



Newham & District Landcare Group

PO Box 314, Woodend, VIC. 3442

14 September 2013

Dear Councillors,

Re: Council Proposed Hanging Rock Development

Recently Newham and District Landcare Group (NDLG) have become aware that Council has taken a decision to seek partners for a rapid expansion of commercial development of the Hanging Rock Reserve and adjacent Council owned paddocks.

NDLG is very concerned that this decision has been taken without ANY consultation with the community or those who are vitally interested in the care of the environmentally sensitive icon that is the Rock.

NDLG has for many years in cooperation with the Friends of Hanging Rock assisted with planting and weeding degraded areas within Hanging Rock. In addition we have over the last 2 years been successful in obtaining funding from the State government of \$12,000 to rehabilitate the Smokers Creek banks and riparian areas. In addition NDLG estimates that over 500 hours of volunteer contribution has been expended (in kind value of \$12,500).

NDLG has also made representations to Council Officers to be a member of the Management Advisory Committee of the Hanging Rock Reserve. A positive response has not been received to our considerable disappointment.

As can be appreciated NDLG is very active in our concern for the Rock and is frankly amazed and profoundly disappointed that Council is proceeding with exploring the “set in stone” complex and related developments, some of which are within the Crown Land Reserve. Given the status of the Rock, NDLG expected any Local Council with responsibility for the Rocks management would automatically seek community input. **It is not too late to do this.**

We point out that Council has a communications policy which mandates that for proposals to change the status quo of existing services a community consultation process is undertaken. **This has not happened.**

NDLG can make a contribution to a consultation process and assist with exploring methods of maximising the income generation that maintains sustainability of the environment of the Rock.

The Mayor notes in the press release that Council has the view that the Rock must be self-funding. This concept is challenged, as in NDLG’s view the community benefit outweighs any commercial consideration. In the NDLG’s opinion it is no different from libraries and swimming pools which have a far greater negative outcome on the Council budget but it is argued are provided (for a limited numbers of members of the community) as a facility that the whole community should fund. In NDLG opinion the Rock is an equivalent service.

NDLG recommends that Council NOT proceed with seeking “expressions of Interest” from developers based on a predetermined outcome but involves the community in the process, as the community may accept that the Rock is a facility that it is not necessary to run at a profit contrary to

the Mayor's statement that "Maintenance and operating costs are forecast to increase more rapidly than expected revenue. Over time there will be less money available for the conservation management of the reserve, a situation we cannot ignore". NDLG suggest the ignoring of this forecast is a community decision not a Council one.

Again the Mayor's statement that Council "agreed that increasing rates was not desirable due to the need to maintain funding for other community facilities and services identified in Council's strategic resource plan" is a decision that the community should be consulted upon.

NDLG also disputes the statement that "under its current model, Hanging Rock will be unable to financially support itself into the future in relation to weed and pest management, regeneration of native vegetation and maintenance of ageing infrastructure". It is clear from the success of NDLG in obtaining funding that seeking grants to supplement rate payer's money is a workable model. Over the past 7 years NDLG has obtained over \$300,000 from State and Federal Government sources to support on-ground environmental rehabilitation works within the area defined by the MRSC Cobaw Biolink planning overlay. These applications were prepared and the grants administered by volunteers, so the scale has been deliberately kept small. These works required a matching contribution, effectively doubling the value of these environmental services.

These funds have been accessible because of the strategic importance of the Cobaw Biolink, not only in the Macedon Ranges but as a connecting link with native vegetation corridors in other Shires. Native vegetation in Hanging Rock Reserve is an important component of the network of native vegetation that will make up the Cobaw Biolink, and giving it a buffer area of revegetation adds significantly to its environmental value.

The report by the Manager of Tourism and Economic Development to Council recommending the investigation of commercial involvement is apparently based on a number of studies, the latest of which are confidential (did this study include possibility of existing Braemar buildings when vacated being a commercial competitor?) and did not foreshadow the extent of development the Council is now prescribing (100 room accommodation, conference facilities, day spar, events and function centre and an outdoor adventure facility) to developers. This is totally unacceptable without community input and agreement.

The history of these types of proposals relies on a developer not falling on hard times; vacating the obligations and management of the development and creating losses that fall back on Council rate payers. This is a real risk which we note that Cr John Letchford at the original meeting commented "*It is a challenge to get the right mix. If it's a mistake, we'll put our hand up and say we've made a mistake*" which seems to demonstrate the cavalier, short term view being taken with the stewardship of the Rock and will offer little comfort once the concrete is poured and 99-yr lease is signed.

The approach adopted by Council may ultimately cost more than accepting the current management arrangement and supplementing the maintenance with volunteer input and benevolent grants or even a regular contribution from government to maintain a Victorian icon.

In summary the Newham and District Landcare Group objects to the action the Council proposes and demands that a full consultation process that does not presuppose the development parameters contained in the Officers report is the base development.

Yours sincerely,

Penny Roberts, President, and the Committee of Newham & District Landcare Group