

5.1 TREES - FORMER BRANDON PARK SECONDARY COLLEGE SITE

(TP329:BG:SYL)

Ward : Mulgrave

Responsible Director: Don Cameron

Reason for Council Consideration: Strategic Planning

RECOMMENDATION

That the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development be advised that:-

- *the windrow of sugar gums adjacent to Strada Crescent should be retained and that a Tree Management Plan should be prepared that includes a maintenance program that will remove dead and dangerous trees and replace those trees with suitable mature species that in time will replace the sugar gums.*
- *Council is prepared to participate in the preparation of a Tree Management Plan for the windrow by providing specialist arborist expertise.*
- *Council is preparing an amendment to the Monash Planning Scheme to include the existing trees in the windrow in a Heritage Overlay.*

That the Minister for Planning be requested to authorise Council to prepare Amendment C79 to the Monash Planning Scheme to introduce a Heritage Overlay over the remaining trees in the windrow adjacent to Strada Crescent pursuant to section 9(2) of the Planning and Environment Act.

That the Monash Special Development School be requested to submit a copy of their proposed landscape plan for the site and that they be advised that the landscape plan should show planting of mature trees adjacent to Strada Crescent that will in time replace the windrow of sugar gums already removed from the site.

BACKGROUND

Council, at its meeting on 19 February 2008, considered a report to determine Council's response to the proposal to remove significant vegetation from the former Brandon Park Secondary College 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.

Council determined:-

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

ANALYSIS

In respect of Part 1 of the above recommendation, the trees located within the Monash Special Developmental School (MSDS) adjacent to Strada Crescent at the south east corner were removed on 13 – 14 March 2008.

In respect of Part 2(a) and 2(b) of the above recommendation, no specific response has been received from the Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD).

In respect of Part 3 of the above recommendation, over 500 letters were sent to owners and occupiers of nearby properties providing advice about the tree issues, inviting them to attend a public information session, and requesting their comment. A total of 30 submissions have been received. A summary of the submissions is attached. [Attachment 1]

The dominant common theme of the majority of submissions identified the significance of the windrow of trees while recognising that maintenance works will include the removal of dead and dangerous vegetation. Where trees are removed new planting of suitable mature species should occur so that the character of the windrow is retained well into the future.

Submitters were split on the issue of an exclusion zone. Those opposed considered that there was no need to have concern on safety matters. Similarly the response to the issue of including the trees in any future public open space requirement was varied with some majority arguing that the tree windrow should be in addition to any public open space requirement.

Significant support is provided for inclusion of the windrow within a Heritage Overlay.

In respect of Part 4 of the above recommendation, comment has been received from DEECD concerning the balance of the former Secondary College site.

The Department has no intention of removing trees from the site, unless necessary and will consult Council before any works take place. The Department on two separate occasions (from two separate arborists) has received an arborist report advising the avenue of trees can be considered in fair to poor condition. From a structural perspective a rating of poor can be applied.

Given the Department is preparing to dispose of the site and will have no input in the end use or development we would not wish to implement a tree management plan or to remove existing trees and re-vegetate the area. Should the retention of the trees present a danger to the community the Department would discuss their removal with Council and make a decision accordingly.

The DEECD, as the current owner of the site, should have a responsibility to the ongoing maintenance and management of the significant trees on site.

The following comments have been received from the DEECD on behalf of the MSDS and their site.

The MSDS setting caters for students with significant development delays and/or intellectual disabilities as well as autism spectrum disorder, physical disabilities and vision impairment. The intricate specialist educational programmes are not limited to the buildings and extensive use will be made of the outdoor environment. Consequently, it is essential that the site and grounds are not only conducive to teaching and learning, but are safe. I understand that the school also proposes to undertake an extensive planting and site development programme in addition to those improvements included in the DDECD funded new school building project. This will further enhance the opportunity for improved student learning outcomes.

The barricades and exclusion zone suggested to trees on the Strada Crescent boundary of the MSDS site will impact greatly on future school projects. More importantly, these barriers could potentially cause harm or injury to students because of their inability to adequately interpret danger. In this case, approximately 8 trees are involved. Removal of them and replanting with a species more appropriate to the terrain and Brandon Park environment would be a better long term outcome. Again, I reiterate the findings of the DEECD arborist concerning the current state of these trees (for removal as soon as possible).

Separate correspondence has been received from the MSDS in response to Council's request for comment. A copy of the MSDS response is attached.

[Attachment 2]

The trees remaining within the MSDS site do contribute to the overall effect of the windrow adjacent to Strada Crescent. These trees should be included within scope of the recommended Tree Management Plan to ensure that the longer term objective of replacement planting reflecting the character of the historic windrow is achieved.

In respect of Part 6 of the above recommendation, Heritage Victoria has been advised however no response has been received.

CONCLUSION

It appears that there is strong community support for the retention of the windrow trees. This includes support for an initial maintenance program that will remove dead and dangerous vegetation and replaces those trees with suitable mature species that in time will replace the sugar gums.

Discussions should be held with the DEECD to encourage them, as owner of the land, to take a responsible and proactive approach to the maintenance and long term conservation of the windrow of trees.

A Management Plan for the long term conservation of the windrow should now be prepared. Council should participate in the preparation of this plan by providing specialist arborist expertise.

There is limited support for an exclusion zone unless absolutely necessary. Further detailed analysis of the trees following the initial maintenance program would have to be undertaken to provide final definition of this requirement.

There is strong support for the inclusion of the windrow within a Heritage Overlay.