

Cutler faces planning row

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THIS WEEK the deputy Premier, Mr Cutler, takes up his new portfolio as Minister for Local Government. Few of his predecessors have had to face a tougher initiation.

His appointment is indicative of the State Government's recognition of local government as a major political force. Mr Cutler will walk straight into several controversial issues.

Probably the most critical of these is the planning wrangle between the Sydney City Council and the State Planning Authority over the future of the central City area.

In recent weeks the differences between the two bodies over vital planning issues have assumed disturbing proportions and it is clear that a head-on clash is inevitable unless Mr Cutler intervenes.

In fact, the council seems to have been bringing on the collision as a means of solving the dispute. Last week Alderman Leo Port, the council's representative on the authority, strongly criticised the authority.

In general terms the council is accusing the authority of unreasonable interference in its planning policies, and says the authority and a number of ad hoc bodies are causing "utter confusion" in city planning.

The authority, irritated by mounting criticism in recent weeks, says the dispute is a

product of an inevitable conflict between local aspirations and metropolitan needs.

There is no metropolitan authority in Sydney to co-ordinate and control Sydney's planning — the State Planning Authority has had to assume this role by default, probably at the expense of its wider role of guiding the development of the State.

This is the basis for the wrangle with the council.

The council has spent about \$500,000 in the past couple of years on planning for the City — the first real attempt to control the massive development in the past two decades that has left Sydney with serious environmental and transport problems.

The man who has done the most in this field is Alderman Andrew Briger, chairman of the City development committee. In recent weeks he has started to show the strain and frustration involved in implementing planning policies.

The main instrument of these policies is the Strategic Master Plan, prepared for the council by outside planning consultants — and its main teeth are a parking control code and a floor space ratio code.

The council wants these two codes made law by incorporating them in the statutory City of Sydney Planning Scheme prepared by the State Planning Authority.

However, Mr Cutler will not

do this until the Sydney Area Transportation Study — certain to affect the two codes — is released next year.

There is also the question of an apparent disregard for City council approval of some major developments recently.

The most recent is the \$45-million William Street project for the Church of England Property Trust. In return for the dedication of a section of land valued at about \$600,000 fronting William Street, the council is prepared to allow the developer to erect a 530ft tower on the site while across the street there is a height restriction of 140ft.

The authority has told the council it will not allow this and that there should be a height restriction of 140ft, but the council argues the developer is entitled to bonuses because of the gift of the land, needed for the William Street Boulevard concept.

Another development is in Victoria Street, Potts Point, where a developer is prepared to erect a car park for the council to serve Kings Cross in return for substantial bonuses.

The floor space ratio for the area under the Strategic Plan — after the maximum awarding of bonuses — is 6:1, but the developer wants more than 9:1 and the council has approved it.

The authority and the State Government-appointed Heights of Buildings Advisory Committee have rejected it. The



Mr Cutler . . . a tough local government initiation ahead.

Government architect, in a confidential report on the development, describes it as "one of the worst examples of visual pollution."

The council is also worried, justifiably so, about the multiplicity of ad hoc authorities operating independently in Sydney, often in conflict with one another.

It contends that the authorities were established because past councils did not face up to their planning responsibilities and says the council has proved itself in this regard and should assume the controls exercised by the authorities.

And, waiting in the wings, are the developers who find themselves in the position of having to criticise the council strongly for its policies on the one hand, and criticise the authority strongly for delays and more restrictive policies, on the other.

All in all, a tough initiation for Mr Cutler.