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Marina helipad gets all clear

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BY MAX MCKINNEY

HELICOPTERS could be touching down at Trinity Point Marina in a matter of months after Johnson Property Group landed approval for the controversial Lake Macquarie helipad.

The long-running saga came to an end late last year in the Land and Environment Court, where conciliation cleared the way for the helipad's construction and operation. Johnson Property Group had appealed the council's deemed refusal of the helipad, and the NSW Department of Planning's deemed refusal of modification to the Trinity Point concept plan.

At a December 9 hearing, Senior Commissioner Susan Dixon ordered the parties to conciliation, which resulted in an "agreement as to the terms of a decision in the proceedings that would be acceptable to them".

Commissioner Dixon then handed down the decision on December 24.

"While I accept that the local residents and the representatives of the sailing club association and Brightwaters Christian College hold genuine beliefs that an approval of the helipad will generate unacceptable safety and amenity concerns, the Minister is satisfied ... the proposal is acceptable," Commissioner Dixon said.

JPG chairman Keith Johnson said the helipad would be the icing on the cake for the master-planned Trinity Point.

"It brings certainty," he said. "We've got certainty we can get people to the international airport. It brings us in-line with every other five-star resort in the Hunter Valley."

He said the helipad will be operational within "six months".

"I just hope now the community can move forward, work together and they'll see the

benefits of it," he said. "There's not a five-star place in the Hunter that doesn't have access to a helipad. It's a necessity. We're a law-abiding company and we will follow the conditions. The disappointing thing is how much money has been wasted by council, ourselves and the department."

The conditions limit the number of flight movements to six per day (three landings and three departures), and 34 movements per week. Operating hours are 8am to 5pm, Monday to Saturday, extending to 7pm during daylight savings. Sunday hours are 9am to 5pm. Public holiday hours extend to 7pm. Flights must occur to the east over Lake Macquarie and pilots must adhere to an exclusion zone of parts of Morisset Park, Windermere Park and Brightwaters.

Morisset Park and District Action Group president Tom Dumbrell said residents opposed to the helipad were "extremely disappointed".

Mr Dumbrell, who spoke at the December 9 hearing along with others, said it was "unprecedented" to allow a helipad alongside a marina. He said the concern that remained was how pilots will adhere to the flight zone in certain winds. He had "severe doubts" about "how enforceable the exclusion zone will be", given the "commercial pressures" on pilots.

"The first priority of a pilot is the safety of his passengers and aircraft," he said. "The people operating the charter helicopter flights are going to be under commercial pressures, say to get people back to Sydney airport for connecting flights.

"The helicopters that are going to be landing there have to take off and land into the wind. If the wind is blowing in the wrong direction, do you think they're going to say ... we're not allowed to fly over these hours?"