

26 October 2007

Submission re inquiry into Public Land Development

Dear Mr Richard Willis,

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on this important issue. This submission concerns Murtnaghurt Lagoon, a Ramsar-listed, publicly-owned wetland, just outside the township of Barwon Heads.

As shown in the attached map, the wetland is bordered by two private golf courses and a parcel of rural land that is owned by a would-be developer. The wetland is not easily accessible and hardly anyone goes there but its inaccessibility is less the cause of its alienation as the deterioration of the wetland ecosystem due to urban encroachment. To preserve the ecological integrity of the wetland, the Government needs to have control over land usage in the adjoining land which forms the catchment of the wetland.

The City of Greater Geelong is currently considering a proposal for the rezoning of adjacent rural land for urban development. We believe that unless there is compulsory acquisition of the land proposed for development, the public land will be completely alienated from serving its proper purpose.

The wetland is of value to the public not as an area to be directly accessed for recreation, but as a natural resource for the conservation of biodiversity, for the ecosystem services it provides, and as a publicly-owned component of the open rural space of the Bellarine Peninsula.

Having said the area is not accessed directly, it must be acknowledged that the wetland is part of the Lake Connewarre State Game Reserve and therefore may be legally used for duck shooting. There doesn't seem to be much of this type of activity occurring currently.

Wetlands of the Corangamite region are acknowledged as being 'iconic natural assets', according to the Corangamite Catchment Management Authority Wetland Strategy. Wetlands of the Bellarine Peninsula are features of the rural hinterland which the Coastal Spaces and the Victorian Coastal Strategy seek to protect against over-development and urbanisation. The wetland is part of the open rural space that provides breaks between settlements and prevents urban sprawl. The character of rural open space and environmental surrounds is formative in the identity of townships and communities. On the Bellarine Peninsula, these open rural spaces have also been formally recognised as having economic value as a key part of the tourist 'product' (Greater Geelong Rural Land Use Strategy (May 2007)).

It is important to have public land that is set aside primarily for conservation of native flora and fauna and is not readily accessible by people. Murtnaghurt Lagoon is a good example of such an area. It provides habitat for migratory waders and other birds that are highly susceptible to disturbance by the proximity of humans.

The current proposal for rezoning and urban development may provide the public with greater access to the wetland, according to the developer's concept proposal which sketches paths and sporting facilities around the wetland border. However increased access and urbanisation would cause severe deterioration to the wetland ecosystem. It is our contention that this is a form of alienation because the value of the wetland would be annulled as a result of rezoning and urban development.

In inquiring into the alienation of public land, we ask the committee to consider situations where restricted access may be important to the value of public land and where alienation may be caused by things other than a lack or reduction of access, perhaps indeed by the reverse. We ask the committee to consider the distinctions between open rural space and open urban space and the different causes of alienation that may occur for each type of public space.

Murtnaghurt Lagoon is subject to 'edge effects' as it is a relatively small wetland and is isolated from the rest of the Lake Connewarre wetland complex. Wetlands are intrinsically linked with their surrounding catchment landscape and hence one of the major threats to Murtnaghurt Lagoon is the storm water run-off from nearby residential areas and golf courses. The residential-zoning would bring with it many threats such as domestic animals, weeds, disturbance by humans, pollution, and alteration to hydrological regimes.

Australia has an obligation under the Ramsar convention to protect the ecological integrity of the wetland. Murtnaghurt is also subject to the migratory bird agreements between Japan, China and Australia. We contend that it is necessary for the Government to have greater control over the land adjoining the wetland in order to meet obligations under these agreements and the Ramsar convention.

Barwon Heads is surrounded by sensitive environmental surroundings—river, ocean and wetlands—all publicly owned. It is a prime example of a coastal town under development pressure which the State Government's Coastal Spaces Initiative and Victorian Coastal Strategy seek to protect against inappropriate and ecologically detrimental development.

As yet there is no planning application—just a 'concept plan' which proposes the development of 240 houses and other enterprises on 54 acres just outside of the Barwon Heads boundary, south of Barwon Heads Road. The attached map shows the proximity of the proposed development to the wetlands.

The developer has been trying to get the land re-zoned since about 1999. In 2004, Council resolved to defer an application for rezoning of the land, pending a review of the Barwon Heads Structure Plan to be undertaken by the end of 2006. That review is now occurring. The City of Greater Geelong (CoGG) planners have written two very good structure plans (1996 and July 2007) arguing that the boundary must not be moved for reasons including the following:

- Barwon Heads is not a designated growth area due to its sensitive environmental surroundings and is adjacent to two areas that are designated growth areas
- the proposed development adjacent to Murtnaghurt Lagoon would set a precedent for further urban sprawl
- there is no strategic imperative or policy support for expansion of the Barwon Heads town boundary (notably, Coastal Spaces and Victorian Coastal Strategy)
- DSE have advised they would prefer urban development did not approach Murtnaghurt any closer than the existing boundary.

The award-winning 2003 Barwon Heads Urban Design Framework also rejected expansion of the town. In July this year, Councillors resolved to amend the July 2007 Draft Structure Plan to incorporate the proposed development and expansion of the boundary. The amended Draft Structure Plan (August 2007) was released for public comment and Council have received about 850 submissions of which about 90% are opposed to the proposed development, including submissions from Birds Australia and the Geelong Field Naturalists Club. A copy of our Save Barwon Heads Alliance submission is attached. Council intend to vote on December 11 this year and the matter will proceed to a panel convened by the State Government, probably in the first half of 2008.

We would be keen to participate further in the Committee's inquiry if the opportunity arises.

Yours Sincerely,

Elissa Ashton-Smith
Secretary, Save Barwon Heads Alliance Inc.

www.savebarwonheads.org.au

Map 2 - Structure Plan

