

TREE CANOPY STRATEGY

Report Author: Trees Coordinator
Responsible Officer: Director Built Environment & Infrastructure
Ward(s) affected: (All Wards);

The author(s) of this report and the Responsible Officer consider that the report complies with the overarching governance principles and supporting principles set out in the Local Government Act 2020.

CONFIDENTIALITY

This item is to be considered at a Council meeting that is open to the public.

SUMMARY

A Tree Canopy Strategy and Implementation Plan have been prepared and taken to the community for consultation.

The strategy is the first of its kind for Yarra Ranges and sets out the vision, objectives and targets for the long-term protection, management and planting of trees in Yarra Ranges. It will provide the foundation for the development and implementation of best practice tree management to maximise the benefits of our tree canopy and to minimise risk.

Our Vision is that Yarra Ranges Council will conserve and enhance our leafy character, culturally significant landscapes and unique biodiversity through the protection, management and planting of trees. Our tree canopy will improve liveability, support community health and wellbeing, maintain ecosystems and enhance local tourism.

The strategy sets out six objectives to be delivered through the implementation plan.

1. Value, protect and manage trees.
2. Grow a healthy tree canopy.
3. Conserve culturally significant trees and enhance local tourism.
4. Improve tree canopy resilience to climate change.
5. Support and enhance community health and wellbeing.
6. Apply best practice tree management.

A strategy is needed to respond to key challenges and opportunities shaping the future of our tree canopy. Council must adopt a more proactive stance to tree management. The strategy establishes a clear vision, defines objectives, and sets measurable targets. Such an approach will offer the direction necessary to effectively plan, allocate resources and act to maximise the benefits of our tree canopy and to minimise risk.

RECOMMENDATION

That Council endorse the Tree Canopy Strategy and associated Implementation Plan.

RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

Council Forum 3 May 2016 – Report considered by Councillors on the review of Council's Tree Management Plan 2009 and the development of a Tree Policy. Councillors were supportive of the proposed Tree Policy and supported this progressing to a Council meeting for adoption. Councillors requested that the updated Tree Policy be developed internally and referred to a future Council Forum.

Council Meeting 4 May 2016 – Council endorsed the Tree Policy 2016.

Council Forum 20 February 2018 – Report presented to Council on the decision-making process for review of requests from the community to remove trees. Councillors supported retaining the current process.

Council Forum 20 February 2018 – Report considered by Councillors on the engagement process to review the Tree Strategy. Councillors requested that the process be undertaken internally and referred to a future Council Forum.

Council Forum 4 August 2020 – Report considered by councillors on the current draft of the Tree Canopy Strategy. Feedback was provided by councillors on the draft strategy, with this to be brought back to a future Council Forum.

Council Forum 20 April 2021 – Report considered by councillors on the current draft of the Tree Canopy Strategy. Feedback was provided by councillors on the draft strategy, with this to be brought back to a future Council Forum.

Council Forum 19 July 2022 – Report considered by councillors on the current draft of the draft Tree Canopy Strategy. Councillors approved the draft Tree Canopy Strategy going to a Council meeting for consideration of its endorsement and for going out to public consultation.

Council Meeting 23 August 2022 – Council endorsed the draft Tree Canopy Strategy going out for public consultation.

Council Forum 2 April 2024 - Report considered by councillors on the current draft of the draft Tree Canopy Strategy. Councillors made suggestions for changes (now included) and approved the draft Tree Canopy Strategy going to a Council meeting for consideration of its endorsement.

DISCUSSION

Purpose and Background

Trees are fundamental to the story of Yarra Ranges, shaping our cultures, values and communities. They are a prominent feature in our landscape, providing benefits to our health and wellbeing, community and culture, the environment, ecology and economy.

'Tree canopy' is our way of referring to Yarra Ranges' diverse tree population and is a way to consider the collective benefits of our trees. As the climate changes, and our cities and communities evolve, our tree canopy is in decline. This means less trees, but also unhealthier trees and increasing challenges for tree management. Issues contributing to this trend include the urban heat island effect, extreme weather, climate change, poor tree diversity and performance, inadequate tree planting, urban development, and competing infrastructure. Understanding these issues provides us with an opportunity to take action to reverse tree canopy decline.

This Strategy sets our vision, objectives and targets for the long-term protection, management and planting of trees in Yarra Ranges. Our tree planting will prioritise the urban parts of Yarra Ranges, in built up areas where canopy cover is low or declining. By taking a strategic approach to protecting, managing and planting trees, we will maximise the benefits of our tree canopy and minimise tree risks, particularly tree risks associated with bushfires and storms, which are significant factors in Yarra Ranges.

In 2019, Yarra Ranges Council was among 32 metropolitan councils, state government agencies, non-government and community organisations that endorsed the Living Melbourne: Our Metropolitan Urban Forest, a strategy for a greener, more liveable Melbourne. Among its six recommended actions, the strategy includes regional targets for increasing tree canopy cover.

Subsequently in 2020, Council endorsed the Liveable Climate Plan that includes an action to develop a Tree Canopy Strategy, with the strategy document to be endorsed by 2022. Significant storm events over the last two years requiring Tree Management team focus resulted in a delay to the strategy being finalised and brought to Council for endorsement.

Options considered

The preparation of a draft Tree Canopy Strategy followed Council's 2019 endorsement of Living Melbourne: Our Metropolitan Urban Forest, a strategy for a greener, more liveable Melbourne. Consultation occurred with Councillors as to how this should best occur.

Recommended option and justification

Following Council's 2019 endorsement of Living Melbourne: Our Metropolitan Urban Forest, a strategy for a greener, more liveable Melbourne, Council in 2020 endorsed the Liveable Climate Plan that includes an action to develop a Tree Canopy Strategy, with the strategy document to be endorsed by 2022.

FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

The development of the Tree Canopy Strategy has been funded within the Council's Recreation, Parks and Facilities Department's operating budget. The funding model for delivery of the Implementation Plan is based on existing operating budgets.

Costings are set out in the attached Tree Canopy Strategy 2024 – 2044 Implementation Plan. There are a range of foundational, ongoing, and annual costs. Nearly all actions will be funded within existing budgets, including the largest amount, \$450,000 annually for tree planting. Business cases will be developed where extra funding is required and funding will be sought through the annual Council budget process.

As well as planting costs, there are maintenance expenses to ensure the target of 95% is achieved with successful establishment rates. This is covered by existing budgets. Any requirement for extra planting will require the maintenance budget to be increased accordingly.

Data collection will be shared across Council departments and is expected to cost \$200,000 to \$480,000 over twenty years depending on the frequency and scope of the data collection.

Business cases will be developed for additional staff resources (EFT) as identified in the implementation plan and referred to the annual Council budget process for consideration.

APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES

This report contributes to the following strategic objective(s) in the Council Plan:

Connected and Healthy Communities

The Tree Canopy Strategy will directly address the concerns that climate change will bring by providing direction for the management of our trees to maximise their cooling benefit and planting new trees in locations with low or declining canopy cover, particularly those vulnerable to heat.

Protected & Enhanced Natural Environment

The Tree Canopy Strategy will give high level guidance for protection and enhancement of our trees across Yarra Ranges.

Vibrant Economy, Agriculture and Tourism

The Tree Canopy Strategy will act to conserve and manage culturally significant trees and enhance culture and tourism with new tree plantings.

Quality Infrastructure and Liveable Places

The Tree Canopy Strategy will take measures to strategically manage public trees as important community assets and demonstrate best practice in delivering tree programs and projects that enhance the liveability of our urban areas and towns.

RELEVANT LAW

Not applicable

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Economic Implications

Trees are a major part of the identity of Yarra Ranges and are a drawcard for tourism and its vitally important associated local job creation. Research also shows that there is more economic activity when shopping areas have high tree canopy cover.

It is generally accepted that well treed streets can lead to an increase in property values. As well, in well treed areas, energy costs are reduced, especially in summer.

Social Implications

It is generally accepted that well treed landscapes improve the amenity and liveability of the neighbourhood and lead to an increase in walking and other forms of activity. The Tree Canopy Strategy will prioritise areas with low or declining canopy cover.

Environmental Implications

Trees are a significant part of the rich biodiversity values of Yarra Ranges. They form an essential part of precious vegetation communities and provide habitat for numerous indigenous fauna species, including two Victorian faunal state emblems - the Leadbeater's Possum and Helmeted Honeyeater.

Trees will play an increasingly important role as the community seeks to adapt to the effects of climate change. From the Tree Canopy Strategy, it is proposed to grow a more diverse and resilient tree canopy, which is better suited to a future climate, and staff will investigate ways to improve landscape resilience.

The strategy sets out targets that will see an increase in tree canopy cover on public land, while specifically increasing cover in built up areas. It is aimed to have 35% canopy cover and provide a minimum of 25% canopy cover for all suburbs and towns in built up areas.

The Tree Canopy Strategy recognises the impact of climate change and extreme weather events including heat waves, bushfires, storms, flooding and drought. Trees are inextricably linked to the impacts of extreme weather, in particular for Yarra Ranges, where bushfires and storms are a significant risk. These events often result in tree failures, hazardous trees, property damage and sometimes the loss of life. Extreme weather cannot be controlled, but the risks posed to communities can be managed to lessen the impact of these events.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

A draft Tree Canopy Strategy was developed by Council staff and released to the community for consultation and feedback.

In summary, eight themes were identified through the consultation phase:

- Bushfire risk
- Tree Protection
- Incentives

- Statistics
- Targets
- Governance
- Heritage
- Biodiversity.

The Tree Management Team has addressed the issues raised in all eight themes and updated the *Implementation Plan – Tree Canopy Strategy*.

COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Along with community consultation, internal Council teams including Environment, Bushlands, Design & Place, Parks and Risk teams were consulted with during the development of the strategy.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Without the Tree Canopy Strategy, Council risks not having direction in protecting its tree canopy and failing to adapt to and be prepared for the effects of climate change and the associated threats to biodiversity more broadly, along with the impacts of development.

The Tree Canopy Strategy provides high level guidance to minimise tree risks, particularly tree risks associated with bushfires and storms, which are significant factors for the Yarra Ranges community. It is proposed to move from a predominantly reactive management regime to a more proactive one, which will see a reduction in risk to people and property, as well as lowering costs.

If the tree canopy is not adequately protected and maintained, it will put at risk Yarra Ranges' unique character and identity, which is essential for the way locals live, tourism and reputation.

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No officers and/or delegates acting on behalf of the Council through the Instrument of Delegation and involved in the preparation and/or authorisation of this report have any general or material conflict of interest as defined within the *Local Government Act 2020*.

ATTACHMENTS TO THE REPORT

1. Tree Canopy Strategy 2024-2044