

5.3 TREES - FORMER BRANDON PARK SECONDARY COLLEGE SITE

(TP329:BG:HM)

Ward : Mulgrave

Responsible Director: Don Cameron

Reason for Council Consideration: Amendment to the Monash Planning Scheme

RECOMMENDATION

1. *That the Management of the Brandon Park Special School be advised that:-*
 - a) *Council is very concerned and disappointed that works were undertaken that have destroyed the integrity of the root systems of part of the row of trees adjacent to Strada Crescent contrary to an understanding with Council Officers that no works would be undertaken until the issues of the trees and their removal had been resolved.*
 - b) *These trees should be removed as a matter of urgency for safety reasons as they cannot now be retained and are considered dangerous.*
2. *That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development be requested to confirm in writing that:-*
 - a) *It agrees with the principle that trees should not be removed from the former Brandon Park Secondary College site at this time unless absolutely necessary so that their potential can be assessed in any strategic plan prepared for the future redevelopment of the site.*
 - b) *All trees are to be identified and tagged as being "To be retained" or "To be removed" prior to any works on site. This detail is to be included on a plan held by both the Department and Council and provided to the demolisher so that there is no confusion about which trees are allowed to be removed and which trees must be retained.*
3. *That the surrounding community be consulted by sending a letter addressed to the owners/occupiers of relevant properties advising them of the issues including the recommendations of the arborists' reports regarding the trees on the site. This advice is to include a 14 day timeline for receiving submissions and an invitation to a public meeting where all aspects of the issue are to be explained.*
4. *That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development and the Management of the Special School be requested to provide written advice detailing their opinion and views on the issue of retaining or removing the trees on their sites.*
5. *That a further report be made to Council following receipt and analysis of any submissions received to determine upon the need for an*

amendment to the Monash Planning Scheme to protect significant vegetation on site and/or conserve the row of trees adjacent to Strada Crescent.

6. *That Heritage Victoria be advised of the current situation in respect of the row of trees adjacent to Strada Crescent.*

BACKGROUND

The former Secondary College site is located to the east of the Brandon Park Shopping Centre. It is bound by Brandon Park Drive, Academy Avenue, Collegium Avenue, and Strada Crescent.

A number of large trees occupy parts of the site. Significant trees include the row of sugar gums adjacent to the Strada Crescent frontage and a stand of mature trees at the centre of the site.

The attached aerial photo shows the existing trees on site. [Attachment 2]

The row of trees adjacent to Strada Avenue on the former Brandon Park Secondary College was probably planted around the time of World War Two to mark a boundary on the property and provided a wind break. They are historically important through their association with the former farm and are also a valued landscape feature.

In response to a request for Heritage Victoria to include the row of trees on the Victorian Heritage register, the Heritage Council determined that there was insufficient cultural heritage significance to warrant inclusion in the register. However, it recommended that the trees be included in a Heritage Overlay in the Monash Planning Scheme. Attached is a copy of the Statement of Significance prepared for this row of trees. [Attachment 3]

The Brandon Park Special School is currently under construction at the south east corner of the former college site. This development includes the renovation of a number of the existing buildings and construction of new buildings. Council has been contacted by consultants on behalf of the Special School, advising that the row of trees adjacent to Strada Crescent were dangerous and should be removed.

The trees at the centre of the site appear to be younger. Their history is unknown.

Council has also been provided with a copy of an arborist report on these trees indicating that they are in a poor state and should also be removed. The Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (the Department) has indicated that it would prefer to remove the trees at the same time that the surplus school buildings are demolished and removed prior to July 2008.

PURPOSE OF THIS REPORT

The purpose of this report is to determine Council's response to the proposal to remove significant vegetation from the site as a precursor to a decision on the preparation of an amendment to the Monash Planning Scheme to protect significant vegetation on site and/or conserve the row of trees adjacent to Strada Crescent.

The initial question to be resolved by Council is whether the cost of retaining the trees, is justified having regard to the community benefit of the tree retention. The question of cost must have regard to the impact of tree retention on the future use and development of the site.

This issue also needs to be communicated to the community surrounding the site for their response and comment.

ANALYSIS

Trees adjacent to Strada Crescent

An arborist was engaged on behalf of Council to examine all of the trees adjacent to Strada Crescent between Academy and Collegium Avenues. That report indicated that:-

- The trees are in poor to fair condition.
- Retention of the trees would require extensive initial maintenance with an ongoing maintenance program.
- An exclusion zone 10 metre from the trunks of the trees would be required both into the school site and into part of the adjacent road reserve, requiring relocation of the public footpath.
- Pedestrian access would have to be restricted in this exclusion zone.

Discussions with representatives of the Special School highlighted their concerns about the trees and the impact such a scheme of management would have upon the operation of the school. They had advice that the trees were dangerous and prone to dropping limbs. The school is not provided with any funding for maintenance of the trees and that a 10 metre exclusion zone would have a significant impact on their existing school building as well as the future use and development of the site.

A meeting was held on site on 8 February 2008 with the school management, builder, architect and school arborist with Council's Coordinator Strategic Planning and Council's arborist to discuss the issues and determine the facts in respect of the status of the trees.

This on-site meeting determined the following:-

- Both the school arborist and Council arborist are in agreement about the state and health of the trees.
- Both arborists agree that retention would require extensive initial and ongoing maintenance.

- A 10 metre exclusion zone would be required.

However, inspection showed that a large diameter fire service water main had been constructed in the area adjacent to the trees in front of the portable classroom at the southern end of the site. This is the existing youth education Centre.

Both arborists agree that these works have destroyed the integrity of the root systems of those trees and that they should be removed as a matter of urgency for safety reasons. These trees cannot now be retained and are considered dangerous.

It is understood this work was undertaken recently and contrary to an understanding between Council Officers and the architect of the development.

Discussions on the balance of the trees to the north of the existing portable classroom highlighted one tree immediately adjacent to the proposed road access as being in a poor state and inappropriate for retention. Also it is likely to suffer significant damage during construction of the access road works. Both arborists supported removal of this tree.

The architect and builder for the school have agreed to construct the access roadway under supervision of the arborist to ensure that minimal damage is done to any of the trees further north.

The Special School Management has advised that it understands that all other trees adjacent to Strada Crescent will be retained and no works undertaken that may impact on these trees until Council has determined its final position having regard to their status.

Trees at the Centre of the Site – (not part of special school site)

Detailed assessment of these trees has not been undertaken other than the arborist report prepared for the Department.

The majority of these trees are located well away from any of the existing school buildings to be demolished.

Discussions have been held with the Department to get agreement to retain these trees during demolition so that their potential can be assessed in any strategic plan prepared for the future redevelopment of the site.

The Department have indicated that it agrees with the principle that trees should not be removed from this site at this time unless absolutely necessary. However, this has not yet been confirmed in writing.

All trees should be identified and tagged as being “To be retained” or “To be removed” prior to any works on site. This detail should be included on a plan held by both the Department and Council and provided to the demolisher so that there is no confusion about which trees are allowed to be removed and which trees must be retained.

However, this is only an interim measure as the long term future of the trees needs to be determined.

CONSULTATION

The community surrounding the site should be consulted to assess their response to the proposal to remove the trees.

Consultation could take the form of a letter addressed to the owners/occupiers of relevant properties advising them of the issues including the arborists reports. This advice could include an invitation to a public meeting where all aspects of the issue could be explained.

The public meeting would be held early in the first week of a two week period for submissions to be received. A further report would then be prepared for Council consideration.

Attached is a map showing the proposed extent of the mail-out of the letter and invitation to the public meeting. [Attachment 4]

POLICY CONSIDERATIONS

Completion of the Brandon Park Major Activity Centre Structure Plan has been delayed because of the delay by the Department in declaring the College site surplus to its education needs and in appointing a “development manager” for the site.

Preliminary assessment of possible designs concepts has highlighted the potential option for medium density residential development over part of the site with an expansion of the retail centre to develop a centrally located publicly accessible “plaza” towards the western end of the site.

Any design option for redevelopment of the site will require the provision of a minimum of 5% of the site as public open space. This public open space could be located anywhere on site, however, its location is likely to be critical in determining the most appropriate design outcome.

In respect of the retention of existing trees on the former school site some of the relevant issues are:-

- How significant or important to the community are:-
 - the row of trees adjacent to Strada Crescent?
 - the stand of trees located at the centre of the site?
- What public open space option for the site is preferred by the local community?
- Should the open space contribution requirement be allocated for “protecting the trees” or used to create a more active public open space area?

- What impact would retaining the trees with a 10 metres exclusion zone have on the future use of the site?
- Should the pedestrian footpath to the west side of Strada Crescent be closed and removed?
- Who will be responsible for the initial and on-going maintenance of the trees if they are retained?
- What is the “cost” of ongoing tree maintenance?
- Should a HO-Heritage Overlay be introduced to conserve the row of trees adjacent to Strada crescent?
- Should a VPO-Vegetation Protection Overlay be introduced over part or all of the site to protect significant trees on the site?

The form of the amendment to the Monash Planning Scheme, ie. HO-Heritage Overlay or VPO-Vegetation Protection Overlay, is dependant on the response to the above questions.

CONCLUSION

There is no simple “fix” to the question on retention or removal of the trees on the former Brandon Park Secondary College site. Further information is required to enable an educated assessment to be undertaken.

It is recommended that Council embark on a consultation process that includes asking the opinion of the local community.

Notwithstanding the need for the further information and assessment as detailed in this report, the trees within the Special School site, located at the southern end of Strada Crescent, that have suffered significant root damaged and are now considered to be dangerous, should be removed as a matter of urgency.