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Dence Park Masterplan
Place Services Team,
City of Parramatta Council
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1 November 2019

Overview:

The Epping Civic Trust welcomes the City of Parramatta moving towards a final masterplan for Dence Park through the release of this draft plan. This has been a long process, with many layers of consultation, and hopefully this is the final stage and a completed document will soon be adopted by Council. At the same time as its adoption, it is vital that Council also commits to a budget overview and timetable for the implementation of the Plan.

Dence Park, as identified in the Plan, has three main components – the Aquatic Centre, the Creative Centre and the surrounding cleared land (old bowling club greens, car park, paths) and bushland backing onto Terreys Creek. All of these components are important because they are vital open public space for the growing Epping community and surrounding population. It was clearly identified in the Epping Planning Review that Epping falls well short of the open space requirements for the rising population. This should then act as a spur for Council to get on with finishing this plan and implanting it.

The Trust acknowledges that Council has undertaken this process taking into account local resident's attachment to Dence Park, its history, its unique setting, and its potential. The latter will now need to be sensitively handled in order to ensure the plan is truly visionary. At the end of this submission, the Trust suggests some guiding principles that should be used in the detailed planning and implementation ahead.

The main concerns that the Trust has with this plan is two-fold:

- a) The proposed 20 metre pool at the Epping Aquatic Centre (EAC). This is patently inadequate and fails to provide an actual increase in swimming facilities. Why would Council fail to grasp the opportunity of doing this masterplan and not increase facilities and properly provide for the future?
- b) Timeline and Budget - We believe an adequate Master Plan should at least contain an outline development programme. Surely it should contain as a bare minimum the projected start and end dates for each of the Stages described in the Plan. It should also indicate sources of funds, and in which budget year those funds are expected to become available. Such information would enable all stakeholders to monitor progress as the work proceeds.

The timeline given is worrying as it is given as 10-15 years in numerous parts of the plan. That should be redrafted to say that the Masterplan will be fully delivered within 15 years so that there is no excuse not to start on it straightaway.

Key aspect of the Plan – detailed comments:

Creative Centre

Pros -

- Supports long term retention of this community facility on this site, which gives certainty to the many user groups
- Addresses current needs for updating of the building within its current footprint to make better use of the space, and possibly free up additional capacity
- Preserves the tranquil surroundings of the centre with low intensity new facilities surrounding it

Cons –

- Pushes any decision on an extension of the current building well into the future with only motherhood statements that it should be addressed. A more definitive statement/aspiration is essential as this is the Masterplan for the next 15 years. Without such an aspiration, this will likely never happen.

Recreation Space

The Plan identifies those parts of the site that offer opportunities for recreation. This would lead to new and additional facilities on the site opening it up to a greater number of users and centres around an area which was formally a bowling green, and transforming this into a playground, walking area and landscaped garden.

Pros –

- Identifies land that is currently unused and neglected, but is already cleared of native bush
- New facilities will attract a different segment of local residents, and thereby also raise awareness of the Aquatic Centre in particular
- Is relatively passive as does not include any formal sporting facilities
- Meets a goal of the Council's new Community Infrastructure Strategy (CIS) to deliver additional playground facilities near the Epping Town Centre

Cons –

- Does not address the needs of adolescent/teenage population – as identified in the CIS this is a concern for council - and which could have been provided by a different mix of facilities
- Does not address another goal in the CIS to also facilitate community gardens in areas near high density housing

It is accepted that this space cannot provide all things for all people, so the Masterplan has landed on a strategy for more passive recreation areas that is likely to better integrate with the Creative Centre.

Epping Aquatic Centre (EAC)

It could be said that the whole driver for this Masterplan has been the fight by the local community to save the Dence Park pool. This commitment to the facility is acknowledged in the Plan and should be reflected in the budget in due course. However, whilst there are worthy elements of the proposed plans for this area, the Plan fails to be a truly visionary proposal. The sum of the changes proposed does not increase the total swimming facilities on the site. Rather it just updates the current elements with some limited improvements.

This lack of vision should be reviewed and changed. This is a once in a generation opportunity to increase recreational facilities so the aim should be to do much more than merely stand still. Unless the swimming facilities are increased, the proposed areas will simply become more crowded as the surrounding population increases. It is likely than in less than 10 years, this masterplan will be reviewed and judged to have failed to the step forward that it could have been.

As Aquatic facilities are major infrastructure works for local councils, and Parramatta has put this amount of effort into drafting this Masterplan, the Trust queries why the plan falls short of taking the key step. A greater net swimming facility should have been the goal right from the start and we urge the Council to review how it can achieve that.

Pros of the Plan:

- Essential work on the current pool's filtration and other mechanical systems are included. This will ensure the continued safe functioning of the main pool
- The current sub standard Learn to Swim pool is removed, and the area renewed
- A new learn to swim pool is provided (but is a compromised inadequate proposal – see below)
- New facilities including changing rooms, accessibility options, a café and gym are included and are essential
- New toddler area looks to be a modern, appealing addition however this needs to be carefully designed to be sympathetic to the bush surrounds
- New spectator area included (but has questions about its scale and cost – see below)

Cons of the Plan:

- Brief reference is made in the Plan to studies having been undertaken on the current condition of the main pool but are not provided. These studies should be attached to the plan and be a public document. This is essential as erroneous information has been previously used to suggest the main pool is likely to structurally fail. That suggestion (by Hornsby Shire Council when they ran the pool) was subsequently proved to be false. It is therefore very disappointing to see it again mentioned in the covering paper tabled for Council with this plan. This reference should be removed as it is factually wrong.

- The 25 metre Learn to Swim pool is the major failure of this Plan despite being highlighted in the community consultation as a major aim for this plan – as referenced here in Section 3.1.2 – 1A.

Later the plan goes on to say that the proposal for the EAC is limited to ‘additional facilities for younger children and families’. Why? Where in the community consultation is this justified? The Trust contends that the enhancements to EAC should be for the whole community.

There is worrying language in a number of places in the draft plan that the Trust refutes. In particular Section 5.1.1 #28 says that the planning for the new 25 metre pool is limited to Learn to Swim and defined as being to ‘meet current demand’. Again – why? This is contradictory to the analysis earlier in the plan that clearly identifies a growing demand through to 2036. This is short termism.

It is obvious that this new pool has been designed to a) Save money b) Be leased to an external operator as the design of the pool is purely for one commercial user c) Is not of a fully built construction – which beggars belief as that is the major failing of the current Learn to Swim pool, so why repeat it.

The increasing population needs a proper indoor 25 metre multi-use pool. One that is open for swimming between Learn to Swim times. One that could be used for hydro therapy and aqua exercise. It should be of a substantial construction, capable of being completely enclosed for safety when not in use and also widely opened, probably by sliding glass doors when in use. There are many examples of such a facility around Sydney for Council to draw on.

- Grandstand – the proposed 1,000 seat grandstand is a major structure but we query how the plan has arrived at this proposal. It would be used a handful of days a year, and likely be a much more imposing structure on the landscape than the current building. Whilst, a refurb or rebuild is necessary to improve facilities for schools, this seems an over reach when funds should be concentrated on increasing the actual swimming facilities e.g. proper 25 metre pool.

Detailed inaccuracies/mistakes in the draft Plan

There are some minor mistakes, factual errors or omissions throughout the Plan that local knowledge can correct as follows:

1.1.1 - Site Location and Planning framework: Surely this section should reference the fact that the pool is a Local Heritage item and what planning implications that involves. This is covered later but should be foreshadowed here.

1.2.1 (page 9) – Local Demographic Analysis – The first paragraph refers to statistics being derived for the suburbs of Epping North, Marsfield and Eastwood. However, you do not mention the suburb of Epping itself. Surely you have included the area including the Town Centre in your statistical analysis otherwise your numbers are deeply flawed. Epping North should not be mixed up with

Epping itself – Epping North starts half way up Norfolk Road and is in an area that is still in Hornsby Shire Council. The writing of this whole section calls into question whether the author actually understands this area at all.

1.1.5 – says the caveat on the property is status unknown. The Save Epping Pool groups has a copy of this caveat showing it is still in place and the status should be more accurately portrayed here for the record.

1.2.1 (Page 16) – Heritage and Historic Site uses

We feel this section fails to adequately address the heritage listing of the site and what consequences that will have on upgrading of the site. At the very least, a heritage impact study should be required before any detailed designs are prepared.

1.4.2 – first bullet point says ‘limited access to areas to the west due to creek’. Surely this should be ‘east’ not ‘west’ as Terrys Creek is to the east of Dence Park site.

Third bullet point says bus stops less than 10 minutes’ walk, whereas under 1.3.1 it says 5 minutes’ walk. Should be consistent.

1.1.7 Surrounding Natural Recreation: # 1.7.1 – last bullet point says there are no dog areas in Epping. In fact, there is a large leash free area at Norfolk oval which is within 10 metres of the LGA boundaries between City of Parramatta and Hornsby Shire Council, in North Epping. This is extensively used by Epping residents. There is a second leash free park at Wood Street Oval in North Epping itself.

1.2.1 – Late 20th Century timeline: this should note that fundraising was undertaken with local residents in order to raise the funds to build the pool.

Should also note here that the current Learn to Swim pool was a later addition (circa late 1990s) and is therefore not part of the original build.

2.2.3 - Last bullet points notes the large area in bushland setting behind the EAC and says it is currently closed. This section though should note that this area was formally established as a picnic and passive recreation area for decades. It was only closed and neglected in recent years under Hornsby Shire Council.

3.1.3 – third bullet point says that there is no squad training at the pool. That is not correct. After Parramatta Pool was closed and demolished, squad training was moved to EAC using the pool for a number of sessions.

3.1.4 – there is an accessible change room/bathroom on the pool deck.

Section 1.3.2 - # 3.5.6 – under weaknesses, it says lack of adequate parking. This is clearly not true as elsewhere the plan notes extensive parking on site. What would be more accurate wording here is that there are only limited parking spaces right at the front door of the creative centre. But current wording is misleading.

Guiding Principles for the next stage

As the Masterplan is adopted and works starts on implementation, there are some guiding principles that the Epping Civic Trust urges Council to adopt (and preferably incorporate in this Masterplan). They are:

- Structural design and finish of the new EAC building should reflect not only the heritage of the site but its bushland surrounds. It should sit easy in its environment.
- The design of new pathways and changes to roadways should reduce not increase urban heat effects
- Landscaping choices and design should be reflective of the indigenous bush plants surrounding the site
- Environmental studies included for any future development on the site should include study of the flora and fauna of the Terrys Creek corridor, and management plans to protect the same
- Lighting of the whole site, but EAC in particular, should be carefully done to reduce/mitigate light spill onto surround bushland areas of Terrys Creek
- There should be a commitment to ongoing maintenance of the Creative Centre within Council's annual budget to ensure its heritage structure is properly maintained