

Gunning for changes

THERE is nothing but the gentle fall of the horse's hooves to disturb the peace as Julie Cook rides through the pristine bush surrounding her home in the village of Hill Top.

"All you hear are birds. It's gorgeous," says Cook. Hill Top has no street lights and is one of the few places left where the roads are safe enough for children to play on their bikes.

A single-lane bridge into the main street slows down what little traffic there is. Like the other villagers of this unspoilt hamlet tucked away on a dead-end road off the Hume Highway in the NSW Southern Highlands, Julie Cook is enjoying the peace — while it lasts.

The last time Hill Top locals found themselves in the media spotlight was more than a decade ago, when police arrested serial killer Ivan Milat for the murders of seven backpackers. Two of his younger brothers, Richard and Walter, had bush properties at Hill Top where the three Milat boys exercised a love of guns at the local shooting range.

And it is guns that have again brought the village back into the news with the State Government this week giving the green light to a mega regional shooting complex, complete with clubhouses and armouries, slap bang in the middle of pristine state conservation land, home to koalas and another 12 threatened species of native mammals.

Locals believe the reason the Government has them in its sights is because it is courting the two Shooters Party Upper House members in a "bullets for votes" deal.

The Government gets their votes, the villagers get the bullets and the native animals get moved on.

"It's disturbing and it's distressing," says Cook, who is spokeswoman for the Hill Top Residents Action Group. She believes the Government's decision is politically motivated and calls for federal Environment Minister Peter Garrett to intervene have fallen on deaf ears.

"We're absolutely disgusted with the Government's lack of accountability," she says. "Obviously it is nothing but a political deal with the Shooters Party."

"The range will significantly change the area. We won't get a moment's peace with the noise of the guns. They are allowing people to shoot .308s, .44 Magnum pistols, shotguns and muzzle-loading black-powder rifles."

There are dozens of Hill Tops across the state: outraged communities whose rights have been stolen away by the deeply hated Part 3A of the state planning laws, says actor Shane Withington. And now they are gunning for the Government with a rally tomorrow at 10am in Sydney's Hyde Park. Part 3A of the Environmental Planning Act was introduced by Frank "Cranky Franky" Sartor in his reign as planning minister before he was dumped last month by new Premier Nathan Rees. It puts all the power over planning decisions into the hands of the minister, who can overrule local residents, councils and experts.

There is no longer any right of appeal to the Land and Environment Court. In other words, the minister calls the shots.

"We would like some visionaries to appear from the Labor Party and Liberal Party to abolish the 3A legislation and give the planning powers back to the local government and to the local community," says Withington, whose day job as a Logie-winning actor on television productions such as *A Country Practice* has been subsumed by his leadership of Friends of Currawong.

Currawong, a unique workers' retreat on Pittwater, bordered by the Ku-ring-gai Chase National Park is one of the many Hill Tops, its future threatened by a development of McMansions.

A decision on Currawong is pending. "We need to look again at the beauty of our state and legislate to protect places for all time," says Withington.

Among those joining the rally are groups from the mining community of Catherine Hill Bay near Newcastle, where Sartor used the law to approve

Opposition to draconian planning laws is putting the NSW Government in the line of fire, writes **Janet Fife-Yeomans**



Bush idyll: Julie Cook with her horse, Ethan, in Bargo State Conservation area and (below) the Southern Highlands Rifle Club range Pictures: Tracee Lea

“We’re disgusted, obviously it is nothing but a political deal”

600 new homes while branding the locals as "luddites". Others are travelling from Sandon Point at Wollongong, where just four days before Christmas, Sartor approved plans for Stockland to build 180 detached homes, 80 apartments and 25 townhouses.

Anglican Retirement Villages was given permission for 250 three-storey units and a four-storey nursing home.

Their experiences echo those of the villagers of Hill Top. Sitting next to the Bargo State Conservation Area, it borders the Blue Mountains National Park and is part of the water catchment area for Warragamba Dam. Locals were told about the plans for the giant complex in a circular in December 2006.

By then, the Government had excised 1000ha of native bushland from the state conservation area to lease to seven

private shooting clubs to develop the Southern Highlands Regional Shooting Complex, and pledged \$5.2 million of public money.

The land was zoned 1 (a) Rural, which prohibits recreational use such as a shooting range. But Sartor ruled it was a "major project" of state significance, and took over the planning process.

While residents still buying property in the village had to sign covenants limiting them to two dogs and one motorbike because of noise concerns, plans went ahead for the seven-days-a-week range, which will allow shooting at night for up to 250 shooters at a time.

It will replace an existing small-scale rifle range, where the Milats used to practise, and which the locals had accepted. The residents' action group has spent many thousands of dollars on

expert reports into traffic, noise, flora, fauna, water, soil and bushfire. The experts have come out unanimously against the project. They predicted the extinction of the local yellow-bellied glider colony, the possible loss of the koala population and the fear that lead from bullets could enter the waterways.

A panel has been appointed to review the proposal, but whatever it recommends can still be over-ridden by the new Planning Minister Kristina Kenally. While she shows no sign of watering down the planning laws, she has proved less antagonistic than Sartor, agreeing to meet Friends of Currawong. Kenally has justified the decision to go ahead with Hill Top saying the outdoor range's hours would be restricted and noise levels closely monitored.

Still, that will be cold comfort for the Hill Top opponents, who smell a political rat. Once the range goes ahead Garrett's electorate of Kingsford-Smith can close down a gun club in Malabar and replace it with parkland.

The minister was not enthusiastic to intervene when contacted by *The Daily Telegraph* this week.

Meanwhile, the Shooters Party MLCs, Roy Smith and Robert Brown, wield unprecedented clout with the balance of power in the Upper House.

The Greens claim the pair have backed the Government 60 per cent of the time in critical votes. Smith has denied the shooting complex is a reward for supporting the beleaguered government, but neither returned calls from the *Telegraph*.

Additional reporting by Joe Hildebrand

