



# Blue Mountains Conservation Society Inc

ABN 38 686 119 087

PO Box 29 Wentworth Falls NSW 2782

Phone: 0490 419 779 E-Mail: [bmcs@bluemountains.org.au](mailto:bmcs@bluemountains.org.au)

Web Site: [www.bluemountains.org.au](http://www.bluemountains.org.au)

**Nature Conservation Saves for Tomorrow**

Dr Rosemary Dillon  
Chief Executive Officer  
Blue Mountains City Council  
Civic Place  
Katoomba NSW 2780

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By email to: [epskgcprecinctplan@bmcc.nsw.gov.au](mailto:epskgcprecinctplan@bmcc.nsw.gov.au);  
[council@bmcc.nsw.gov.au](mailto:council@bmcc.nsw.gov.au)

## **Re: support for Draft Precinct Plan – Former Katoomba Golf Course Site**

The Blue Mountains Conservation Society (the Society) is a community-based volunteer organization with over 900 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 thanks the Blue Mountains City Council (BMCC or Council) for its invitation to participate in the stakeholder focus group meetings in December 2022 and January 2023, and we are pleased to now have the opportunity to comment on the draft Precinct Plan.

First, the Society again commends BMCC for its acquisition of the old golf clubhouse and decision to create a Planetary Health Precinct on the golf course site as part of its broader Blue Mountains Planetary Health Initiative. We congratulate BMCC for a well-considered concept plan informed by the principles, vision and objectives for the site developed by the Planetary Health Advisory Committee and Traditional Owners. Under this plan, the site promises to become an exciting and innovative demonstration site for the Council's Planetary Health Initiative as well as continuing as a public open space recreational area for local residents and visitors.

The Society's interest in and support for the development of a similar initiative to the Council's Planetary Health Initiative and a dedicated sustainability-related precinct was first laid out in our submission to the Draft West Sydney District Plan (2017). **We therefore generally support the Draft Precinct Plan – Former Katoomba Golf Course Site and its general direction for the site, though with some reservations.**

In a previous submission during the preliminary consultation phase for the Precinct Plan, the Society stated that the site should be:

- maintained and enhanced as a public open space recreational area for Blue Mountains residents and visitors
- used for research and education relating to restoring 'planetary health'; specifically, targeted environmental restoration and sustainable resource management

- reclassified as 'community land' to provide better protection for the community's long-term interest in the land.

We also stated that we would resist any moves to alienate public land and/or rezone the golf course to allow for a hotel/conference centre or tourist development.

Given the Society's position, we support Council's proposed planetary health-related activities on the site, such as Aboriginal cultural events, on-site talks and guided tours, small-scale low-impact events (p.53), a non-commercial community plant nursery and gardens, and informal recreation (walking, cycling, bird watching, picnicking). In this regard **we are highly supportive of Council's intention to not allow dogs off-leash on the site.** As more people begin to use the site and the work of bush and swamp regeneration advances, free-ranging dogs will pose more of a threat to the public, native animals and the environment (p.64). As Council points out, there are designated dog off-leash areas available elsewhere in Katoomba and the mountains.

The Society also supports repurposing the existing sheds for education rooms, arts and crafts activities, retail of local goods, produce and crafts etc. and a café selling locally sourced sustainable food (p.70). And we support longer term plans for a future Planetary Health Leadership Centre adjacent to or incorporating the clubhouse that would house more formal education, research and community programs in multipurpose spaces.

We note that some of these proposed uses are not permissible in the current zoning of the site (RE1 Public Recreation zone) at their indicative locations. These uses include a community plant nursery and gardens, creative industries, retail activity (shops), formal educational establishments and accommodation. Council proposes to overcome this through adding 'additional permitted uses' to the RE1 zone on the site through an amendment to the LEP rather than rezoning the site. We support this approach on the understanding that the 'additional permitted uses' are site specific i.e. would only apply to the RE1 zone on the golf course site. We note that such proposed LEP amendments will be subject to community consultation.

**The Society recommends that:**

- **any definition of 'additional permitted uses' for the site relating to shops, horticulture, a community plant nursery, an educational establishment and accommodation for students, researchers, artists-in-residence etc should only allow additional permissible uses if these uses are consistent with the Planetary Health Initiative and the Principles and Objectives for the site as outlined in the precinct plan.**
- **in particular, the proposed "additional permitted use" to allow for accommodation to support Planetary Health Initiative activities should not allow large-scale commercial tourist development or a hotel/conference centre on the site. To this end the term 'Eco-tourist facility' should be used in terms of any additional permissible uses related to accommodation, as defined in the current LEP Dictionary, rather than 'tourist and visitor accommodation' (p.95).**

*Reservations about the draft Precinct Plan*

Although the Society generally supports the draft Precinct Plan, we have some reservations. Our concerns are as follows.

## 1. Impact of development uphill on the precinct's proposed layout

One of the objectives of the draft Plan is “to develop and demonstrate innovative water management as integral to restoration, recharge, stormwater management, the design of infrastructure and site activations” (p.35). In guiding future activity on the site, a great deal of attention has been paid to analysing the behaviour of water in the landscape, including identifying areas of natural groundwater discharge (the swamp) and groundwater recharge on ridges at the edge of the site, and identifying natural wet areas indicating existing overland flow in heavy rain events. The management of water feeding into the complex system of existing managed water bodies and flowlines into the swamp and Kedumba Creek informs the spatial layout of the Precinct Plan (map on p.59).

However, this plan does not seem to take into account the impact that the new developments at a highpoint on the north-west boundary of the golf course – The Escarpments townhouses and the approved but yet unbuilt 120-room ‘zombie’ hotel located adjacent to The Escarpments – will have on the site’s hydrology. The current construction of the final phase of The Escarpments development is a stark demonstration of disturbance to the landform and natural surface and groundwater flow caused by deep excavation. This will likely compromise Council’s aim to maintain or restore these identified areas of groundwater penetration (pp.58-59). Disturbance to groundwater recharge areas and surface water flows created by construction of these developments will likely have a negative impact on the health of the swamp and creek, contrary to the objective above. Changed water flow patterns caused by these developments could potentially require a major future readjustment to water management plans for the precinct with added costs to Council.

**Given the potential disturbance to the precinct’s hydrology by current and future development activity on The Escarpments and hotel sites, the Society believes Council needs to investigate (or at least acknowledge) changes to the behaviour of water in the landscape and its impacts, and review the water management plan, prior to finalising the Precinct Plan.**

Additionally, the lack of adequate stormwater controls under the old ‘zombie’ approval for The Escarpments means that runoff from the development will be unregulated in terms of volume, velocity and water purity before discharge downhill onto the golf course site. We understand that, if the hotel is built under the ‘zombie’ approval, current stormwater controls in the LEP will also not apply, leading to further problems arising from inadequate stormwater management. However, if there is a new development application for a medium density housing estate on the hotel site, current LEP stormwater controls should apply (unless it is built under the Low Rise Housing Diversity Code). Either a hotel or medium density housing development will have a profound visual impact on the precinct and affect Council’s plans for water management on the golf course site.

So, incongruously, while ongoing conservation and restoration/regeneration of the central swamp and buffer area on the golf course is regarded as ‘critical’ in terms of water management, including the improving the quality of downstream water (p.76), pollutants such as sediment, weeds, garden chemicals, oil and grease will be re-introduced through unregulated stormwater feeding into it from development uphill. We therefore hope Council will have some control over management of water drainage patterns and stormwater runoff from the new Escarpments development and any future development on the hotel site.

## 2. Commercialisation of the site

The Society is concerned about the potential for the vision for the site to be compromised by the imperative for the precinct to be “financially self-sustaining” (p8). The community is rightly concerned about the future of the golf course site, given past proposals for its use. For example, various tourism-related reports commissioned by BMCC (Stafford Group 2017; Urbis, 2019) have recommended a large-scale accommodation, conference centre and tourist park development in a proposed ‘South Katoomba Tourism Precinct’, the only possible site for a development of the scale imagined being the golf course. The recommendations in these reports reflect the interests of local tourism operators, one of whom explicitly and publicly advocated for a conference centre/hotel on the golf course site (letter from Philip Hammon to the *Blue Mountains Gazette*, 13 March 2019, p.22). As previously noted, the Society would oppose any moves to alienate public land by sale or long-term lease of areas of the site, or through rezoning or ‘additional permitted uses’ that would permit a hotel/conference centre or tourist development on the site.

The Society is also concerned about the potential for commercial activities on the site to become predominant in the name of income generation. We can accept that special one-off or temporary paid ticketed events for the purpose of planetary health education and related activities (cultural, arts etc) may be called for, given the level of resourcing required for such activities. And we accept that permanent restricted access to some areas of the site may be required for cultural heritage and environmental protection reasons e.g. protection of the swamp. Apart from these reasons, and given there are no details in the draft Precinct Plan of the commercial opportunities on the site that might require controlled access, **in principle we would not support areas of the site becoming permanently off-limits to the community or permanently ticketed for commercial purposes. Specifically, we would not support private commercial tourism operators having permanent restricted-access leased areas and attractions on the site.**

We are also concerned about the potential for some sections of the site to be carved off for long-term leasing or even sale in the name of revenue raising. This is made much easier with the site’s classification as ‘operational land’. **The Society recommends that most if not all of the site be re-classified as ‘community land’, to ensure community confidence that the land will stay in public ownership in perpetuity.** We understand that a classification of ‘community land’ would not prohibit any of the proposed activities on the site.

**We also urge BMCC, in its development of the governance and management framework and financially sustainable business plan for the precinct, to clearly prioritise seeking funding for the development and maintenance of the site, as well as funding for programming and management, from public institutions (e.g. partner educational institutions), government agencies, philanthropic organisations and grants (p.88).** Again, we are concerned about commercial activities becoming the easier, default mode of income-generation and financial viability. **The Society would therefore also like to see the final version of the Precinct Plan tightened up and include the requirement that any proposed commercial activities must be consistent with the Planetary Health Initiative and the Principles and Objectives of the Plan. We would also like to see clearer guidelines in terms of the length of time which restricted access ticketed events (free or paid) would be permitted to run for e.g. 1 month maximum limit on their duration etc.**

### 3. Tourist accommodation on the site

The Society has similar concerns about proposed accommodation on the site. We understand that, with the future establishment of the Planetary Health Leadership Centre, supporting facilities such as accommodation for visiting researchers, students, school groups, artists-in-residence and others associated with the Centre will be required. This is an expected feature on any campus of an educational establishment. The draft plan also presents the possibility of temporary accommodation including camping to support other activities and programs on site as well as students and researchers (p.80, 88).

**The Society would strongly resist the use of any such facilities for tourist accommodation purposes if and when they are not in use by students, researchers or individuals associated with the Planetary Health Initiative and Leadership Centre. We would also oppose any proposal for ‘glamping’ for recreational purposes on the site – the nearby Katoomba Tourist Park offers cabins and campsites.**

Although the Society is heartened by the statement on p.54 that “accommodation would not be available for short term stays not associated with activities or programs on the site”, we believe that, if the precinct were to come under financial strain, Council’s position could be undermined by the promise of a quick fix cash injection.

Although the planning and development of the site will be a work in progress, the finalised Precinct Plan will inform this future development. **Again, the Society would therefore like to see the final version of the Precinct Plan tightened up and include the requirement that any proposed accommodation on the site must be consistent with the Planetary Health Initiative and the Principles and Objectives of the Plan.**

### 4. Protection of the hanging swamp

In order to adequately protect the Blue Mountains Swamp (as defined in the LEP), a buffer of native vegetation is required. As this site is proposed as a study site the minimal 60m wide buffer zone adopted for LEP 2005/LEP 2015 should be exceeded in favour of ‘best practice’.

The study on which this minimum buffer zone was based was undertaken by Judy and Peter Smith in 1997, entitled “Buffer Zones for Protection of Sensitive Vegetation Units in the City of Blue Mountains”. Amongst their recommendations they state “Bushland edge effects and buffer zone design and management are questions that warrant further study in the Blue Mountains....We recommend that Council liaise with nearby tertiary institutions to encourage and support such studies” (p 18). Therefore widths greater than 60 m should be allowed for to enable research to address the questions of effectiveness of various width.

The Society has concerns about a proposed boardwalk or elevated boardwalk (tree top walk p.56) above the hanging swamp. There will inevitably be some impact on the swamp ecology. Whilst a low narrow boardwalk can have limited impact, a high structure with viewing platforms (p.76) will alter the light and shade in the area, and also interfere with life in the canopy.

**The Society therefore recommends that:**

- **buffer zones be identified around all swamp edges and all human and non-local animals excluded with barriers;**
- **buffers in excess of 60m be allowed for, to enable further research into the most effective widths;**
- **boardwalks and elevated viewing platforms be excluded from the swamp and its buffers, unless it can be demonstrated that there will be no adverse impacts on the swamp, its buffers and any native fauna for whom the swamp provides habitat.**

The Society hopes that our concerns can be addressed in the finalised Precinct Plan and the proposed relevant amendments to the Blue Mountains LEP and DCP 2015 (precinct objectives and development controls), to ensure that any future development on the site aligns with the Precinct Plan.

If you have any queries in regard to this submission, please contact me on [president@bluemountains.org.au](mailto:president@bluemountains.org.au) or mobile 0450 215 125.

Yours sincerely



Annette Cam  
President  
Blue Mountains Conservation Society