

8.2 REIMAGINING RUTHVEN MASTER PLAN UPDATE**Author:** Urban Designer**Reviewed By:** General Manager City Sustainability and Strategy

PURPOSE

The purpose of this report is for Council to consider its next steps in regards to planning for the long term future of the old Ruthven primary school in Reservoir.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Council purchased the old Ruthven Primary School site in 2016 to provide a park for the community and Council has been engaging with the community to help shape the vision and to understand community aspirations, needs and ideas to help develop a master plan for this site into the future.

The scope of Council's work towards developing a master plan has included exploring development of a Children's hub at the site. Community feedback has shown that a significant proportion of the community do not want a building at the site and Council's technical investigations have also confirmed that there is not an immediate need for a Children's hub in this area, nor is this the only site in this community that could provide for facilities at a future point in time when additional services are expected to be needed.

Based on the findings of the community engagement work and technical work to date, Officers recommend adjusting the scope of the master planning and now focusing on planning for this site to be a local park with natural character for the long term, in line with community aspirations.

Officers also recommend undertaking some immediate upgrades in this financial year to include some new bins and introducing recycling at the park, seats, tree planting and a drinking fountain to make the site more accessible and usable straight away.

Working with the CRG, Officers would prepare the draft master plan focussing on creating a natural character local park over time and for the long term, and would also engage with the broad community including diverse groups. Officers would explore opportunities to enhance biodiversity and to support community involvement in the park, for example by getting the community involved in naming of the park and by exploring opportunities for community planting days.

There has been wide-ranging community participation in consultation and this included a Family Fun Day event attended by 350 people and the involvement of community members in a Community Reference Group (CRG). It was clear that a significant proportion of the community oppose the idea of an early year's facility at the site.

Two other options could be considered by Council:

- Council could continue master planning on the basis that this site should provide an Early Years Hub in future years when there is expected to be a need for additional services. Officers advise this while this site could be used for this purpose, it is not required for this purpose, as there are other potential sites in area.
- Council could put master planning on hold until community infrastructure planning for the whole precinct is finished. Master planning would then be finalised during 2019-20 or later, rather than in 2018-19. This approach would provide Council with detailed information about the needs for services in the wider area and all the potential locations so it could consider the precinct as a whole before resolving plans for this particular site. Officers advise that current knowledge of the area is sufficient to understand that there are other potential sites in the area for community services in future, and this particular site is not required for this purpose.

Recommendation

That Council:

- (1) Confirms that its vision that the former Ruthven Primary School is for a local park of natural character that is open space for the long term.
- (2) Thanks the Community Reference Group for their advice and seeks their further advice to help complete development of a draft master plan for a local park of natural character and to prioritise some immediate upgrades to the site.
- (3) Formally responds to the Community Reference Group's submission as found in **Appendix B**.
- (4) Writes to the local community providing them with a project update.

BACKGROUND / KEY INFORMATION

At its 5 September 2016 meeting, Council resolved to purchase the former Ruthven Primary School is located at 74-76 Glasgow Street Reservoir to fill a gap in Darebin's Open Space network and move towards Council goals of ensuring that all residents live within a 500m walking distance of public open space. The minutes of this meeting identified that Council would progress with master planning and that exploration of the need for community services would be done as part of this.

Council's current Council Plan *'Darebin 2021'* which was released in 2017 recognised the importance of this site by nominating it as Big Action 6 seeking to *'create a new park, playground, oval and children's hub on the site of the old Ruthven primary school in Reservoir'*.

The 3ha site is currently being used by the local community for informal exercise and dog walking. It contains remnants of the primary school including the junior oval and cricket pitch, mature trees, basketball/netball courts and building foundations.

Work for research and community engagement to help develop a master plan for the site, setting out long term plans for how the site will develop was budgeted for in 2017-18.

Prior to Council's purchase and even while the school was operating, the site has been used by the community for many years. In 1996 Council entered into a joint user agreement with the State Government, allowing the local community to use the playspace, sporting oval and BBQ facilities outside school operating hours.

State Government merged the Ruthven primary school with the Merrilands and Lakeside Colleges, declaring the subject site surplus for educational needs and commencing the process to dispose the site in 2010.

Following Council's purchase, the site was rezoned to a Public Park and Recreation Zone (PPRZ).

Previous Council Resolution

At its meeting of 5 September 2016, Council resolved:

'That Council pursues option 2 – Purchase part of the Lakeside and all Ruthven sites as follows:

- (1) Acquire the former Ruthven Primary School site at 74-76 Glasgow Avenue, Reservoir (estimated to be approximately 30,000m² in area) from the Victorian Government for an amount of \$6,900,000, plus GST and costs; and
Acquire approximately 18,000m² of land at the rear of the former Lakeside Secondary College at 31 Radford Road, Reservoir for an amount of \$270,000, ex GST for the land plus any associated costs.
- (2) Make arrangements for the funds to be transferred from the Open Space Reserve during the 2016/2017 financial year to enable the purchase of surplus Victorian Government land.
- (3) Approve the Chief Executive to authorise, sign and seal any documents relating to the transaction.

- (4) Request the Minister for Planning to exercise his power to prepare and approve Amendment C159 to the Darebin Planning Scheme under Section 20(4) of the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* to rezone the surplus Victorian Government land to be acquired by Council, considering: 74-76 Glasgow Avenue, Reservoir and rear 31 Radford Road, Reservoir to Public Park and Recreation Zone.
- (5) Writes to residents in the vicinity of Ruthven and Lakeside sites to advise of Council's agreement to purchase the land.
- (6) That consideration of planning and master planning for the Ruthven and Lakeside sites be referred to the 2017/2018 budget process.

COMMUNICATIONS AND ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement has revealed support for the creation of a natural park at the Ruthven site and that large buildings are not wanted.

A preliminary round of community consultation took place for a three week period in October 2017. Over 3000 residents were notified and invited to attend the main consultation event – a Family Fun Day – celebrating the acquisition of the site with the local community and kick starting the future planning of the site. Simultaneously the Expression of Interest (EOI) to form part of the project Community Reference Group was sought with the local community.

Consultation showed broad support for a local farmer's market (top response), walking paths, additional trees and garden beds, maintaining the natural look and feel for the park, a community gathering/BBQ area and children's play spaces. The Community Engagement Summary Report with the opinions of over 375 participants can be found at **Appendix A**.

Findings from the Family Fun Day showed that a high number of community members did not support the proposal for a Children's Hub, or large community building and sought clarification as to why this Ruthven site was selected for this function, given the recent development of Keon Park, Council operated Gellibrand and two privately run privately run early learning centres servicing the Reservoir West precinct.

A Community Reference Group has been established to help guide the development of the master plan, shape the community engagement program and be community ambassadors for the project.

Similar to the key findings from broad community engagement the CRG's vision for the Ruthven site is that a large (3ha) green and natural park is created for the local community. They envisage Ruthven as being a space for contemplation, tranquillity and creativity. Their vision seeks to create three recreation zones - a space for young children, senior citizens and an open lawn area which can be used for a wide variety of uses from an informal game of cricket to hosting a one-day farmer's market event.

CRG has proposed a vision is for the site to become a natural park. As outlined in their submission (Appendix B) they say: *'The site should be developed into a beloved local facility, one which is aesthetically pleasing, creatively inspiring and spiritually uplifting. We hope to help guide it to become a place that supports the native flora and fauna of our local environment whilst being a happy destination for the people of our community.'*

The CRG do not support any large buildings including a children's hub or a community facility being built on the site. The group have prepared a submission to the project outlining in detail their concerns and desires for the site which can be found in **Appendix B**.

ANALYSIS

Alignment to Council Plan / Council policy

Goal 2 - Opportunities to live well

- Council Plan Goal 2.1 – 'Create a new park, playground, oval and children's hub on the site of the old Ruthven primary school in Reservoir.

Environmental Sustainability Considerations

The subject site contains a number of mature native trees in relatively good condition, which are highly valued by the community. Any future plans should seek to protect and build on this valued character of the site and identify opportunities to enhance its biodiversity values.

Equity, Inclusion and Wellbeing Considerations

There is solid evidence linking improved health and well-being to access to quality open space for the community. Community feedback collected to date indicates that a park catering to Reservoir West senior and young children age groups – will create an intergenerational space, improving physical and mental health and social cohesion.

Any future improvements to the site will need ensure that high quality universal access to and within the park are integral to the design and implementation of the master plan.

Cultural Considerations

The community of Reservoir West is a diverse community. Any future plan for this site should celebrate this strength. Future consultation on a draft master plan should reach out to all residents inclusive of cultural groups as well as traditional owners.

Economic Development Considerations

There are no factors in this report which impact on economic development considerations.

Financial and Resource Implications

Minor improvements at the site would be completed in 2018-19 via existing budgets and programs – for example a drinking fountain would be installed under Council's drinking fountain program and tree planting will be completed through the existing planting program.

Further improvements would be included in the 2019-20 draft budget for consideration by Council. City wide priorities would need to be considered and balanced in considering future work.

Legal and Risk Implications

As the site is located 200m from Edgars Creek, A Cultural Heritage Management Plan may also be required, guiding any future works requiring deep excavation.

DISCUSSION

This site plays an important role in the open space network

Council purchased this site to fill a gap in the open space network, which is clear when it is seen mapped. The Darebin Open Space Strategy and Council Plan seeks to ensure that all residents are able to walk 500m to their local park. Figure 2 illustrates the gap the recent acquisition of the Ruthven site addresses for Reservoir West precinct.

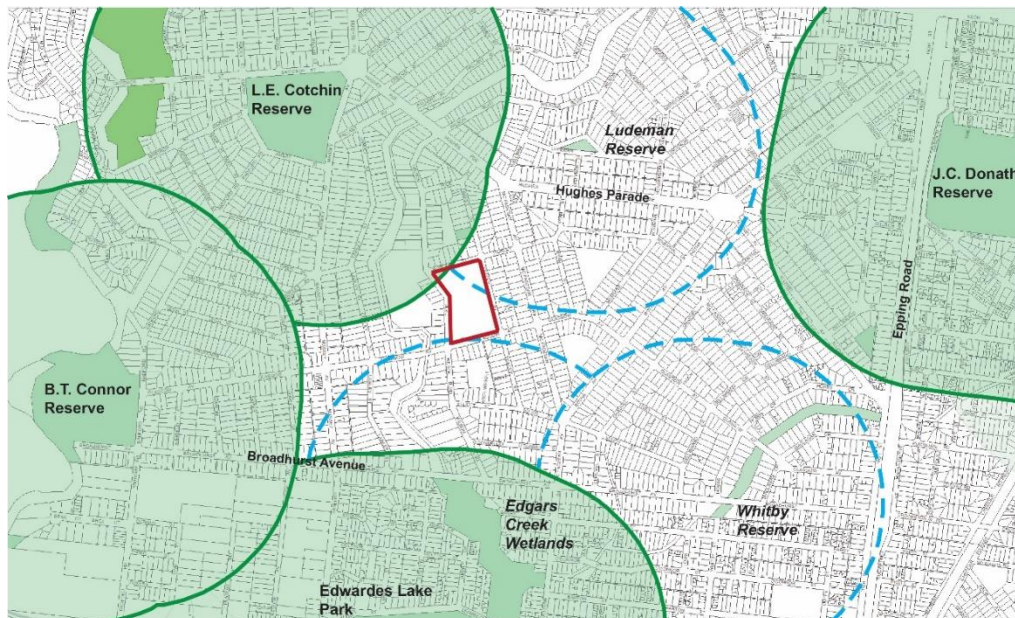


Figure 2 – Early mapping analysis identifying the shortfall of open space for the Reservoir West community. Subject site is highlighted in red.

Further, open space has been lost nearby in the last 30 years as shown in **figure 3**.

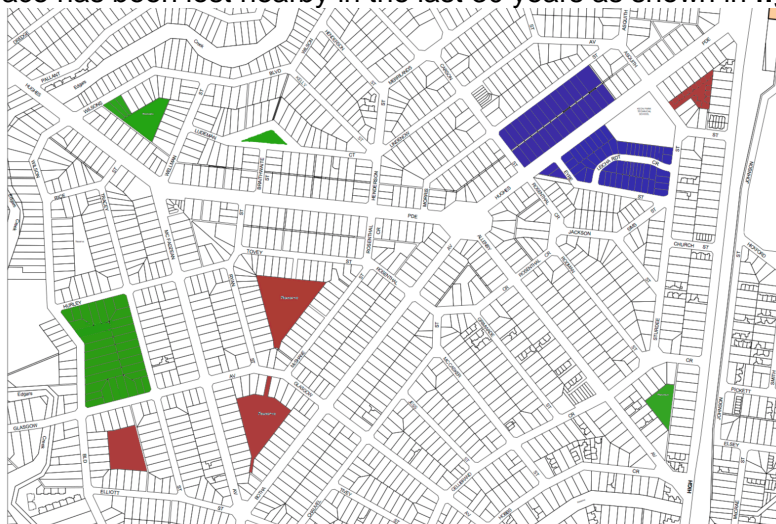


Figure 3 – Map of the eastern sub-precinct of Reservoir West (Merrilands) highlighting the loss of Government land over the last 30 years. The green parcels illustrate the current open spaces servicing the precinct, the red parcels illustrate former open space sold off for private use and blue highlight former State Government land sold for private use. Map Source: Ruthven Community Reference Group.

Significant community feedback did not support a building and sought an open park with natural character

At the Fun Day, there was clear feedback from a majority of participants in consultation that any 'large' community building and associated car parking would be taking away the site's primary function as public open space. There was also a community perception that there is not a need for these types of services in the area.

The Community Reference Group has also strongly expressed this view. Their feedback is included in full in **Appendix B**

This particular site isn't required for an early years facilities as there are other sites nearby that could meet future need

What is currently known about the future need for early year's facilities is that there is not an immediate need for additional facilities but that the need in the wider community is expected to grow over 5 to 10 years.

However, this specific site is not required to meet future need as there are other sites nearby that could be used to provide for these services for the local community in the future.

Detailed investigation into the community infrastructure needs and planning for the wider precinct is progressing but results are not currently known.

Latest forecasts of demographic change suggest that in 2041, an additional 1200 people will call Reservoir West (Merrilands) home. People within the 0-14 aged groups are expected to experience the most growth, whilst the 60-84 age groups is expected to decline during this time. Next steps in the investigations to help inform the long term planning for the precinct will include:

- Planning to understand other community infrastructure and services requirements for other aged groups of Reservoir West (Merrilands) which will include looking into requirements for the seniors, young adults/teenagers etc.
- Further work to understand the reasons of low kindergarten participation rates Reservoir West (Merrilands).
- Work to understand what role Council will play in the planning and roll out of new Federal and State Government permanent funding for two years of kindergarten before school, including access to at least five hours of subsidised three-year-old kinder by 2022, progressively scaled up to 15 hours per week over the next decade.

OPTIONS FOR CONSIDERATION**Option 1 (Recommended) – Progress master planning for a park of natural character for the long term**

That Council

- 1) Confirms that its vision that the former Ruthven Primary School is for a local park of natural character that is open space for the long term.
- 2) Thanks the Community Reference Group for their advice and seeks their further advice to help complete development of a draft master plan for a local park of natural character and to prioritise some immediate upgrades to the site including planting, a drinking fountain, and seats and introducing recycling bins.
- 3) Formally responds to the Community Reference Group's submission as found in **Appendix B**.
- 4) Writes to the local community providing them with a project update.

Officers recommend progressing master planning on the basis of this site being used in the long term as a local park with natural character, in line with community aspirations.

Working with the CRG, Officers would prepare the draft master plan focussing on creating a natural character local park over time and for the long term, and would also engage with the broad community including diverse groups. Officers would explore opportunities to enhance biodiversity and support community involvement in the park, for example by getting the community involved in naming of the park and by exploring opportunities for community planting days.

Progressing with the master planning of local park with a natural character can be achieved in 18/19 budget along with undertaking some immediate upgrades in this financial year to include some new bins including introducing recycling at the park, seats, tree planting and a drinking fountain to make the site more accessible and usable straight away.

Officers advise that it is not necessary for this site in particular to be used as the home for community services in the future and that while community infrastructure planning is not yet completed, that with the information currently available that officers have reasonable confidence that other sites in the precinct could play this future role well.

This option aligns with the CRG's view, confirming that the site is used as a natural park in the long term and does not include a community building or children's hub. The CRG has provided feedback to this option which can be found in **Appendix C**.

Option 2 – (not recommended) - Put master planning and planning for any future community hub on hold until after the community infrastructure planning is completed in detail.

Master planning for the site would be progressed in 2019/20, following the finalisation of the community infrastructure needs planning.

Whilst the community infrastructure planning is being prepared, some immediate improvements would be made including some planting and a drinking fountain.

This would develop a whole of precinct view about locations for all community services before any site specific planning progresses. It would provide high confidence that the various open space and community functions for Reservoir West are located in the best place for the community into the future.

Officers understand this is not supported by the CRG as they would like Council to confirm that long term plans for the site are that it would remain as open space in its entirety.

Option 3 – (not recommended) Progress with master planning of the site but indicate that part of the site may be considered for a community hub in future, subject to details infrastructure planning.

This would allow master planning for a park of natural character to continue now, while also keeping the option open for Council to consider including a community hub in future if the detailed infrastructure planning identified it as a priority.

While it is possible that detailed community infrastructure planning could identify a particular benefit, Officers advise that with the information currently available there is reasonable confidence that other sites in the precinct could play this future role well.

Officers understand this is not supported by the CRG as they would like Council to confirm that long term plans for the site are that it would remain as open space in its entirety.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

Details

If option one as recommended is supported, implementation would include:

Preparing a master plan for the Ruthven site

- Meet with the CRG to progress master planning for the site, including key milestones such as community engagement activities. (November 2018)
- Officers to update the community of a project update via letter drop and website(November 2018)
- Work with the CRG to create a master plan for a natural, local park.. (December 2018 – June 2019)
- Further community engagement including reaching diverse groups that reflect Reservoir now and in the future.

Delivering immediate upgrades to the Ruthven site

- Officers with CRG's advice to plan immediate improvements (November 2018)
- Implement improvements (January – June 2018)

Communication

- Communications and community updates will be run at each of the key project milestones and to let residents know about improvements.

RELATED DOCUMENTS

- Nil

Attachments

- Ruthven Community Engagement Report (**Appendix A**)
- Former Ruthven Primary Reference Group - Statement of Position (**Appendix B**)
- Ruthven CRG workshop outcomes (**Appendix C**)

DISCLOSURE OF INTEREST

Section 80C of the *Local Government Act 1989* requires members of Council staff and persons engaged under contract to provide advice to Council to disclose any direct or indirect interest in a matter to which the advice relates.

The Officer reviewing this report, having made enquiries with relevant members of staff, reports that no disclosable interests have been raised in relation to this report.