

David Elliott intervened to stop department's proposal to name Sydney Metro station after traditional custodians

Plans to name new CBD station Gadigal were signed off by previous minister but changed when Elliott took over transport



David Elliott speaks to the media at a Sydney Metro site. The new transport minister reversed plans to name a station after the Gadigal people.

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The New South Wales transport minister, David Elliott, personally intervened to reverse a departmental proposal to name a new underground metro station in the heart of Sydney after the traditional Aboriginal custodians of the land, despite it being signed off by a previous minister.

Elliott has reportedly instead proposed the station be named after Australia's first Indigenous commissioned army officer.

In August last year, the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council in Sydney floated a proposal with the NSW transport department to name a new metro station after the traditional owners of the land, the Gadigal people.

The transport department accepted the idea, and received ministerial sign-off before sending a proposal to the Geographical Names Board of NSW (GNB) "to name a railway station located underground running parallel to Pitt Street, as Gadigal Railway Station".

The GNB is a statutory authority responsible for assigning names to places in NSW. In October, it called for submissions on the proposal and said the name “acknowledges the local Aboriginal custodians of the area”.

“The proposed name Gadigal Railway Station is supported by the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council and a number of other local key Aboriginal stakeholders,” the GNB chair, Narelle Underwood, said at the time.

Suggestions for “alternative names” were “not being sought at this time”, she said.

During the GNB’s one-month consultation period it received 120 submissions on the proposal, the majority of which supported naming the new station “Gadigal Railway Station”.

However, under the GNB’s policies, if it receives any objections they are forwarded to the relevant government agency, in this case transport, for comment.

In November, the GNB provided the 120 submissions back to the transport department for its “consideration and comment” before making a decision.

But despite transport submitting the proposal to name the station after the Gadigal people only a few months earlier, the GNB says it never heard back from the department on the consultation.

Instead, two months after Elliott was sworn in as the new transport minister the GNB received a new proposal.

A spokesperson for the GNB told Guardian Australia it received a separate proposal from transport on 21 February putting forward a new name and requesting it “defer” the Gadigal Railway Station suggestion.

“This request, along with the alternative name proposed by TfNSW will be considered by the GNB at its meeting on 8 March 2022,” the GNB spokesperson said.

“If TfNSW chooses to proceed with the proposed name Gadigal Railway Station all submissions will be reviewed ahead of the name either being rejected, altered or endorsed by the NSW government.”

Neither the transport department nor the minister’s office responded directly to questions about the decision. In a statement, a spokesperson for the new Sydney Metro did not say what the alternative name for the station was, or what had changed between August and February.

“Sydney Metro consults with a number of stakeholders including local communities and cultural groups,” the spokesperson said.

“The GNB is a statutory authority and is the sole authority for determining station names.”

Elliott's office did not respond to specific questions from Guardian Australia about his role in the decision, but hours later a story on the change appeared in Sydney's tabloid newspaper the Daily Telegraph.

Instead of naming the station after the Gadigal people, as the local Aboriginal land council had hoped, Elliott has instead pushed for the station to be named after the first Indigenous Australian to serve as a commissioned army officer.

Captain Reginald Saunders, who served in Korea and the second world war, was a "hero", Elliott told the Telegraph. He did not respond to the Guardian's questions about why he considered the new proposal preferable to the Gadigal name.

However, sources within the transport department told Guardian Australia that Elliott was directly involved in the decision to propose an alternate name for the station. On 18 February, three days before transport proposed a different name for the new station, Elliott met with officials from the department and Sydney Metro.

During the meeting, the Guardian understands the minister expressed his dislike of the original proposal and instructed officials to change the name of the new station.

Nathan Moran, the chief executive of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council, had not been told about the department's backflip on the station's name. He said staff from the department had been "supportive" of the idea when it was floated last year.

"In talking to the project staff at transport about the concept of the new station we as the body responsible for the cultural heritage of the place where it will be constructed put forward the name of Gadigal to acknowledge the original custodians of the land where it will be built," he said.

"That's where it started and we were pleased to see that transport progressed that suggestion. But of course, there are differences between the administrative arm and the elected arm of the government. But it's very sad to hear."

Due to open in 2024, the second stage of the Sydney Metro rail network will run from Chatswood in the city's north, under Sydney Harbour to the CBD and onto Sydenham and Bankstown.

The new station will be located underground, running parallel to Pitt Street, and have entries from Park Street and Bathurst Street.

Elliott was appointed transport minister in December following a reshuffle under new premier Dominic Perrottet. A former police minister and key factional powerbroker in the NSW Liberal party's centre right, he has been the subject of intense criticism from the opposition Labor party after the state's train network was sensationally shut down amid an industrial dispute last week.