

POLICY PROPOSAL

The establishment of Canadian Multi Use Forest Park

SUMMARY

The establishment of a Canadian Multi Use Forest Park is now possible due to the imminent hand back of ex-plantation blocks along the east side of Geelong Road in Ballarat to the Victorian Government. The cessation of the plantations has left a large part of the land clear felled, abandoned and prone to rubbish-dumping. It is now a visual scar on the eastern vista of Ballarat.

The removal of plantation trees has fragmented the Canadian Forest and leaves the land at risk of disposal for inappropriate development and liable to become a wasteland of erosion and weeds.

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity to establish the Canadian Multi Use Forest Park that will maintain local biodiversity, the north-south bio link and the natural environment. It will provide new recreation opportunities for Ballarat's rapidly growing population.

The Canadian Forest forms the scenic backdrop to Ballarat from many viewpoints in the CBD. It establishes our identity as a naturally beautiful and environmentally conscious city. This identity is attractive to and attracts new residents and businesses.

1. Background

a) The proposal is for the establishment of a Canadian Multi Use Forest Park.

b) The Canadian State Forest is a 629 hectare area of crown land located on the eastern edge of Ballarat. It includes 311 hectares area of plantation land first established in the 1960's. In 1997 the Forest Commission plantation trees were sold to the private sector as part of a Victorian Government privatization scheme. In 2011 East Victoria Plantation Forest Logging Company of Australia Pty Ltd. made a decision to return it to the Victorian Government. The process began with the clearing of former plantation trees and stump removal. This land is now bare, at risk of erosion, rubbish and weed infestation. It is in a state of limbo except for windblown and remnant seed pioneer species regrowth. There is no discernible direction or intent in place for this land.

This clearing activity led to the formation in November 2012 of a community group the "Friends of the Canadian Corridor" (FoCC), representing local residents and groups interested in the future of the Canadian Corridor and Forest. The FoCC have produced a vision and plan for the forest.

The FoCC has worked through a program of research, consultation and investigation into the environmental, social, recreational and tourist possibilities of establishing a Canadian Multi Use Forest Park. There is wide support within the community for the establishment of a "Canadian Multi Use Forest Park".

Our proposal is consistent with "Parks and Gardens" and "Bushland, rural and wildlife" as a number one priority and number three priority in the 'love our beautiful city' section of the recent "Ballarat Imagines" City of Ballarat consultation process.

The land has always been considered to be forest, whether native or plantation. It is free of utility and community connections and has undeveloped road access. It has never been considered for possible future development.

This policy is necessary to protect Ballarat's eastern forested skyline and the wildlife corridor linking the Creswick and Enfield State Forests. It will bring planning certainty to the forest land and adjacent properties as well as a sustainable forest park within the boundaries of the existing Canadian Forest and ex plantation land.

2. Policy Statement/Requirements

- The establishment of the Canadian Forest Multi Use Forest Park will require a legal authority by way of regulation or legislation.

- It may require referral to the Victorian Environmental Assessment Commission to consider the change in land use status of the plantation land.
- It will require budget expenditure to develop a Management Plan and visitor facilities for the Forest Park in conjunction with other stakeholders.
- Some additional recurrent annual expenditure will be required for maintenance, weed control and facility maintenance beyond the current maintenance undertaken by DEPI.
- The implementation of the policy will require the DEPI to commit resources to the establishment of the Forest Park.

3. Overview of Proposal

The Canadian Multi Use Forest Park would provide infrastructure e.g. trails, signage, to encourage both formal and informal recreational opportunities to enhance community health and wellbeing including organised forest sports, such as orienteers, mountain bikers, runners and bush walkers. It would also be a treasured recreational destination for bird observers, youth organisations (eg. scouts), field naturalists, hikers, picnickers, and others seeking natural, spiritual, and historical experiences.

The Victorian Koala Management Strategy 2004 provides a rationale for this policy because the proposal targets the fragmentation of local koala habitat which has resulted from the plantation clearfelling and from recent housing development. The City of Ballarat was the first city in Australia to introduce a Koala Plan of Management. This Canadian Multi Use Forest Park proposal would re integrate fragmented sections of forest thus increasing the koala habitat, in accordance with City of Ballarat's Koala Plan of Management. Revegetation of bare ground between existing remnant Koala vegetation islands would create a continuous corridor or Bio Link.

The Canadian Forest is a major part of the Canadian Creek catchment and any land restoration within the catchment will have a positive impact on flooding and water quality. The current City of Ballarat and Corangamite Catchment Management Authority Canadian Tributaries Flood Study shows the need for the cleared forest to be revegetated as part of that strategy.

The Canadian Multi-Use Forest Park is integral to a biolink corridor that extends from the Enfield Forest to the Creswick Forest. This biolink is the keystone link in the Great Eastern Ranges Conservation Corridor which runs from the Queensland Tablelands via the Canadian Forest to the Grampians (Gariwerds) The establishment of a Forest Park will build on the many and varied current uses of the existing forest and will bring new and better recreational and visitor opportunities to the Ballarat tourist sector.

4. Consistency with Victorian Government and City of Ballarat Strategies

The proposal of a Canadian Multi Use Forest Park is consistent with the Victorian Government policies and the City of Ballarat's strategic and planning policies.

4a) The Canadian Multi Use Forest Park is consistent with Victorian Government Strategies and Plans:

- The Victorian Koala Management Strategy 2004 whose key principles include:
 - Integrating koala conservation and management with frameworks and plans such as the Native Vegetation Management Framework;
 - Recognising the key role played by planning schemes in influencing an area's capacity to maintain koala habitat;
 - Recognising that fragmentation of habitat is a critical issue for koala conservation, based on the koala's low capacity to travel between fragmented habitats.
- Victorian Native Vegetation Management Framework 2002 – Its primary goal is to achieve: *"A reversal across the entire landscape of the long-term decline in the extent and quality of native vegetation leading to Net Gain."*
- Native Vegetation Retention Controls 1987: Established under the Planning and Environment Act 1987 is also an important policy tool for habitat protection.
- Bio Diversity plans: These are progressively being developed by a coalition of DSE, CMAs and key regional stakeholders. They focus on the protection, enhancement and linking of remnant vegetation and will benefit koala conservation in the medium to long term. (See Koala Plan of Management 2006 Page 21)
- Parks Victoria 'Healthy Parks, Healthy People': This strategy implements significant environmental and recreational initiatives. The initiative aims to promote the mental and physical benefits of spending time in parks and its contribution to the health of individuals and the community.

- VicHealth Strategies and Resources. The key strategic framework: *Lead, Empower, Support, Connect* outlines the organisation's key priorities for 2006-2009 as to improve the health of the Victorian Community. In particular the strategic framework identifies the priority to create active communities and to:
 - Increase participation in sport and active recreation;
 - Improve access to nutritious food;
 - Encourage more walking and cycling, and;
 - Promote inclusive and accessible environments.
- The Land Conservation Council: Ballarat Study (1982) – Its final recommendations are largely consistent with the establishment of a Canadian Multi Use Forest Park. As the land is no longer used for timber production, the Victorian Environment Assessment Council may undertake a study to revise the timber harvesting and plantations purpose as identified in the Final Recommendations.

4b) The Canadian Multi Use Forest Park is consistent with many City of Ballarat Strategies and Plans:

The Council's current strategic documents, Blueprint Ballarat, Council Plan, the Municipal Strategic Statement, the Ballarat Open Space Strategy; and the Environment Sustainability Strategy (ESS) as well as other policies, strategies and plans are consistent with the establishment of a "Canadian Multi Use Forest Park". Recent updates of these strategic plans have not changed the intent of the Ballarat Open Space Strategy and the Koala Plan of Management.

Blueprint Ballarat

Some key visions guide, in particular, the Ballarat Open Space Strategy, these include:

- Ballarat will be a confident, outward-looking city, as proud of its heritage as it is ambitious for the prosperity and wellbeing of its people;
- Ballarat will be a leader in its management of the natural environment;
- New industries, new transport links and targeted migration will have helped to boost the population across the whole region;
- Above all, Ballarat will be a resilient, self-reliant city that draws confidence, energy and ideas from its own traditions and from the capacities of its own community.

Council Plan

The Council Plan 2007 -12 highlights the importance for the development of an Open Space Strategy and specifically supports several projects that enhance the municipalities open space network.

"What will distinguish it from other cities will be the way that Ballarat values and celebrates its natural environment, its history and its cultural life. A city in its own right." – City of Ballarat Council Plan 2007 – 2012

The Council Plan of 2013-2017– highlights improvements to open space, and to beautify Ballarat, to integrate urban planning initiatives and to improve on and off road path networks.

Municipal Strategic Statement 2006

It is a vision of the Municipal Strategic Statement that by 2022 Ballarat will be a municipality where lifelong learning and improved community health and cultural enrichment create wellbeing and community infrastructure to meet changing community needs with high quality accessible social services for all stages of life.

Economic Development Strategy

The 2006 Strategy sets a framework for the future development of the economy in the City of Ballarat, to grow jobs and investment, as well as to encourage sustainability and responsible development through eight key strategic themes. The 2010 Strategy builds on those eight themes. The Canadian Forest is absent from direct economic observations and/or values. We believe this now represents a gap in the City's strategic thinking. The establishment of a Canadian Multi Use Forest Park would add diversity to Ballarat's environmental and recreational context. It would also provide additional visitor and economic opportunities, for example for the accommodation, hospitality and sports sectors.

Ballarat Open Space Strategy 2008

The Ballarat Open Space Strategy sits under the Municipal Strategic Statement and provides the framework for a number of documents for the development of the open space network as shown below. It contains a strategic rationale and broad directions for improvement. The establishment of a Canadian Multi Use Forest Park is consistent with the following relevant key points of the Ballarat Open Space Strategy.

- "Provide a sustainable network of accessible open space which supports the recreational, environmental, social and health needs of the community and connects Ballarat to its past, present and future" (Page 8) and:

- A key recommendation to encourage the DSE to continue to maintain Canadian Forest in accordance with the Forest Management Plan known as “Midlands Forest Management Area”, (DNRE 1996) and to encourage preparation of a site-specific Management Plan for Canadian Forest which is here designated as a regional Conservation (Bushland, Native Grassland and Wetland) open space. (Page 117)
- That Council will work in partnership with DSE to resolve management options and a preferred model for native vegetation off-set areas that are required to be designated under state legislation. (Page 56)

Municipal Public Health Plan (Health and Wellbeing Plan) 2009 - 2013

The Municipal Public Health Plan provides strategic direction through identifying priority issues and needs for the health and wellbeing of the Ballarat community. The previous plan had a specific recommendation to develop an Open Space Strategy that:

- articulates a link between access to open space and community wellbeing;
- considers ‘walkability’ of open space and linear links to open space to promote access via walking & cycling;
- provides a clear and concise policy framework for the management, use and development of Ballarat’s open space assets;
- determines the appropriate provision and development standards of open space;
- caters for Ballarat’s existing and projected growth;
- provides a sustainable public landscape & planting vision to respond to the impact of climate change;
- The use of developer contributions to fund new open space and upgrades to existing open space.

The current Health and Wellbeing Plan recognises that the City of Ballarat’s open spaces such as parks, gardens, sporting ovals, wetlands, tracks and trails provide places for social gatherings, recreation, physical activity and relaxation, and are important to the community’s wellbeing and health.

City Of Ballarat Recreation Strategy

Under the Health and Wellbeing Plan sits Council’s Recreation Strategy which outlines principles to guide planning and decision making for provision of recreation services and facilities. Council’s key priorities for recreation provision and actions to be taken over the next 10 years to achieve these priorities are set out. The Recreation Strategy identifies that from a recreation perspective the Open Space Strategy should consider:

- The provision of suitable open space to satisfy the outdoor recreation and leisure needs of local communities and sporting associations.
- The provision of appropriate public open space in the newly developed areas.
- Council’s capacity to resource the development and maintenance of Crown land reserves managed by Council and Committees.
- The future of active sporting fields which are considered surplus to need
- The future of passive recreation spaces which have little community value.
- Policies for the assessment and disposal of surplus land.
- The development of a linked, safe, accessible and cohesive trail network.

Environmental Sustainability Strategy

The Environmental Sustainability Strategy is the framework, through a set of key directions and actions that will help to deliver Blueprint Ballarat’s environmental and sustainability vision. The Strategy focuses on the following key areas: biodiversity (flora and fauna); water quality and quantity; energy; waste, recycling and reuse; and air quality. Specific strategies that have a direct relationship to the Open Space Strategy include sustainable principles for open space management, protection and restoration of natural assets, recycling and reduced resource consumption, and partnership initiatives to achieve targets for improved practices and outcomes.

City Marketing Strategy

The City Marketing Strategy sets the strategic direction for tourism, events, marketing the city as a destination and managing the City’s cultural attractions.

Koala Plan of Management 2006 (KPoM)

The “Koala and Koala Habitat Protection” policy was added to the Ballarat Planning scheme in 2010. This policy provides planning protection including koala habitat restoration.

Canadian Valley Outline Development Plan 2005

The plan recognizes the constraints imposed by native vegetation, landscape character and existing non-urban areas. It provides recognition of the value of the Canadian Forest as a natural open space forest.

Shire of Buninyong Outline Development Plan 1994

Recognized the importance an open space system linking the Canadian Forest with the Canadian Creek.

Ballarat Region Conservation Strategy 1991

Identified the Canadian Forest as fitting into the notion of “region based wildlife corridors”.

Future Strategies

Future strategies under development by the City of Ballarat which may affect the Canadian Forest are:

- Implementation of the Ballarat Planning Scheme 21.09-3 Environment including Biodiversity mapping and a Canadian Valley Landscape Overlay.
- Draft Ballarat Bicycle Strategy
- Draft Canadian Tributaries Flood Study
- Draft Woodmans Hill Gateway Precinct Master Plan C173

To establish a Canadian Multi Use Forest Park is consistent with the recent history of the forest's planning, uses and management. All plans and strategies set out over time, from historical Shire of Buninyong and Land Conservation Council documents to those referenced by our present City of Ballarat Council exhibit a planned wish to keep the Canadian Forest in a natural state for recreation and conservation, and to stand as the backdrop vista for our city.

Prepared by the Friends of the Canadian Corridor July 2014

Appendix - Stakeholders who have been consulted in developing this proposal

Department of Environment and Primary Industries – Grampians	The City of Ballarat – Various portfolios.
Federation University – Various Faculties and Schools	Ballarat Observatory
Field Naturalists Club of Ballarat	Ballarat Bushwalking and Outdoor Club
Birdlife Ballarat	Ballarat Community Health centre
Ballarat Bicycle Users Group	Ballarat Wild Plants
Ballarat East Network	Friends of Sparrow Ground
Friends for Pryor Park	Leigh Catchment group
Geo Caching Australia - Ballarat	Corangamite Catchment Management Group
Geoff Howard MP	Fifteen trees
Ballarat Tree growers	University of the Third Age - Golden Point
Society for Growing Australian Plants	The Wadawurrung People
Eureka Orienteers	Ballarat and Sebastopol Cycling Club – Mountain Bike Division
Great Dividing Trail Walking clubs Association	Mt Clear College
Buninyong Lions Club	Sovereign Hill
Creswick Motor Cycle Club	Scouts Australia – Pax Hill
Keilor Bush Walking Club	Tourist Business
Corangamite Catchment Management Authority	Disability Groups