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Project Director
Land and Biodiversity White Paper
Project Team
Department Sustainability and
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Attention: Project Director, Land and Biodiversity White Paper

Land and Biodiversity at a time of Climate Change - Response

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input into the development of Victoria's Land and Biodiversity White Paper. Council has a strong commitment to sustainable land management and biodiversity conservation and would like to express an interest in participating in future consultation processes for this important policy document.

Whittlesea is often characterised by its rapidly expanding urban areas, however it also contains vast areas of rural land. In fact approximately 70% of the municipality is still zoned for rural and conservation purposes.

Recent population growth has been concentrated on the urban fringe, predominantly in the rapidly developing suburbs of Mernda, Doreen, South Morang and Epping North. In January 2007, the preliminary estimated resident population of the municipality was 134,197 people. The City's population is expected to grow to more than 150,000 people by 2011, an increase of around 1,800 new households per year. By 2030, the population is expected to reach around 240,000.

Urbanisation is considered one of the greatest threats to biodiversity in Australia. The anticipated growth within the municipality will inevitably place significant pressure on biodiversity values, both directly and indirectly. Like other urban fringe areas, the biodiversity values of the municipality are under constant and immediate threat from land use change and poor land management practices. Nowhere is this more apparent than within the urban growth boundary and surrounding green wedge land.

Many areas of very high ecological significance still exist in these peri-urban and green wedge areas. In Whittlesea, high quality remnants of the Endangered Plains Grassy Woodland, in particular those representing the Flora and Fauna Guaranteed listed

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community 55-04 Western Basalt Plains (River Red Gum) Grassy Woodland exist providing important habitat for woodland species. There are significant areas of the endangered Plains Grassland and Stony Knoll Shrubland, as well as large expanses of forested land and riparian vegetation which provide important habitat, refuge and corridors for many of our native fauna.

Some of the key threats to biodiversity on the urban rural fringe include:

- **Perceived uncertain future of green wedge land:**
Land speculation coupled with the lack of certainty in green wedge areas continues to fuel the perception that land may be rezoned in future years. Many landowners have reported being approached by developers, perpetuating the notion that green wedge land is negotiable, even though the planning scheme states otherwise.
- **Poor land management practices:**
Unsympathetic land management practices continue to hasten the incremental loss of remnant vegetation on private land and is largely unchecked and unmonitored. Unauthorised native vegetation removal, unmanaged weed and pest animal infestations, and increasing erosion and salinity all lead to incremental loss and fragmentation of habitats.

Furthermore, changing land use and ownership seems to be more frequent in green wedge areas making this issue difficult to address. Land uses range broadly from the more traditional farmer, to semi-commercial properties, to hobby farms or rural residential style properties. Many do not rely on the property to generate an income, thereby reducing the incentive to invest in land management. The green wedge areas are also characterised by a growing number of inexperienced landowners that are often unaware of their land management responsibilities.

Tailored policy and programs are required to address the barriers associated with improving land management in green wedge areas. The approach should encompass the key elements of landholder education, economic incentives, technical support and regulation, while complimenting existing local education and incentive programs.

- **Pest plant and animals:**
Pest plants and animals are known to be one of the greatest threats to agriculture and biodiversity. However, landholder extension and compliance activities undertaken by State government relating to pest plants and animals are limited and in some areas non existent. Furthermore, the impact of skilled field officers and the rapport they develop with rural landholders is often understated and undervalued.

An approach which integrates a comprehensive on-ground support component will be essential to nurturing a 'land stewardship ethic'. It will be necessary to identify the right mix of incentives (both financial and other), technical support, education, improved regulation and enforcement delivered by highly skilled extension officers.

- Limited knowledge of local flora and fauna values:
Information regarding biodiversity values in green wedge areas is often of poor quality and somewhat unreliable. This makes it extremely difficult to make informed decisions, particularly in an environment that is changing so rapidly. Furthermore, planning strategically for the long term protection and improvement of biodiversity is difficult without a good understanding of values and distribution.

Compounding these key threats to biodiversity is the fact that property values in green wedge areas have increased at a significantly greater rate than the financial return from rural enterprises. This situation disadvantages both traditional and non traditional farming properties in green wedge areas as the property valuation bears no connection to the income derived from the property (or the farming enterprise), placing additional financial burden on land owners. It also acts as a barrier to the establishment of new rural enterprises and investment in sustainable land management. This is a significant issue that needs to be considered at a state level.

Furthermore, the challenges of farming and managing land in green wedge areas are often greater than other rural areas due to factors such as:

- increased regulations and restrictions due to proximity to residential areas and increased rural densities;
- difficulties with right to farm issues;
- potential higher incidence of land speculation and absentee landholders; and
- dog attacks on farm animals, particularly sheep.

Clearly there are significant challenges faced by rural landholders within green wedge areas which affect their capacity to undertake a range of farming activities and manage land for rural purposes as defined in Melbourne 2030. These challenges are not unique to Whittlesea and many urban rural interface Councils have developed programs in an attempt to part address these issues locally.

An example would be the City of Whittlesea *Sustainable Land Management Program* which acknowledges and supports a broad range of land management needs in the rural community, encouraging a land stewardship ethic and biodiversity conservation.

The Program for support incorporates the following key initiatives:

- Environmental Works Grants (for the protection and management of biodiversity)
- Land management advocacy and advice provision
- Sustainable Land Management Rate Rebate Scheme
- Pest Plant Education Program (linked to the City's Pest Plant Local Law)
- Regular free land management seminars and field days
- Support to local Landcare Groups and other key community based organisations

Combined, these initiatives present a strategic local approach, incorporating the essential elements of landowner advice, incentives, education and support.

Specialist environmental staff are a vital component of the program. Motivating and engaging local landholders to improve land management practices is a core focus. Establishing a positive and ongoing relationship with local landholders through the implementation of these types of programs is essential to maximising good land management outcomes. This personalised approach facilitates the development of essential skills and knowledge required to manage rural land, and provides the

landholder with a far greater capacity for achieving long-term improvements on their properties.

These local programs have been quite successful in achieving on-ground action on private land, however, a targeted and adequately funded State government response addressing the key barriers associated with the sustainable management of green wedge land is needed.

Given the inherent values of green wedge land and the current and real threat that is posed to these areas, it is vital that the White Paper specifically address the issues and barriers associated with securing their long term future. Council anticipates that these matters will be addressed in the upcoming Green Paper and looks forward to contributing to future discussions on biodiversity planning in green wedge areas.

If you would like to discuss any of the issues canvassed in this letter, please contact Felicity Ayres, Council's Environment Planner and Coordinator on 9217 2279 or email felicity.ayres@whittlesea.vic.gov.au

Council looks forward to the next phase of the consultation process.

Yours sincerely



Chris De Silva
Director Planning and Development