

Response to:

“Health and Condition Report for the Brimbank City Council: Report on the Trees at the McKay Memorial Gardens, Sunshine.” Prepared by Homewood Consulting Pty Ltd, 29 June 2009.

For the Friends of the McKay Memorial Gardens

It is very pleasing to finally have an accurate map and associated photographic record of the trees in the Gardens as of May 2009. The record of tree health is also particularly useful, as is the advice on preventing tree damage arising from construction work. It is a pity this advice was not more timely.

Overall however, the Friends find this report to be overly narrow in its focus. In particular, it does not clearly address, or take into account, the heritage issues that should underlie the management of the gardens. We note that although the consultant has had previous experience providing assessment reports for local councils, there is no evidence that he has any experience or expertise in dealing with heritage gardens of this period. This is problematic given that the report is based upon the assessor's experience.

- The report lacks a site analysis. Had a site analysis been undertaken the report may have been able to advise on the impact of exposure to prevailing winds resulting from the removal of shelter belts (the hedges). Specifically, it should have contained an assessment on the impact winds are having on the structure of previously sheltered trees and on the moisture levels in the soil.
- The report lacks a soil analysis. Had soil analysis been undertaken, we would know the constitution of the soil and therefore be in a better position in regard to species selection and in regard to remedial action, if any, that needs to be undertaken to improve soil structure. We would also know to what extent hydrophobic soils exist within the active root zones of the mature trees.
- The report lacks an irrigation analysis. The report only tells us what we already know, namely that the trees receive insufficient irrigation. A better report would have at least provided advice on irrigation routines. The suggested use of water-filled-road-barriers has already been discussed and rejected as having failed. In addition the use of road barriers in a garden is inappropriate both in terms of visual amenity and in terms of soil compaction necessitated by their need to be constantly refilled.
- The report fails to provide adequate or appropriate advice on routine maintenance procedures. Of the 37 trees listed as being in poor to very poor health, 12 have no associated recommendations for action. Are we to infer that these trees should just be allowed to die? If not, what should be done to assist these trees? Of the 37 trees listed as being in only fair health, only one has recommended work! There is no mention of what should be done to improve the health of the others. The report recommends that one oak should be fertilized but fails to explain why only this tree and not the others. How often should the trees be fertilized? Why are there no recommendations about soil compaction resulting from routine maintenance

procedures? Why is there no advice about the use of herbicides and pesticides? And so on.

- The report's use of ULE are at best debatable. The report lists tree number 5, a **mature** *Brachychiton populneus* as having a ULE of 20-40 years. The real life expectancy of this species is somewhere in the region of 120 years. (Maximum life expectancy) In comparison the report goes on to list tree number 26, a **young** *Quercus robur* (English Oak) in **good health**, as *also* having a ULE of 20-40 years. This is bizarre. It suggests a real life expectancy for this species of somewhere in the region of 70-80 years! For the record, Heritage Victoria specifies the life expectancy of *Quercus robur* as being between 200 and 400 years. With reasonable treatment they can be expected to live much longer. This would give this tree a ULE of 40+. Tree number 80, *Strelitzia Nicolai* (mispelt in the report) has been given a ULE of 5-10 years but this species is self propagating and with barely adequate treatment will last indefinitely. (That is, a ULE of 40+) And so on. The weighting or use of the ULE in this context is also exceedingly odd given that it is the age of the mature trees that makes them valuable. The older the tree the more historically valuable it is!
- At least one species is misidentified. Tree number 27 is identified as *Quercus ilex* but is in fact a *Garrya Elliptica* silk tassel *bush*.
- The Gardens are misclassified as a 'park'. "In the southern section of the **park**..."
- The report contains several spelling errors and an incomplete sentence. This is hardly professional and suggests that the report was produced in a rush.

Regarding Observations/Discussions, 4.1.

"A number of mature, high value trees are showing signs of stress and deteriorating health. This is likely associated with the age of the specimens, the species represented, the difficult conditions of the site and the below average rainfall from the previous ten years."

Stress and poor health is the result of:

Age:

The oaks are not yet 100 years old and cannot therefore be suffering poor health as a result of age. This suggests that the assessor has an inaccurate understanding of the longevity of this species. (See discussion of ULE) In heritage gardens of this kind, where great age is considered the norm, age is a poor excuse.

Species represented:

Is the assessor referring to the oaks and other exotics? We note that the assessor has experience in recommending native species for landscape planting in the area of the airport but no experience in heritage gardens of this period.

The difficult conditions of the site:

The report has no analysis of site conditions.

Below average rainfall for the previous ten years:

Indeed, but why is there no mention of irrigation and maintenance practices? Are we to assume that these have had *no* impact on the health of the trees?

Regarding Tree Health 4.2

“Trees currently performing well could influence decision making for future planning schemes.”

Species performing well *could* influence decision making but appropriate heritage species *should* be the determining factor. Certainly, Heritage Victoria thinks this. In the case of the heritage of the McKay Gardens this means, among other things, oaks and other exotics.

Overall, this report appears to be an off-the-shelf variety typically used to provide tree assessments for municipal parks and streetscapes. No doubt it would be appropriate in those circumstances but it is inappropriate here. Proportionally, it is excessively concerned with matters of liability but shows very little awareness of heritage issues. The advice regarding the use of mulches and road barriers for watering is generic and unhelpful, as is the assessment of the assumed causes of the current tree decline. While the report does provide some recommendations for immediate action in regard to the trees, it is unlikely to be very useful in providing on-going guidance in tree management. We consider this report an opportunity missed.

Substance of recommendations:

Removal of trees: The report recommends the removal of nine trees, with a further removal of two trees within five years.

Tree numbers

7 – the Friends have agreed (in conjunction with Ros) to the replacement of this tree with an elm – provided replacement is provided within two weeks of removal.

17 – no objection.

24 – this tree has already been removed without replacement. **Replacement required.**

37 – this tree has already been removed – no objection

39 – this tree has already been removed – no objection

59 – no objection – provided a replacement is provided within two weeks of removal

62 - no objection – provided a replacement is provided within two weeks of removal

79 – it is yet to be determined if this tree requires removing – if removal is required – the Friends have no objection provided a replacement is provided within two weeks of removal.

We also note that trees 38, 94 and 96 have also been removed and that number 18 has been seriously damaged by the installation of the adjacent path and is looking particularly unwell. (It also appears to have been damaged by a mower colliding with it). In addition, the Friends note that 19 trees (or more?) have been removed from the Garden during the last 5 years. Only 9 new trees have been planted (mostly as part of the redevelopment). This is unsatisfactory, it has reduced the amenity and canopy cover in the Gardens. The reduction of canopy cover exacerbates moisture loss.

- We require the replacement of **an additional ten trees** beyond those marked here for replacement. The Friends also require in-put into the placement and species selection.

The current practice of replacing trees only as part of (and to be timed with) the Council's broader tree planting regime is unsatisfactory. It is this practice that in large part explains the current decline in number of trees and the failure to provide for succession planting.

- The Friends require that any tree removed from the Gardens be replaced within two weeks of original tree's removal, so that a) the overall numbers of trees is not diminished, b) succession plantings are not allowed to lapse into their current woeful condition and c) the public can see that Council is not simply removing trees.

Mechanical damage:

It is regrettable that the advice on avoiding damage to trees as a result of construction work has arrived after the work (and damage) has been done. The Friends note that irrigation, parks and maintenance crews continue to drive across the gardens, lawns, paths and tree root zones. This must cease! More effective training and information to officers working in the Gardens might be helpful.

Treatment of trees in poor and very poor health:

The Friends have no objections to the structural work that is recommended for trees in this category, nor to replacement of trees as indicated above. In addition:

- The Friends require that *all* trees that are in this category (that are not to be replaced) receive irrigation, where necessary fertilization and where appropriate the application of fine grain mulch *to the correct depth*.
- The Friends require that **all the mature oaks receive irrigation**, fertilization and the replacement of the current mulch with fine grain mulch *applied to the correct depth*.
- The Friends require that the hedge along the the outer edge of the 'straight six' be replaced with an appropriate species as soon as is practicable, to restore the shelter belt and reduce excessive moisture loss from the soil.
- The Friends require a replacement time line for the establishment of succession plantings be established.

Treatment of trees assessed as in fair health:

The Friends recommend that all trees in the category be individually assessed and appropriate adjustments to their maintenance be made as required. No tree currently being irrigated should have irrigation withdrawn.