



Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

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Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow

30 May 2019

Dr Rosemary Dillon
General Manager
Blue Mountains City Council
Locked Bag 1005
Katoomba NSW 2780
By Email to: council@bmcc.nsw.gov.au

cc Mr Mark Greenhill, Mayor
Blue Mountains Councillors

Dear Dr Dillon,

Submission: Draft Delivery Program 2017-2121 and Operational Plan 2019-2020

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society (BMCS) is a community-based volunteer organisation with over 800 members. Its mission is to help conserve the natural environment of the Greater Blue Mountains, and to increase awareness of the natural environment in general. The Society also runs an extensive guided bushwalking program, with approximately 150 guided bushwalks a year, which are open to the general public.

We would like to make a submission to Blue Mountains City Council's *Draft Delivery Program 2017-2121 and Operational Plan 2019-2020*, focusing on the environmental related budget allocations.

2019/2020 Budget - Natural Environment

The Society is concerned that the Natural Environment budget has decreased. This is highlighted in the following table. Actual funds allocated have decreased since last financial year, and the percentage of funds allocated as compared to the overall budget has fallen over the last three years. This is concerning especially given the Natural Environment budget represents a very small portion of Council's overall budget, despite the high importance of the environment to the community (see further below).

Budget year (figures from yearly Operational Plans)	Program	Net budget in \$'000	Percentage of Council budget
2019-2020	Natural Environment	3,444	4%
2018-2019	Natural Environment	3,731	4%
2017-2018	Natural Environment	3,143	5%

Asset renewal of *Natural Area Visitor Facilities - Very High Risk Mitigation* has a proposed budget for 2019/20 of only \$200,000 for 2019/20, as compared to \$241,485 in 2018/2019 a drop in funding of 17%. We note under new major assets funding for the Prince Henry Cliff Walk (Southern Scenic Escarpment) and projects in relation to the Scenic Eastern Escarpment are included.

The Society argues that the proposed Natural Environment budget is totally inadequate given the high conservation value of the natural assets managed by Council, the high importance placed by the community and elected Councillors in the natural environment, including for recreation, and the significant risks associated with not funding this program area adequately. The Society believe the Natural Environment budget should be increased substantially, progressively reaching 10% of the Council budget over the next five years, and provides the following information to support this recommendation.

Draft Open Space and Recreation Plan

This Strategy undertook surveys of the community to ascertain use of Open Space, including bushland reserves as well as the community's recreation preferences, and the community's views on how they should be managed. The Society notes the following:

- The draft Plan identifies that walking for exercise and then bushwalking are the two most popular and most frequently participated activities across the Blue Mountains.
- The draft Plan highlights that many of the bushwalking tracks on Council managed and/or owned land are historic having been built in the 19th century and many are protected under heritage listing.
- Council estimates it manages over 130 km of tracks and 98 lookouts. An estimated 80% of these were identified as being in poor condition or failing, and there is insufficient funding to repair or replace the track surface and drainage or key infrastructure such as bridges and signage.
- A nice setting (bushland, views) were what people ranked the mostly highly in choosing where they went, followed by good paths or walking tracks.
- Residents nominated walking and bike tracks, followed by bushland reserves as their highest priorities for Council's future investment in open space.

Resourcing Strategy 2014-2024

This Strategy outlined how the Council would finance and deliver, over a ten year period, on the community plan for the city - *Sustainable Blue Mountains 2025*. In December 2014 council voted to adopt the Resourcing Strategy (2014-2024) with the aim to “Improve Service levels” and to apply for a Special Rate Variation to achieve this. The Resourcing Strategy identified, for each of 16 service areas, the funding levels required to:

- meet current service levels and
- meet required standards on renewal and
- manage risk.

The estimated available level of funding across all service areas over the 10 years was 82% of the required funding level (i.e. \$1,084,124,000 of funds would be available, compared to \$1,322,172,000 required).

On p159 of the Strategy it identified different the different service areas managed by Council, what funding was required over ten years (to maintain current service levels, meet required renewal standards and manage risk), the available funding, the funding gap and the risk profile for each area. The Natural Environment and Natural Area Visitor Facilities were the two most underfunded service areas identified in this Strategy.

Program	Funding required '000	Funding available '000	% of funding required allocated	Funding gap '000	Risk profile
Natural Environment	79,708	34,190	43% (i.e. area is underfunded by 57%)	45,518	Very High
Natural Areas Visitor Facilities	60,582	15,411	25% (i.e. area is underfunded by 75%)	45,171	Very High

The funding gap for the Natural Environment (57%) and Natural Areas Visitor Facilities (75%) were the highest funding gaps identified with both identified as being in the highest risk category. The next highest gap was Water Resource Management at 38% but with a lower risk profile.

If the current level of funding for the natural environment in Council’s budget continues over the next ten years, the funding gap identified in the Resource Strategy will continue indefinitely unless Council takes immediate action to increase the Natural Environment budget.

An example of a critical project that is likely to be delayed is the repair and reconstruct of the walking track at Minnehaha Falls. The long period of closure has led to people making a track along the creekline, causing damage to the creek. There is also the safety issue as many people continue to use the closed track.

Blue Mountains Conservation Society - local Government election candidate questionnaire

The Society asked Blue Mountains local government candidates during the 2016 local

council election some questions related to the funding of key Council environmental programs. The full results of the survey can be found here <https://bluemountains.org.au/elections/bmce16/bmce16-w1.shtml>

In relation to the natural environment budget we asked candidates whether they supported the following:

- Support for Council's current funding to Bushcare and Bush regeneration activities being either maintained, or increased
- Support to increase the Noxious Weeds program by extending the number of catchments targeted each year
- Support maintaining its budget for bushwalking track maintenance and development

All the current elected Councillors answered in the affirmative to the above questions (though some answered yes in principle or yes subject to staff advice). This suggests strong support among elected Councillors, as representatives of the community, to at the very least maintaining the Natural Area budget at the 2018/19 level, if not increasing funding in the 2019/2020 budget.

Conclusion

The above Council studies and reports all strongly support Council giving serious consideration to increasing the Natural Environment budget substantially, progressively reaching 10% of the Council budget over the next five years. At the very least the Natural Area budget for 2019/2020 should be increased to the 2017/2018 benchmark of 5% of the total Council budget.

If you have any queries in regard to this submission please contact me.

Yours sincerely



Lachlan Garland
President
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