

TREE CANOPY STRATEGY

Report Author: Trees Coordinator
Responsible Officer: Director Environment and 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 draft Tree Canopy Strategy has been prepared for consideration by Council. The strategy sets out the vision, objectives and targets for the long-term protection, management, and planting of trees in Yarra Ranges. Following the 2021 storms where an unprecedented number of trees were lost, there is an urgency to address the canopy loss.

The strategy is the first of its kind for Council and 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.

This report presents the draft Tree Canopy Strategy and seeks to have this released to the community for consultation and feedback prior to it being considered by Council for formal adoption.

RECOMMENDATION

That

- 1. Council endorse the draft Tree Canopy Strategy for public consultation, commencing 25 August 2022.***
- 2. Following public consultation, the draft Tree Canopy Strategy be referred to Council Forum for review of the consultation prior to formal consideration at a subsequent Council Meeting.***

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.

DISCUSSION

Purpose and Background

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.

Key issues

The draft Tree Canopy Strategy recognises 11 key issues. Detail of how Council will address these issues is in the attached draft strategy, but in brief they are:

- Community Perceptions – Council will work with the public to help them understand the benefits of trees and to understand community concerns about trees;

- Urban Heat – DELWP have measured vulnerability to heat across Melbourne. Lilydale, Mooroolbark and Kilsyth have areas of moderately high to high heat vulnerability;
- Extreme Weather & Climate Change – our trees will be affected by a warming climate, storms and bushfire;
- Tree Diversity & Performance – many of our trees are in poor condition and the diversity of species is narrow;
- Vacant Street Tree Sites – there are more than 16,000 vacant sites in the Lilydale area and surrounding suburbs;
- Urban Development – our population is growing, and the associated development makes it difficult to have good tree cover unless it is well planned;
- Competing Infrastructure – our trees compete with other assets both above and below the ground;
- Infrastructure Projects – major projects, like new roads and level crossing removal, often involve trees having to be removed;
- Managing Culturally Significant Trees – Yarra Ranges is fortunate to have many culturally significant trees, but currently they are not managed as they should be;
- Managing Large Habitat Trees –there are many of these trees, and they provide high level biodiversity values and provide critical ecological services. However, there is a need for good management processes so the community can feel confident in having them in the landscape; and
- Best Practice Tree Management – tree management has changed significantly in recent years. It is now much more asset focussed – like roads and footpaths. Good data is required to manage these valuable assets.

In June 2021 a significant storm occurred across the municipality where an unprecedented number of trees were lost. The loss of mature large trees, vegetation and tree canopy damage was extensive, with the tragic destruction of several local indigenous and community significant trees. Much of the impacted terrain is steep and challenging, which added to the complexity of recovery operations.

There is an urgency to address the canopy loss of this event. High level impact assessment has estimated 25,000 trees fell across the region and there were over 2,660 tree related requests for assistance from the community.

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 draft Tree Canopy Strategy has been funded within the Council's Recreation, Projects, and Parks 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 draft Tree Canopy Strategy 2022 – 2042 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, \$250,000 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 \$400,000 over twenty years.

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 draft Tree Canopy Strategy will directly address the concerns that climate change will bring, especially by providing shade in the areas most in need

Protected & Enhanced Natural Environment

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

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 draft 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 the 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 draft 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

The draft Tree Canopy Strategy has been developed by Council staff and is proposed to be released to the community for consultation and feedback before it is finalised.

COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Not relevant.

RISK ASSESSMENT

Without the draft 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.

The draft 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 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. Draft Tree Canopy Strategy 2022 – 2042
2. Draft Tree Canopy Strategy 2022 – 2042 – Implementation Plan