

The Weekend Australian

Tasmanian hamlet of Swansea weighs life as a booming China town

Matthew Denholm, Saturday July 7, 2018



Freycinet Action Network's Sophie Underwood, centre, with Jennie Churchill and Anne Held of the East Coast Alliance. Picture: Peter Mathew

Plans by Chinese businessmen to build a \$100 million tourism town on Tasmania's east coast have -created hope for jobs, but a lightning rod for concern at mass tourism and foreign investment.

Companies linked to several mysterious Chinese businessmen, mainly Kejing Liu, 69, appear to have purchased titles over 3185ha at Cambria, on the outskirts of the quiet seaside town of Swansea. Mr Liu until recently also owned a company, which plans to develop an old homestead and surrounding land into what media reports in China describe as "a famous town that integrates cultural tourism, leisure and holiday care".

The company — Cambria Green Agriculture and Tourism Management — is now owned by Hong Kong-based businessman Siu Lam Suen, also linked to one of the property purchases, and -Chinese-born, Victorian-based Ronald Hu.

Mr Liu remains a director of the company, which has applied to amend the local planning scheme to realise its grand vision.

Their Cambria Green proposal near Swansea includes a historical precinct, a luxury hotel with 100 to 200 rooms, 240 units, 70 villas, 80 apartments, a health and potential palliative care centre, a conference centre, a bistro, an 18-hole golf course, organic agriculture, an arts precinct, an airstrip and a training facility.

The sprawling complex would have its own “village” with a man-made lake, shops, cafes, restaurants, pharmacy, medical and dental services, art gallery, gym and children’s play area.

Swansea’s population of 866 may be outnumbered by those staying within the complex, up to 10km from the town.



Mr Hu said despite the Chinese news report, the development was “not a new town” but would provide a tourism boost, attracting local, interstate and foreign visitors.

“Cambria Green will improve the tourist industry and balance the seasonal difference in numbers of visitors,” he told *The Weekend Australian*.

“(It) will source local produce — food, wine, meat, etc. Our visitors will not just stay in our operation but will visit the surrounding east coast and purchase local goods and services.

“Our employees, many of whom will be locals, we hope, will mainly live locally, increasing permanent residency.”

For these reasons, some locals back the project, championed by Glamorgan Spring Bay Mayor Michael Kent. “To me it’s all about job creation,” Mr Kent said. “The

average age of the population on the east coast is 65 — it's probably the oldest-aged municipality in Australia — and into the future we need younger people.”

However, some believe the development is too large for a quiet, rural town, and for a region where the infrastructure already groans under the weight of 10 per cent - annual tourism growth.

“We would encourage appropriate development but what this proposes would completely change the tone and aesthetics of what this region is about: pristine natural beauty,” said holiday accommodation manager Anne Held.

Ms Held, president of local group East Coast Alliance, said shops in the complex would compete with those in the town, while jobs for locals were likely to be “very limited”.

“If they are going to aim at the affluent Chinese market ... then I doubt very much that in the local population there are many people who speak the language necessary,” she said.

Her group was focused on the local impacts, not on foreign investment, which is growing in Tasmania’s booming agriculture and tourism sectors, fuelled in part by 60 per cent annual growth in Chinese tourists.

However, others such as Freycinet Action Network convenor Sophie Underwood are concerned about the difficulty in tracking foreign purchases of land, businesses and residences. “We do need a broad community discussion. There is no inventory of foreign-held businesses but anecdotally we are hearing that many are being sold into foreign hands.”

Mr Hu said his company would pay all local and state taxes. He said he and Mr Liu had “faced some racial abuse” but there had been “tremendous support”.

Mr Kent said some opposition was based on “racism” and “NIMBY” attitudes, while some knockers were retirees with “nothing better to do”.