

Freedom Ride 60th Anniversary Event

File No: X092336

Summary

On Friday 12 February 1965, Sydney University student and Arrente/Kalkadoon man Charles Perkins joined with other students involved in Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA) on a bus tour of regional NSW. Known as the 'Freedom Ride', the bus tour aimed to increase public awareness about systemic and structural racism in Australia.

The SAFA bus was on the road for 15 days, until 26 February, but generated comment and debate in the local and international press for years afterwards about the poor treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia. The Freedom Ride had a lasting impact on the Aboriginal people and communities in the towns that the bus visited and influenced the civil rights and self-determination movement in Redfern in the 1970s.

February 2025 marks 60 years since the Freedom Ride.

The City of Sydney and the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, is proposing to hold two events in February 2025 to mark the 60th anniversary of this historic event.

1. Exhibition Launch, 119 Redfern Street

The launch at 119 Redfern Street will feature a public program to show the legacy and impact of the Freedom Ride. This will include a morning tea, a recorded panel discussion with key participants from the country towns that the bus visited, and a display about the Freedom Ride featuring historical photographs of the event and contemporary portraits of participants.

2. Freedom Ride 60th Anniversary Reception, Sydney Town Hall

A reception will be held in Sydney Town Hall's Centennial Hall for up to 600 guests and will be attended by community representatives.

This report seeks approval to provide up to \$135,300 (including GST) in the event delivery and support costs. Funding will be drawn from the 2024/25 General Contingency fund or savings from the City Life 2024/25 operating budget. Further details of the event will be shared with Council through the CEO Update.

Recommendation

It is resolved that:

- (A) Council note the 60th anniversary of the Freedom Ride on 12 February 2025;
- (B) Council note the impact and legacy of the Freedom Ride as one of Australia's most significant civil rights events;
- (C) Council approve a total expenditure of up to \$135,300 (including GST) to deliver a program of events to mark the 60th anniversary of the Freedom Ride from the 2024/25 General Contingency Fund or savings from the City Life 2024/25 operating budget;
- (D) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive Officer to negotiate, execute and administer any contracts with suitable supplier(s) relating to the events; and
- (E) Council note further details of the event will be shared with Council through the CEO Update.

Attachments

Nil.

Background

1. On Friday 12 February 1965, 29 students from Sydney University set out in a bus to tour regional towns in NSW to expose systemic discrimination and racism against Aboriginal people.
2. Arrente/Kalkadoon man Charles Perkins, one of only two Aboriginal students at the university at the time, was elected president of the newly formed group.
3. The bus visited 16 towns over 15 days: Wellington, Gulargambone, Walgett, Collarenebri, Moree, Boggabilla, Warwick, Tenterfield, Glenn Innes, Inverell, Grafton, Lismore, Coffs Harbour, Bowraville, Kempsey and Taree.
4. In these country towns, the freedom riders confronted the entrenched and overt racism experienced by Aboriginal people including segregation and exclusion. In Walgett, the bus was run off the road by angry locals.
5. While only on the road for a little over 2 weeks, the Freedom Ride generated comment and debate in the local and international press for years afterwards about the poor treatment of Aboriginal people in Australia.
6. The Freedom Ride also had a lasting impact on the Aboriginal people and communities in the towns that the bus visited, and the protest became a contributing factor in breaking down the 'colour bar' in regional towns in NSW.
7. The Freedom Ride is now widely recognised as one of Australia's most significant civil rights protests. The event was documented with photography, film and audio at the time and its legacy has gone on to be remembered and interpreted through documentaries, exhibitions, books and memorials.
8. Many of those involved in the Freedom Ride - the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal university students on the Student Action for Aborigines (SAFA) bus and the Aboriginal people and communities living in the towns that the bus visited - dedicated their lives to confronting systemic and structural racism in Australian society.
9. The City of Sydney and the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council will develop an event program to mark the 60th anniversary of this important occasion.
10. Further details of the event will be shared with Council through the CEO Update.

Event program

11. Two events will be held in February 2025:
 - (a) Exhibition Launch: 119 Redfern Street, Redfern
 - (i) The launch will feature a recorded panel discussion with some of the key participants in the Freedom Ride, who grew up in the country towns that the bus visited. The moderated discussion will tease out the connections of the Freedom Ride with the civil rights movement of the 1970s.
 - (ii) The City of Sydney will arrange an exhibition about the Freedom Ride to show its enduring impact and legacy, featuring historical photographs and contemporary portraits of participants. Some of the community participants with connections to activism in Redfern in the 1970s will be interviewed as part of the City's oral history program.

- (b) Freedom Ride 60th Anniversary Reception: Sydney Town Hall
 - (i) A reception will be held in Centennial Hall, Sydney Town Hall for up to 600 guests.
 - (ii) Community representatives and Elders from City of Sydney as well Elders and their guests from Aboriginal communities from Kempsey, Grafton, Glenn Innes, Inverell, Walgett, Dubbo and Moree will attend.

Key Implications

Strategic Alignment - Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision

12. Sustainable Sydney 2030-2050 Continuing the Vision renews the communities' vision for the sustainable development of the city to 2050. It includes 10 strategic directions to guide the future of the city, as well as 10 targets against which to measure progress. This program is aligned with the following strategic directions and objectives:
 - (a) Direction 6 - An equitable and inclusive city - Celebrating the Freedom Ride and continuing to celebrate the history and Culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People contributes to ensuring that everyone feels welcome and can participate, prosper and reach their full potential in a city that is fair and just.
 - (b) Direction 7 - Resilient and diverse communities - The planned event will raise awareness of the Freedom Rise and its importance for the Australian civil rights movement. It will also provide an opportunity for the City to continue to increase awareness of racism in Australia, and ensuring that racism has no place in our city.
 - (c) Direction 8 - A thriving cultural and creative life - The planned event will create an opportunity for Truth Telling and celebration of the Culture and stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People, particularly those involved in the Freedom Ride.

Social / Cultural / Community

13. Almost 60 years after the Freedom Ride, Walgett is honouring the local men and women who made it happen. The project began with Walgett Aboriginal Medical (WAMS) securing state government funding to develop an artwork to commemorate the Freedom Ride to Walgett.
14. The Freedom Ride Memorial Park was officially opened in July 2023 in Walgett, with an artwork to commemorate the Freedom Rides.
15. The display focuses on Walgett's association with the Freedom Ride, identifying significant local Aboriginal people who had a key role in the demonstrations and events specific to the town. The artworks include interpretive panels that were developed in collaboration with local artist Frank Wright and are displayed on the old bank vault that was existing on site.
16. The site will also have native planting, interpretive pathways, seating and language signage around the artwork, providing a communal space for truth telling, sharing and contemplation.

17. In 2025, The Freedom Ride 60-year anniversary will be marked with special events, in each of the towns including Sydney, Moree, Lismore, Wellington, Kempsey and Walgett, with each town creating their own celebrations for the 60-year anniversary.
18. The City acknowledged the important cultural significance this anniversary has in communities right across NSW and was happy to support the Walgett organising committee to achieve this with the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Lands Council (MLALC).
19. The City will work collaboratively with the Walgett organising committee, other local communities and descendants of the original Freedom Riders to make sure that the events support the overall aims and objectives of the 60th anniversary.

Financial Implications

20. This report seeks approval for total expenditure of up to \$135,300 (incl. GST) to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Freedom Ride.
21. The expenditure consists of approximately \$50,000 (incl. GST) to deliver a morning tea, performances, infrastructure for the exhibition and other program activities at 119 Redfern Street, and \$73,000 (incl. GST) to deliver Freedom Ride 60th Anniversary reception for up to 600 people, all infrastructure, staffing and set up for all activities at Sydney Town Hall.
22. A contingency amount of \$12,300, or 10% of the total estimated cost, has been requested to accommodate unforeseen program changes given the evolving nature of discussions with Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council. All expenditure will only be exercised if necessary and approved by appropriate delegation.

Relevant Legislation

23. Local Government Act 1993.

Critical Dates / Time Frames

24. The 60th anniversary of Freedom Ride will take place on 12 February 2025.

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