



Riddells Creek Landcare

ABN: 70 547 050 379

Riddells Creek Structure Plan Comments on Issues Paper

Native flora and fauna

The natural environment is one of the primary reasons many residents live in Riddells Creek. We want to signal strongly that the impact of zoning on native bushland and other remnant vegetation needs to be strongly considered. Members of Riddells Creek Landcare have seen first-hand that the spread of higher density living usually means a Europeanisation of the landscape, that compromises native vegetation with a thousand small cuts. More dramatically, thoughtlessly located and overly dense development can seriously reduce connectivity or destroy valuable biodiversity.

On the positive side, well-planned zoning in infrastructure can improve not just the appearance of Riddells Creek but connectivity between the town and its surrounding bushland. One goal in planning for residential and commercial activity, and infrastructure, should be to improve the connectivity with adjacent areas of native vegetation in the Macedon Ranges, along waterways, railways, roadsides and the grasslands of the Volcanic Plains to the south of the town.

To plan for this, residents first need accurate information on waterways health, biodiversity and the quality of agricultural land. The Vegetation Protection Overlay leaves out significant areas of native vegetation in the townsite and surrounds. We recommend early consultation with Riddells Creek Landcare (RCL) to identify these sites. Our membership draws together expertise in identification of flora and fauna, and deep knowledge of the Riddells Creek area. The Landcare group has been the prime mover in identification of the flora and fauna of Riddells Creek, with over 1000 species now identified and recorded on the NatureShare website developed by RCL. Our experience is that Department of Sustainability and Environment data on Ecological Vegetation Classes is accurate at a coarse level, but often inaccurate at the level at which townsite planning will take place. Mapped EVCs are often absent, or interspersed with other vegetation communities.

Finally, the relationship between bushfire risk and native vegetation needs to be discussed. We want to find planning solutions that retain the integrity of native vegetation, while providing protection to the town.

Barrm Birm

Barrm Birm is the side of the hill visible from, and overlooking, Riddells Creek (see the home page of Riddells Creek Landcare for this perspective—www.riddellscreeklandcare.org.au). The boundaries are the undulating Light Hill Ridge to the west, Gap Road and farmland to the north and north-west, Gap Road and Royal

Parade to the east, and Wheelwrights Road to the south. It covers about 250 hectares with 15km of walking tracks.

Riddells Creek Landcare prepared a Statement of Significance and presented this to Council in 2005. After an unsuccessful attempt to offer amalgamation of the 162 small lots of the subdivision into five larger lots, in September 2009 council agreed the following motions:

1. That, due to the low participation rate by landowners, resulting in no prospect of successfully completing the existing lease and sale scheme, Council discontinue the scheme in respect of the Riddell Ranges Estate when it ceases on 30 June 2010, and that all owners be notified of this decision in advance of the expiration of the leases;
2. That Council advise the company "Vegetation Offsets" that their proposal is not acceptable to Council, due to planning constraints precluding the proposed development of four dwellings on the land, and that there are legislative restrictions on Council's involvement;
3. That Council requests the State Government to explore the possibility of the acquisition of the land in the estate, to add to the other flora and fauna reserves in the area.
4. Council refer to the next budget, consideration of a funding allocation for the purposes of an expert study of the subject land.
5. That Council seek a planning scheme amendment to delete restructure overlay R07 from the Macedon Ranges Planning Scheme through an anomalies amendment.

Since these decisions, we know of no further action taken to protect this area.

The Municipal Strategic Statement (21.05 Environment and Landscape Values) commits the Council to "maintain and enhance the ranges, major hills and ridges as significant visual backdrops to the Shire" and to "preserve exotic and native vegetation as a fundamental component of the environment, character and landscape of the Shire".

Residents value the green backdrop to the townsite provided by Barrm Birrm and also by Conglomerate Gully Reserve. One measure of community interest in these areas is the continued purchase of the publication "Macedon Ranges Flora" (2062 copies sold since 2008) and attendance at RCL's regular guided community walks. Barrm Birrm is also regularly visited by professional and amateur field naturalists and botanists who are attracted to the biodiversity and uniqueness of its landscape. Many residents are active recreational users of Barrm Birrm, and their interests are diverse—walkers, dog owners, field naturalists, geocaches, horseriders, motorcycle riders, 4-wheel drivers, and people who just want to be surrounded by bush. The Heathy Dry Forest and Grassy Dry Forest of Barrm Birrm are valuable remnants of foothills vegetation, and home to the critically endangered Hairy-leaf Triggerplant, discovered by RCL members.

At a regional scale, Barrm Birrm links the reserves of the eastern Macedon Ranges, threading together this landscape and protecting its biodiversity values. These areas of relatively undisturbed bushland give substance to the Shire's Claims to be a green Shire, and form a landscape-scale entry statement to the Shire.

The questions that need to be answered in the preparation of the Structure Plan are:

- What condition will Barrm Birrm be in by 2036 if the current trajectory of damaging use continues?
- What kind and level of use will meet recreational needs while maintaining the ecological integrity of this area?
- How can Barrm Birrm be integrated with the open space and recreational opportunities of Riddells Creek townsite?

Decisions on these matters need to be made now, before use escalates uncontrolled.

Discussion within the community

There are significant social differences within the Riddells Creek community. Tradespeople live alongside empty nesters, work-from-home professionals, young families and long-term residents. Reaching agreement on the Structure Plan will require consultation formats that allow extended discussion between these interests. They may have values in common, but it is how these values are worked through into the fabric of the town that needs discussion, not simply with council staff or its consultants, but within the community. Community is that elusive thing that many people have come for, and stay for, and want to see nurtured in Riddells Creek. Focused and fulsome discussion about the built form of Riddells Creek is needed.

Residents need deeper information, ideally map-based, about the current location of various densities, the extent of settlement of these zones, and current biodiversity condition. This needs to be in a map-based format, with visual explanation of what different vegetation systems look like.

We note that the Issues Paper presents choice between a commuter suburb and something that is more "self-contained". What "more self-contained" means in terms of businesses, employment opportunities and services needs debate and exploration. The alternate futures for Riddells Creek need to be developed as specific scenarios, early in the planning process, to allow residents to consider and debate the strengths and limitations of each. Agreement on a desirable future for Riddells Creek is one way to resolve at least some of the conflicts that will inevitably arise as we move towards a Structure Plan.

We would also like to discuss, at an early date, a draft of the consultation proposed for the Neighbourhood Character Study and the Structure Plan. Our members have considerable experience in processes of public consultation and will have views on how this can be made both practical and adequate to the decisions at hand. In particular, we want to ensure that consideration of biodiversity protection, connectivity, and the role of Barrm Birrm is well-integrated with decision-making about zoning, public infrastructure and bushfire risk.

Recommendations

1. Consult with Riddells Creek Landcare at an early date to remedy gaps and errors in Vegetation Protection Overlay, and the data on which this is based.
2. In order to integrate Barrm Birm with planning for biodiversity protection, open space and recreational activity, identify what condition Barrm Birm will be in by 2036 if the current trajectory of misuse continues, and set out a pathway for decisions on the kind and level of use that will meet recreational needs while maintaining the ecological integrity of this area.
3. Provide map-based information of the native vegetation and its condition, and current zoning and densities, so that residents can consider the future impact of residential density.
4. Discuss with Riddells Creek Landcare, at an early date, a draft of the consultation proposed for the Neighbourhood Character Study and the Structure Plan. This is to ensure there are opportunities for discussion between residents that enables them to move toward understanding of their values and vision for Riddells Creek, and agreement on objectives for the Structure Plan.

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