

9.4 RESPONSE TO NOTICE OF MOTION 921 VEGETATION BUFFERS

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Attachments: Nil

Reference: Notice of Motion 921

SUMMARY

This report provides a response to Notice of Motion No. 921 relating to vegetation buffers.

Vegetation buffers are Council owned narrow linear reserves located throughout the shire. They are variable in area and accordingly have a range of maintenance requirements.

This report details the quantity and location of these reserves and presents options available to best manage ongoing maintenance and management costs in an effort to increase resilience to climate change.

RECOMMENDATION

THAT Council:

1. Receive and note the report; and
2. Makes a recommendation to the Technical Committee of the Local Government Infrastructure Design Association that the standard width of access exclusion strips be 10cm.

BACKGROUND

At the 18 September 2017 Council meeting the following Notice of Motion was passed:

MOTION

MOVED: CR. B. CHISHOLM

SECONDED: CR. D. LOWE

THAT Council Officers prepare a report to Council on the background, number, location and maintenance costs associated with the vegetation buffers/screens that Council manages or will manage into the future. The report should also include possible ways with better planning, can we make this type of infrastructure better able to cope with the possible effects of climate change into the future (i.e. Location, usability etc.) and ways in which maintenance can be reduced.

CARRIED

RESPONSE TO NOTICE OF MOTION 921 VEGETATION BUFFERS (CONT.)

ISSUES AND DISCUSSION

For the purposes of this report a “*vegetation buffers/screens*” as referred to in the Notice of Motion has been taken to mean narrow linear reserves in Council’s ownership. This was verified with mover of the motion in the preparation of this report. These strips or corridors of land may also be referred to as ‘*Plantation Reserves*’.

As these reserves are not formally specifically categorised within Councils asset register, this review has been undertaken via a desktop analysis of GIS maps and aerial photography.

What is the purpose of Vegetation buffers?

While the specific purpose for the creation of these reserves is not always entirely clear, we can speculate as to the reasons for their creation when we consider the range of factors that may have led to the creation of these reserves in the past.

Vegetation reserves have been created in the past for the following reasons;

- Protection of existing environmental and/or aesthetic values;
- Protection of identified habitat and wildlife migration corridors;
- Augment the available roadside space for walking paths or other public use;
- Creation of vegetated buffers or plantation reserves between existing roads and new residential roads to preserve and enhance residential amenity;
- To secure additional roadside land for future road widening or upgrade, particularly adjacent to arterial roads;
- To control access to roads through the removal of the direct abuttal or ‘legal right to access’ to a road reserve for newly created lots;
- Creation of vegetated buffers or plantation reserves between undeveloped land and new developments to preserve and enhance amenity of the undeveloped land and remove the obligation for the landowner of the undeveloped land toward half-cost residential style fencing.

How many Vegetation Buffers exist across the Shire?

In total thirty-nine (39) reserves were identified across the Shire. The width of the reserves ranged from 10cm to 20m wide, with an average width of 5.7m. Reserve lengths ranged from 32m to 2km.

The combined land area dedicated to these reserves is 96,313.75m² or 9.6Ha.

Where are these Vegetation Buffers located?

As indicated in the table below, vegetation buffers exist throughout the shire in a range of locations. Attachment 1 further outlines these areas in greater detail.

Beveridge	1
Broadford	3
Kilmore	12
Kilmore East	2
Pyalong	2
Seymour	3
Wallan	13

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Wandong-Heathcote Junction	3
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How much does it cost to maintain these Vegetation Buffers?

The maintenance costs of each of the identified reserves varies greatly as some receive regular maintenance, such as those that have walking tracks and footpaths, whilst others are seen simply as an extension of a rural roadside which are not subject to any form of proactive maintenance regime.

Approximately 10% of the identified reserves are part of a regular mowing program (many of these are adjacent to other open space), costing Council approximately \$720 year. A quarter of the reserves are part of the roadside slashing program, this costs Council approximately \$360 annually (based on a single cut). This equates to \$1,080 to maintain the existing reserves either through mowing and slashing.

If Council was to maintain all the reserves as part of the regular mowing program it is estimated to cost Council approximately \$7,200 a year. However, some sites are likely to not be practical or accessible to mow.

Some of the reserves, such as those in-between VicRoads managed road reserves and private property are difficult to access for maintenance purposes.

Benchmarking

Enquiries were made with six (6) other local government areas regarding the management of 'plantation reserves'. One detailed (1) response was received and four (4) responded that they did not have any information available on these reserves.

The Council that responded in detail stated that they apply an average width of 0.1m to their "access restriction strips" and this generally gets absorbed into the roadside reserve. This is done to minimise maintenance requirements. Historically these reserves were larger. Where the reserves include a shared path for example they are on average 3 to 5m in width and included in the parks maintenance program.

Future Reserves, Planning and Maintenance

The number of future vegetation buffer reserves is unknown as development occurs.

The creation of plantation reserves is no longer common practice; however, they can be used on occasion. In the past the width of these reserves has varied. This report recommends that the standard width of reserves created for the primary purpose of restricting vehicular access (access exclusion strips) is 10cm. It is considered applying this standard to future reserves will both achieve restriction of access whilst also minimising Councils maintenance requirements and liabilities. The minimum width would also seek to increase resilience to climate change impacts particularly as it relates to minimizing bushfire risk.

CONSULTATION

Discussion with the mover of the motion regarding the detail and scope of the Notice of Motion assisted in writing this report.

Council's Environment Coordinator consulted with Council's Manager Development Approvals, Manager Engineering and Major Projects, Transport & Development Coordinator, Property Officer, Parks and Gardens Coordinator, Parks and Gardens

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team members and other local government environment and parks maintenance teams in the preparation of this report.

FINANCIAL, RESOURCE AND ASSET MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

The maintenance of these reserves is difficult to quantify as many are managed in conjunction with the adjoining roadside or open space areas.

Currently Council spends approximately \$1,080 to maintain the existing plantation reserves through mowing and slashing.

If Council was to maintain all of the reserves as part of the regular mowing program it would cost Council approximately \$7,200 a year. However, some sites are not practical or accessible to mow.

POLICY AND LEGISLATIVE IMPLICATIONS

There are no policy or legislative implications as a direct result of this report. However, it is worth noting that Council has responsibilities for the management of Council owned and managed land under legislation including the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994* and *Country Fire Authority 1958*. Reserves can be created, and section 173 agreements made under the *Planning and Environment Act 1987*.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS (SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL)

Plantation reserves can provide important habitat and wildlife corridors for native species, whilst providing public amenity and shade.

Landscaping design should also take into consideration future climatic conditions.

CHARTER OF HUMAN RIGHTS IMPLICATIONS

The rights protected in the *Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* were considered in preparing this report and it's determined that the subject matter does not raise any human rights issues.

OFFICER DECLARATION OF CONFLICT OF INTEREST

No officers involved in the preparation of this report have any direct or indirect interest in this matter.

CONCLUSION

Council owns several narrow linear reserves throughout the shire. These reserves are variable in area and maintenance requirements.

In order to minimise Council's future maintenance requirements and exposure to bushfire risk and other climate change liabilities, this report recommends that the standard width of new access exclusion strips is 10cm. To formalize this arrangement it is recommended that Council makes a recommendation to the Technical Committee of the Local Government Infrastructure Design Association that the standard width of access exclusion strips be 10cm.