



Submission by Devilbend Foundation Incorporated
to the
Victorian Legislative Council Select Committee on Public Land

Re: Hearings Focussed on Devilbend Reserve
27 September 2007

Case for retaining the 40 hectare block north of Graydens Road in public ownership

1 Devilbend Foundation Incorporated (DFI) was formed in August 2006 as a formalisation of the coalition of community groups which had developed the Community Vision for Devilbend and promoted it to the Victorian Government. Its mission is to 'support the Victorian Government and other agencies in the creation and maintenance of a world-class Conservation Reserve for the long-term benefit of Victoria, centred on the Devilbend Reservoir site' (see Appendix A: Mission and Purposes of Devilbend Foundation and Appendix B: List of Member Groups).

2 The Victorian Government announced in January 2006 that approximately 1014 ha of the 1057 ha decommissioned Devilbend Reservoir site on the Mornington Peninsula would be set aside as a conservation reserve for the long term protection of biodiversity, some 3 ha retained by Melbourne Water, and the 40 ha block north of Graydens road (labelled 'Block 1' in the Government's 2004 Devilbend Working Group) sold (see block numbered '1' on map of reserve Appendix C, see also Google Earth photo of 'Block 1' Appendix D).

3 From the outset of community consultation regarding the future of the Melbourne Water-owned land at Devilbend community groups have emphasized the importance of retaining 100% of the land as a conservation reserve. This has always meant the inclusion of 'Block 1'.

4 The 'Community Vision' for the priceless Devilbend asset was first presented at the DSE community workshop at Mornington Racecourse on 26 July 2003, where it was overwhelmingly supported. It was later tabled and favourably considered by the DSE Krohn Working Group in 2004. This vision is outlined in the accompanying document (Appendix E) titled 'Devilbend Reserve – A Strategic Planning Approach' recently published by the Devilbend Foundation.

5 The Minister's formal announcement of 'an ecologically viable, conservation-focussed park' appeared to indicate that the Community Vision had been understood, and hence that the need to retain all of the 1056 ha had been understood. However, the Government's announced decision to sell the 'Block 1' site in order to raise a comparatively trivial sum (measured against its value to the reserve) was a severe disappointment, and we considered that the Minister had received incomplete or inappropriate advice.

6 Originally, we consider, there were three basic reasons to retain 'Block 1' as an integral part of the potential reserve:

6.1 The first imperative was the ecological requirement to maximise the area for ultimate restoration as an intact 'island' of quality habitat in accordance with the concepts of 'island biogeography' and 'landscape ecology'. These concepts form the scientific basis of the Community Vision as a conservation reserve to be fully restored to high quality habitat over time. To achieve the conservation objectives the 1000 hectares would ideally, according to these principles, be of the order of 10,000 hectares, and any reduction of the publicly-owned area would threaten the sustainability of key fauna populations. Thus removal of the 40 ha of 'Block 1' diminishes the possibility for greater biodiversity conservation.

6.2 The second reason was the very reason Melbourne Water owned 'Block 1' in the first place: it had earlier been acquired because it formed part of the catchment of the reservoir from this northern end, as shown in Appendix F where the green line drawn on the map represents the boundary of the reservoir's catchment and the creekline running through two dams on 'Block 1' and under Graydens Road into the reservoir is visible.

6.3 A third reason was to prevent the use of 'Block 1' for purposes contrary to the vision and spirit of Devilbend Reserve as a conservation reserve. This block is within the Green wedge of the Mornington Peninsula Shire and is valued by the Shire as such. If the 3 titles are sold, they could allow undesirable intrusions into the Green Wedge. A major 'development' by a 'major developer', similar to the residential and tourist development proposed in 2006 (now withdrawn) which threatened the National Park values of Greens Bush, would be bound to exert undesirable impacts on the conservation reserve and bring about unacceptable conflicts. Any private ownership of 'Block 1' could bring cats and dogs, noisy recreational vehicles, destruction of vegetation and habitat and possibly some undesirable agricultural or developmental activities, with the likelihood of polluted stormwater inflow to the reservoir. In addition, bird monitoring nearby indicates the Block 1 already provides good bird habitat, which is likely to be destroyed if large scale development of Block 1 occurs.

7 As the long-term Community Vision evolved during 2002 and 2003, a further special role for 'Block 1' was recognised by the community groups, namely the need for a special-use site, belonging to the conservation reserve, but slightly isolated from it. 'Block 1' is capable of accommodating highly desirable yet ecologically intrusive 'people intensive' activities associated with the educational and other aims of the reserve, keeping human impacts on the main body of the reserve (south of Graydens Rd) to an absolute minimum.

The key attributes of 'Block 1' that commend it for this purpose are:

- 7.1 it is part of the publicly-owned land asset;
- 7.2 it is very close to the main, simply shaped, 1000 ha reserve;
- 7.3 it is sufficiently separated from this main reserve to minimise 'busy' impacts; and
- 7.4 it is confined by the roadway boundaries, thereby preventing any tendency for people-intensive activities to spread into the tranquil main body of the reserve.

8 Devilbend Foundation therefore believes that the role of 'Block 1' should be not only 'defensive' in the terms of the three reasons listed above, but that it should play a very positive and necessary role in securing the overall vision of a sanctuary for wildlife from which people would gain great benefit through carefully controlled engagement. The Foundation believes that most of 'Block 1' should be revegetated along with the main reserve to provide buffering and connectivity and appropriate control of the water running

from the block into the reservoir. At the same time, however, a multitude of comparatively busy activities could be accommodated, occupying quite a small proportion of the area.

9 (Note: In Metropolitan Parks, conservation is treated as having low priority, and intensive human activities are dominant; in contrast, in Conservation Reserves/National parks, conservation is the dominant objective, but most such reserves are much larger than 1000 ha, and necessary infrastructure – toilets, parking, etc – can be tucked away unobtrusively. By comparison, the existing area of Devilbend is so precious that people-intensive activities and infrastructure on the main part of the reserve would be counterproductive to the main conservation purpose).

10 'Block 1' could host some of the activities of a 'Metropolitan' or 'Regional' Park, providing for 'picnickers' and other recreational visitors, but with the added interest of many environmental features including a well 'interpreted' on-going restoration program on the site (progressively removing pines, setting up wetland filters, selective slashing, planting etc, etc); as well as the potential for a tranquil walk in the nearby main reserve for those so inclined while their companions remain to enjoy other recreations. The undulating lie of the land lends itself to conducting a number of different activities, separated if necessary, yet still occupying only a fraction of the total area. The major part could be restored, contributing usefully to the overall ecological goals of the reserve. Its zoning within the reserve would presumably become 'Conservation and Recreation' or perhaps a mixture of that category and 'Conservation'.

11 The key 'busy' activities that could be accommodated on 'Block 1' fall into the following categories, each representing an additional reason for retention of the 100 ha in public ownership :

- 11.1 Host educational and interpretation activities associated with the reserve.
- 11.2 Host research (eg by University teams) based on the reserve.
- 11.3 Host selected recreational and social activities incompatible with the conservation and restoration objectives of the main reserve, but including some roles of the existing picnic ground.
- 11.4 Host a centre for indigenous culture.

Each of these activities is discussed in turn below.

12 Education

- 12.1 Many parks and reserves have a continual demand to accommodate visits from schools and from adult groups, and at least one local Secondary College has already expressed a desire to offer students bush restoration projects beyond their school boundaries.
- 12.2 The site would be ideal for an interpretation, education and arts centre which offers displays and programs on many aspects of the reserve, and on conservation and natural history generally. It could provide a centre from which a volunteer guide service might operate.
- 12.3 Methods used on the main reserve for regeneration could be replicated on a smaller scale so that demonstration to many people could be achieved conveniently in a short time frame without pressure on the reserve.
- 12.4 A recent, specific example of an excellent potential use of the site has been an expression of interest by 'Hands On Learning Program', a not-for-profit organisation staffed by experienced teachers with practical skills, led by Russell Kerr. This organisation provides a service to schools by motivating middle school students having difficulties with classroom learning with

alternative programs of practical tasks. Initially HOLP would offer, as an element of their program, supervised labour for the construction of buildings and infrastructure on Block 1 or on the main reserve. They see a further outcome as a growing involvement in the land restoration programs: a highly desirable activity for their students. The site, hosting compatible activities, would offer an ideal central base for their programs.

13 Research activities associated with the reserve include the following:

13.1 Completed:

13.11 Three Monash Post-grad Environmental Studies Students – health benefits of a conservation reserve at Devilbend.

13.12 Four Frankston TAFE Social Science students – ran a Picnic to build awareness of Devilbend.

13.13 A final year ecology student at Deakin carried out a technical analysis, using Landscape Ecology principles, of the anticipated degradation through edge effects in Melbourne Water's proposed subdivided park compared with a 100% retained reserve. He has subsequently played an important role in the planning for Devilbend Reserve and is a member of the present Parks Victoria Advisory Group.

(Note: all of these projects were initiated by enquiries from the participants. There is clearly a significant potential for many more.)

13.2 Ongoing:

13.21 Birds Australia bird monitoring program (now 3 years). A remarkably interesting and useful project in which over 144 species of birds have been observed on the reserve – over two thirds of those recorded on the Mornington Peninsula, providing a strong indicator that this 1000 hectares already offers comparatively rich habitat.

13.3 Proposed:

13.31 A Monash lecturer in aquatic science has expressed interest in Devilbend as a focus for PhD and other post-graduate projects. A first step would be a thorough baseline study of aquatic fauna in the reservoirs and creek system.

14 Recreation and Social: The 'Block 1' site could host:

14.1 Social and community gatherings.

14.2 Small scale fishing in the existing two large dams.

14.3 Canoeing.

15 Indigenous Culture Centre

Subject to the aspirations of the local Boon-Wurrong/Bunurong community, 'Block 1' could in due course become a site for a cultural heritage centre, along the lines of the Brambuk Living Cultural Centre at Halls Gap.

16 Physical development of the site

16.1 The essence of all building and structure development on the site should be 'low key', and the extent of such structures should be quite limited.

16.2 There would be an opportunity to demonstrate eco-friendly technology, through the infrastructure systems adopted, eg solar energy, waste water treatment, etc.

16.3 There is an opportunity for immediate or near-immediate occupancy and use of the site using the existing residence on the land.

16.4 It is worth noting that if 'Block 1' were retained as part of the reserve, there could be advantage in re-siting the public entrance to the main reserve from the present picnic ground to a point on Graydens Road opposite 'Block 1', making for easy access from one to the other. With Block 1 providing an interpretation centre as well as simple picnicking facilities, the main reserve entrance need only provide essential infrastructure such as parking and toilets, and the starting point of one or more trails. There are two existing houses in this area of the main reserve which could prove useful at least in the short term.

17 Role of the Devilbend Foundation

Because 'Block 1' has always been an integral component of the Community Vision, the Foundation and several of our member groups have continued, so far without success, to request the State Government to reconsider their decision to exclude it from the reserve. We believe the money raised by sale of 'Block 1' is far outweighed - if it is not sold - by its long-term value to the conservation and educational goals of the reserve, as argued above. The Foundation has therefore initiated an active search for philanthropic funding to acquire the 40 ha. This initiative has the approval of Trust for Nature who have supported the Community Vision for several years, and have offered appropriate support in this ambitious initiative.

Clearly, a better outcome would be the retention in public ownership of Block 1 under Parks Victoria management, with the fund-raising potential of the Foundation (which extends beyond those available to Parks Victoria) devoted to improvements on the land and to other useful purposes of the reserve.

18 A related issue

We wish to bring to the Committee's attention another aspect of the Government's decisions on the Devilbend Reserve which we believe relates to the alienation of the 40 ha block and is of concern to the Foundation. Of the various sub-classifications of 'Conservation Reserve' provided for under the Crown Land (Reserves) Act, the one chosen, 'Natural Features Reserve' offers a low order of protection of biodiversity, and allows for the consideration of inappropriate activities in a reserve aiming at the highest standards of protection (see Appendix G; a more appropriate classification would in our view be 'Nature Conservation Reserve' which would automatically provide a high level of protection). This classification decision is, like the decision to sell 'Block 1', inconsistent with the requirements for an effective conservation reserve as defined in the Community Vision and further supports our earlier stated view that advice provided to the Minister on the potential for the site may have been incomplete or inappropriate.

The Foundation is seeking, on behalf of its members and, we believe of the broader community, a review of this classification by the Minister or by VEAC. Perhaps the Select Committee can assist in this objective.

19 Recommendations: On the basis of the arguments we have set out above we request the Select Committee to table an interim report to the Legislative Council recommending:

- 19.1 That the 40 ha parcel of land described herein as 'Block 1' be retained in public ownership;

- 19.2 That the status of the land be classified to include it as an integral part of Devilbend Reserve, serving as a vital ancillary area to the principal Conservation Reserve, and protecting it by removing into one separate area beneficial 'people-intensive' activities associated with the reserve which would impact detrimentally on the conservation objectives.
- 19.3 That these recommendations be considered with some urgency, so as to enable 'Block 1' to be included as soon as possible into the ongoing Parks Victoria management planning process for the Devilbend Reserve.

Janet Oliver,
President, Devilbend Foundation Inc.
21 September 2007

List of Appendices

- Appendix A: Devilbend Foundation: Vision and Purposes
Appendix B: Devilbend Foundation: List of member groups
Appendix C: Map/aerial photograph of Reserve and 'Block 1'
Appendix D: Aerial photograph of Block 1
Appendix E: 'Devilbend Reserve – A Strategic Planning Approach', Devilbend Foundation, 2007.
Appendix F: Map showing northern catchment boundary (green line)
Appendix G: Park Classifications