

## **Koolunga Native Reserve Wetlands – Community Engagement Summary**

### **Background**

Koolunga Native Reserve is a 'native reserve' located in the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges which hosts a variety of indigenous flora and fauna. This reserve is identified as a site of State significance in terms of its biological values due to the presence of many rare or threatened indigenous plant species.

Council proposed a new wetland within the reserve to filter stormwater runoff from surrounding urban areas before it enters Blind Creek Tributary. The proposed wetland intends to:

- Reduce stormwater pollution;
- Allow stormwater to enter the stream system in a slower, more natural manner;
- Provide diversity in habitat for indigenous flora and fauna that presently do not occur in or near the reserve; and
- Provide a pleasant landscape feature that allows people to enjoy nature and receive its benefits to health, wellbeing and quality of life.

Beyond the waterbody itself it is proposed to include seating and viewing areas, new paths, indigenous vegetation surrounding the wetland to improve biodiversity and habitat for wildlife at the reserve, as well as aquatic vegetation within the wetland to provide treatment functions, a food source and safe breeding areas for native fish, turtles, frogs and birdlife.

The Friends of Koolunga Native Reserve Group, dog walkers along with the local community are all active users of this reserve.

The Blind Creek catchment which the Koolunga Native Reserve resides within is highly urbanised yet is considered a high value catchment within Knox. Due to urbanisation, availability of land for large infrastructure does not exist and emerging research highlights the wider benefits of managing stormwater runoff further upstream using small-scale assets. In response to this council identified the Koolunga Native Reserve as a potential site to accommodate a wetland in 2018.

Discussions between council, the Friends of Koolunga Group and a specialist biodiversity consultant, Dr Graeme Lorimer, were held in February 2019. The discussion explored the potential environmental (biological and ecological) benefits a wetland at the proposed location would provide.

Following initial feedback from the afore mentioned stakeholders, a high-level concept plan was created and an application for funding was made through Melbourne Water's Living Rivers Program in late 2019.

Through further refinement of the wetland design, a detailed plan was created with the intent to engage with the broader community.

## **Purpose of this Report**

As a response to this recent engagement, various different views have been provided across a number of different platforms that have been both council and community led.

The themes and common queries contributed by the community through the various channels are captured within this report.

The purpose of this document is to share the feedback and themes of the views presented across these different platforms with all members of the community.

## **Consultation Process**

The initial consultation was scheduled to be undertaken mid 2020 however, due to COVID 19 restrictions this was postponed, delaying the consultation process to early 2021. Engagement activities were structured to ensure that social distancing and COVID Safe conditions were maintained.

### *Council's online platform:*

Council officers established council's Have Your Say online platform for the project. The platform provided information about the proposal for interested residents. Residents were able to subscribe to automatically receive updates on the proposal and provide their thoughts.

### *Drop in sessions:*

A letter inviting residents to attend a drop in session, and also including a concept plan of the wetland, was sent to more than 700 residences surrounding the reserve in late February 2021.

The letters included an open invite for residents to attend one of two prepared drop in session on the 10<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> of March. Residents were asked to nominate a preferred date and time via email or telephone to assist officers to safely manage the number of attendees from a COVID-19 perspective.

Project signs were installed onsite informing residents of the planned information sessions and how to register attendance.

Council's online platforms and social media posts were also used to promote the consultation process to achieve a broader reach in the community than the user group of the reserve.

Two separate information sessions were held on the evening of Wednesday 10<sup>th</sup> March and the morning of Friday 19<sup>th</sup> March, 2021. Approximately 70 people attended each session.

The intent of the sessions was to provide an opportunity for those in attendance to learn more about the proposed wetland, ask questions and provide their feedback. Information was also provided about next steps and further opportunities for community involvement in enhancing the amenity of the wetland.

## Community feedback

Feedback from the community was received in a number of ways:

- 59 email submissions and letters
- 138 comments via the Have your Say online platform
- a hard copy petition with 307 signatures
- an online petition with 300 signatures

The Have your Say platform saw 1,289 separate visits from 676 individual visitors. The platform received 138 comments on the proposed plan. The site also provided the opportunity for respondents to place a marker on a map of the reserve and add a comment on that area. There were 39 markers and associated comments added to the map.

The 138 comments originated from 49 individual contributors and the 39 map markers from 13 individual contributors. It is not known whether there is an overlap of respondents between the comments and map pins as the platform does not provide this specific information.

Additional comments were received via Council social media channels and are also included as part of the issues summary.

A hard copy petition was tabled at the April council meeting with 307 signatures. The petition calls on council not to construct the proposed wetland in the Koolunga Native Reserve. The petition highlights the value placed on the open grassed area that would be taken up by the proposed wetland.

The second petition tabled at the council meeting was an online petition via the Change.org platform with 300 signatures. In the interests of transparency, it's important to note that unlike the hard copy petition, this petition includes a significant proportion of interstate and overseas signatories.

## Key issues

A summary of the key issues that have been highlighted by this feedback are outlined below.

It should be clearly noted that the below comments have been grouped in themes and may represent one or many individual's comments.

### Communication and consultation:

- Community Engagement  
A common theme of the feedback received related to a lack of communication and engagement by Council prior to the information sessions being held at the reserve. This included concerns relating to the project timeframe, the scope of influence of the consultation process on the wetland design and some local residents not receiving letters.

### Impact on Reserve users:

- Passive Recreation  
Some of the respondents were excited by the social benefits the proposed wetland would bring. It was felt the inclusion of a wetland within the reserve would provide an attractive and peaceful place to sit, have picnics, observe native wildlife and enjoy the natural environment.

- **Enhancement of the Native Reserve**  
Some respondents felt that the proposed wetland would enhance the environment of the reserve, complimenting the natural elements which already exist including the waterway and large canopy trees. It was thought by these respondents that the natural feel would attract more birdlife and native fauna which are some of the elements which make the reserve a nice place to visit.
- **Loss of an existing off leash dog area**  
The proposed wetland is located in an area of the reserve considered popular among dog walkers. A number of respondents who frequently walk their dog in the reserve are in opposition to the proposed wetland due to the loss of the existing off leash dog area and the absence of another alternative large, dry open space within the reserve. The feedback suggested that the alternative open spaces are not considered suitable for walking dogs in all seasons.
- **Loss of open space**  
Some users consider the proposed wetland as an infringement on the open space available within the reserve. Some respondents considered that the other available open areas are wet and boggy and cannot be utilised actively for most of the year. Feedback also indicated one of the adjacent open areas is not mown due to sensitive vegetation (orchids) making it unusable. As a result, the proposed wetland reduces the active open space available. Some respondents felt the proposed plan was in conflict with Council's Open Space Policy in relation to providing green open spaces as they perceived the introduction of the wetland was not an open space.
- **Wetland Location**  
A common theme linked to the two points above was where the wetland could or should be located. A number of respondents felt that if a wetland was to be constructed, it should be either incorporated within the creek corridor or placed in other low lying areas within the reserve.

**Safety/public health:**

- **Community Safety**  
There were concerns raised relating to community safety. A number of respondents were worried about water safety, particularly with younger children in mind. This included concerns for steep banks and deep pools with the potential for people to fall in and drown. There were questions around whether the area will be fenced off as a result and if this was planned, then what would this look like and where would fences be placed.  
  
There were concerns over the width of the pathways and the need for them to be accessible for all users. Other concerns included having no safety lighting around the wetland and no longer being able to have the same level of passive surveillance due to the potential height of the wetland vegetation.

- **Increased Mosquito Activity**  
Concerns were raised that the creation of a wetland would increase the activity and population of mosquitoes in the reserve. Specifically, that stagnant water within the permanent pools would be a breeding ground for mosquitoes.
- **Public Health**  
Some residents raised concerns that the creation of a wetland within the reserve would result in effluent, noxious gases and other harmful pollutants being introduced to the area. Similar questions were also raised in regards to the build-up of pollutants (including heavy metals) within the sediment captured and stored within the sediment basin.
- **Emergency Services Access**  
A query was raised as to whether emergency services access to the site was considered, specifically whether the CFA could still access the reserve effectively if the wetland was constructed.

**Environmental:**

- **Biodiversity**  
There were comments and feedback in support of the potential improvement in the biodiversity of the reserve through the creation of the wetland. Particularly the habitat opportunities the wetland environment provides for aquatic life, water birds and birds of prey. It was also felt that the wetland would enrich the diversity of micro ecosystems available within the reserve for indigenous flora to establish.
- **Water Quality Benefits**  
A number of respondents questioned the value of the wetland from a stormwater treatment perspective and whether the loss of the active open space is worth the level of treatment achieved. This query refers to the area of the catchment connected to the wetland relative to the overall catchment upstream. In contrast, others saw any improvement to water quality and flow regimes within the adjacent creek as a positive.
- **Water Quality Testing**  
Queries were raised at the information sessions and online regarding the quality of the stormwater derived from the upstream catchment and whether water quality testing had been undertaken to support the need for a wetland at this location.
- **Creek Flows**  
There were some concerns voiced that, by diverting stormwater from the Council pipe into the nearby creek, the existing downstream infrastructure would not be able to handle the additional flow of water which would cause flooding.
- **Groundwater**  
There were queries relating to the interaction of the water within the wetland with the groundwater table and subsurface flows. There were concerns the water residing within the wetland would infiltrate into the surrounding soils causing saturated soils, excessive ground movement and altered soils characteristics which would impact the surrounding trees.

**Increase in visitation:**

- **Increased visitation**  
Concerns were raised that the proposed wetland could attract greater interest causing the reserve to become a destination for people outside the local area. Some individuals felt increased visitation would result in the deterioration of the community atmosphere the reserve currently has.
- **Car Parking**  
Linked with increased visitation from outside the local area, there were concerns raised on whether the local streets surrounding the reserve had the parking capacity to accommodate the additional cars.
- **Noise**  
Concerns were raised that the proposed wetland could potentially lead to increased usage of the reserve for recreation resulting in increased levels of noise. Some people felt the proposed change in land use would negatively impact the amenity and tranquility of the site.

Council will continue to update the community on the progress of the project via the '**Have Your Say**' platform. Officers are working on a process to work with the community to consider this feedback. We are planning another round of consultation in July/August 2021.

Individual responses will be made to each person who submitted feedback at a later time in the process as well as provide an update to the wider community.

The project plans are on hold until this occurs.