

DRAFT Second Reading Speech

HON JO PALMER MLC

University of Tasmania (Protection of Land) BILL 2025

check Hansard for delivery

Mr President, I move that the Bill now be read a second time.

Tasmania has only one university, and its future matters deeply – not only for higher education, but for our economy, our workforce, and our capacity to grow and prosper as a State.

This Bill does three things – clearly and deliberately.

First it secures an ongoing University presence at Sandy Bay consistent with our election commitment.

Second it enables two parcels of land identified by the University as surplus to future needs to be rezoned for inner residential use.

Third, it creates a pathway for the value unlocked from that land to support investment into a new, world-class STEM precinct.

That is the central link in this Bill.

It turns surplus land into opportunity, and opportunity into investment in the skills and industries Tasmania needs for the future.

Mr President, the case for action is grounded in the data.

Like other jurisdictions Tasmania is facing challenges in productivity and workforce capability.

Across the economy, digital and technical skills shortages are a constraint on growth.

Our technology sector already contributes more than \$1 billion annually to the state economy and is projected to triple by 2035, creating 21,000 new jobs.

Yet at the same time, 31% of workers lack critical digital skills, and more than 1,500 businesses report shortages. It is estimated that addressing these gaps could deliver over \$200 million in productivity gains by 2030.

Mr President, the number of people in Tasmania currently holding STEM related qualifications in Tasmania is 25% below the national average.

If we want more engineers, more scientists, more digital specialists – we have to create an environment that attracts students into those fields and supports them to stay, study and build their futures here in Tasmania.

That brings me to the University itself.

We have seen what happens when we invest in modern, fit for purpose facilities.

The Cradle Coast campus redevelopment has seen an increase in local applications of over 100 per cent, and I'm advised that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders students represent more than 20 per cent of students undertaking medical degrees there. We are seeing more opportunities for students in the North West through new facilities enabling expanded offerings.

The new Inveresk campus in Launceston has become a thriving centre of learning, research and innovation. While the Forest has reimagined higher education in the South – it is a great example of world class facilities and what is possible.

But at Sandy Bay, many STEM buildings are among the oldest on the campus. They are no longer fit for purpose and enrolments have declined as a result, despite growing national demand.

If we are serious about building Tasmania's future workforce, that cannot continue.

And that is why this Bill matters.

This Bill provides the mechanism to help fund the next step.

It allows land the University has identified as surplus to future needs, to be rezoned for inner residential development.

And it creates the pathway for the value generated from that land to be reinvested into a world class STEM precinct.

That is the link.

This Bill provides a clear, defined and timely mechanism to unlock that value and enable it to be directed towards the investment Tasmania needs.

With this Bill, we move forward with certainty – securing an ongoing University presence at Sandy Bay, while enabling land not required for future needs, to contribute to the next chapter of higher education in this State.

The STEM Precinct Detailed Business Plan by Deloitte makes the opportunity clear.

New facilities would attract top researchers and educators. They would strengthen the University position as a centre of excellence in science, technology and innovation. And they would support stronger partnerships with industry – creating more opportunities for students to gain real world experience while they learn.

Importantly a visible and accessible STEM hub would also strengthen outreach activities increasing interest in STEM pathways for senior secondary high school students and encouraging them to continue their education here.

Mr President this proposal has not emerged in isolation.

The future of the Sandy Bay campus has been the subject of extensive community discussion and engagement. This Bill was the result – preventing the University from disposing of campus land at Sandy Bay without the approval of both Houses of Parliament. There are only two parcels of land exempt, which we are looking to rezone.

Rezoning the identified parcels of land above Churchill Avenue was included in the University' Masterplan, informed by a substantial program of engagement in 2021.

Hobart City Council has also undertaken two rounds of consultation on the Mt Nelson and Sandy Bay Neighbourhood plan, with the discussion paper recommending higher density housing on the same land proposed to be rezoned in this Bill.

The University has continued to receive technical and planning advice from Hobart City Council officers, on this land.

So this is not a new idea. It is a well understood opportunity – now supported by a legislative pathway.

And it comes at the right time – and in the right place.

Tasmania needs more well-located housing. Land close to jobs, services, education and transport is critical.

The land proposed to be rezoned under this Bill sits near the Hobart CBD and presents a genuine opportunity for appropriate inner residential development.

Clause 7 makes it clear that the rezoning applies only to the defined parcels of land. It cannot extend to land protected as vested land.

Mr President it is equally important to be clear on what this Bill does not do. This Bill does not approve any specific development.

Any future proposal will still be subject to Hobart City Council planning processes, including full public scrutiny.

What this Bill does is enable the opportunity.

And the timing matters. Because without this Bill the pathway to a new STEM precinct becomes very uncertain.

So the choice before us is clear.

We can keep the status quo – allow outdated infrastructure to continue to age, skills shortages continue – and see a key housing opportunity delayed.

Or we can act.

Act to secure the future of the University at Sandy Bay, unlock land for housing and invest in the skills, research and innovation Tasmania will rely on in the years ahead.

This is not just about land.

It is about jobs.

It is about skills.

It is about housing.

And it is about acting now, to back the future of our only University and the future of our State.

Mr President, I commend the Bill to the House.