focus for the community is ludicrous," he said. "I agree that of course market forces have to be taken into consideration, and that shops have to be viable, but when that determination of economic viability comes from the books of the people who stand to profit from a finding of commercial non-viability, then the process is flawed.

"Especially when the Government, too, stands to benefit, from things like change of purpose fees, rates and stamp duty. Then the two principal beneficiaries of that decision [to raze the shops and put up housing] are going to be the developers and the Government, and not the people of Giralang.

"This site was built on the premise of a shopping centre for the suburb. If the current lessees can't make a go of it as a shopping centre, how come they can make a profit from turning it into a residential development?

Why not hand the reins to someone else to have a go at turning it into a going concern?"

The group's members weren't placated, yesterday, by the news (news to them, they haven't met Mr Corbell yet) that when and if redevelopment occurs, Giralang will probably still have a kind of corner convenience store. They thought a shopping centre needed the synergies from a cluster of shops.

"One of the concerns of GRAG," Mr Nolan said, "is the loss of a community heart, a site, a place in which people can come together, run into each other and have a chat

"A local convenience store where you come and grab a loaf of bread can't provide that focus.

"The Government should become involved in this. Rather than allow market forces to dictate, the Government should meet with the community with the developers recognising that there are various interests at play here."

No one from the Nikias Property Group was available for comment yesterday.