



## CANOBOLAS CONSERVATION ALLIANCE

### MEMBERS NEWSLETTER 1 – September 2021

#### *Welcome!*

This is the first of a series of occasional newsletters aimed at keeping members of the Canobolas Conservation Alliance (CCA) up to date with all things relevant to our principal aim of protecting the Mount Canobolas State Conservation Area (SCA) from inappropriate development.

This newsletter focuses on reports on the Mount Canobolas Mountain Bike Trails Proposal tabled at the July 20, 2021 meeting of Orange City Council (OCC) and what they tell us about Council's intentions going forward.

Future newsletters will also provide updates about Canobolas Conservation Alliance (CCA) activities and any important new information about the SCA and its extraordinary natural and cultural heritage values.

#### **Council Reports**

Three reports were tabled at the meeting:

- A progress report from Roxanne Betts, Project and Corporate Information Officer.
- Six maps showing the new *Mt Canobolas Trail Master Plan* designed by Dirt Art.
- A new *Mount Canobolas Mountain Bike Trails Project – Constraints Summary Report*, prepared by The Environmental Factor (TEF) and dated March 2021.

The reports to Council can be downloaded from

[https://savemtcanobolassca.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/mtb-reports\\_occ\\_20-july-2021.pdf](https://savemtcanobolassca.files.wordpress.com/2021/09/mtb-reports_occ_20-july-2021.pdf).

#### **OCC Progress Report**

The progress report provides a snapshot of where the project is up to and what Council is currently doing to advance it. The key points are:

- **Costs.** Council's expenditure on this project is unknown at this time, however they seem to have spent well over \$500,000 since this proposal first surfaced in 2014. Most importantly, Council's report notes that '*A September budget review will be undertaken to cover costs of any additional investigations required to be undertaken in accordance (with the) Environmental Impact Assessment approval process*'. This indicates that a great deal more ratepayer expenditure is required to get this project over the line, including for detailed archaeological and biodiversity assessments of the proposed trails, as well as traffic impacts, economic impacts, social impacts and others. It can be expected that several hundred thousand more dollars will be needed from the Orange community, just to get the project to the next phase. There appears to be little recognition from Council of the likely full cost of the development, which may be many millions of dollars of public money.
- **Consultation.** Council claims to have consulted widely and touts the public forum of 25 February 2021 as being 'well received'. That was not the tone of the forum we attended. Most of the questioners were clearly against the proposal and the forum itself was set up as a public relations exercise, rather than genuinely seeking community feedback. It would be safe

to say that most of the other consultative activities were also sales pitches rather than information seeking exercises.

- **Trail Network.** The Council report sets out the process behind the new trail network, including attempted avoidance of identified environmental constraints, archaeological constraints, social conflicts and existing tracks and roads. It also indicates the emphasis is on downhill riding with 'shuttle uplift' to nodes on high points. There appears to be no detail about what these shuttle uplifts mean, who does them, nor their impact on traffic and other users of the mountain. It should be noted that the constraints recognised by Council's consultants relied very heavily on information provided by members of our group. The surveys done by TEF were minimal and described as a 'familiarisation' exercise. By contrast, some of our members have spent years studying the mountain.

Extensive detailed information was passed onto TEF by CCA in order to ensure known critically important areas of the mountain are not harmed. Explicit in this information was the recognition that not all areas have been studied in detail, and that gaps exist in our knowledge of critical species distributions across the SCA. Given that suitable habitats exist right across the SCA even in areas less studied, there is an expectation that new discoveries will be made in the future. There is no way that the consultants (who have spent little time on the mountain) can know whether their trails intersect populations of threatened or endangered species. Despite this the new proposal imposes **71.7 km of trails** in the SCA, up from 64 km in the original proposal!

- **Weeds and Feral Animals.** Council continues trying to use the issue of invasive weeds and wild pigs in the SCA as a tool to justify the proposal, claiming that somehow the development will lead to improved weed and feral animal control. This is devious in at least two ways. Firstly, there is no mechanism or funding stream identified by Council for weed and feral animal management. Secondly, it is wrong to dangle an uncertain environmental benefit as justification for a clear environmental harm. The most likely outcome would be for the SCA to be carved up by bike tracks and still have significant weed and pest problems. In the meantime, NPWS have spent \$130000 in 2020/21 on weed control in the SCA and there is an expectation of a similar amount being allocated in 2021/22. This is to be commended, however the problem will remain as long as significant weed and feral pest populations exist in the adjoining State Forests. Why doesn't Council commit their resources there?
- **Where to now?** Council has flagged the submission of a *Preliminary Environmental Impact Assessment* (PEIA) to the NSW Government seeking to have the project accepted as a *State Significant Development* (SSD) and requesting the Secretaries Environmental Assessment Requirements (SEARs) which outline what the assessment of an SSD on Mt Canobolas must include.

This would lead to more intensive survey work by consultants, which would need to be across many seasons. The output of the further work would be submission of a Development Application together with a Biodiversity Development Assessment Report (BDAR) (the Environmental Impact Statement). Public submissions would then be sought which would likely result in the proposal being referred to the Independent Planning Commission for determination.



## TEF Constraints Summary Report

TEF produced a brief 18 page Summary Constraints Report outlining how they identified constraints and criteria for classifying them as No-go, High, Moderate or Low constraints. There are many differences between the constraints identified by TEF, the level of importance assigned to them and the amount of buffering proposed, compared with those identified in the CCA report [\*Biodiversity Values and Constraints on Development in the Mount Canobolas State Conservation Area\*](#).

There are some errors, omissions and interpretations in the TEF report which allow bike trails in areas excluded in the CCA report. TEF has also been selective in the way it accepted constraints identified by CCA, which means some bike tracks have been proposed for areas that should not be developed. Our view consistently is that the entire SCA must be excluded from the development, not just little fragments of it.

## How is CCA Responding?

- CCA lodged [four questions](#) for Council at its last meeting on 7 September, concerning lack of transparency with the project. The questions related to the non-tabling of consultant's final reports, whether the consultants have completed their work, the amount spent on the project by Council so far and how much more ratepayers money would need to be spent on the main environmental assessment still to come.
- Several individual members of CCA (and member organisations) are standing in the Orange and Cabonne Council elections, to lobby against support for the mountain biking project.
- The CCA is working to influence members of other tickets in the Council elections to oppose the mountain biking proposal. We have commitments from some to oppose the development if elected.
- CCA members will continue to attend Council meetings seeking transparency and accountability. They will continue to question Council on the cost blowout and burden on Orange ratepayers. Members should also write to Council and the Central Western Daily querying the costs and value for money versus the cost to the environment.
- CCA will continue to issue Press Releases, the latest on the cost blowout in the leadup to the Council meeting that decides on future funding.
- CCA maintains its webpage and Facebook page where you can find up to date information on the campaign, as well as background information on the values of the Mt Canobolas SCA.
- CCA is preparing a detailed critique of the TEF Summary Constraints Report.
- CCA has produced a brief Powerpoint talk which has been delivered to some service groups in Orange with an overall positive response. The lockdowns have stalled further face-to-face talks, however there are two Zoom talks due to be delivered before the end of September.
- CCA has created working groups on a) community engagement; b) mountain bike trail damage; and c) other information materials. These groups will provide reports and products in due course.
- A new factsheet is almost complete and will be used in lieu of face-to-face meetings during lockdown. A link to this factsheet will be provided on the website.
- Some CCA members have been working with Elders and members of the Wiradjuri community to protect the significant cultural and spiritual heritage of Gaanha-bula, Mt Canobolas.
- A Public Forum has been prepared and will be held when the COVID-19 situation improves.



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- CCA will continue to lobby Ministers, political parties, environmental lobbyists and influential community members to ensure that Mt Canobolas SCA gets the recognition and protection it deserves.

### **Feedback**

Your comments on this first Newsletter and suggestions for future newsletters are welcome. Please send feedback to [savemtcanobolassca@gmail.com](mailto:savemtcanobolassca@gmail.com)

**Thank you for your support! With your help, Mt Canobolas SCA will be saved from desecration by unwanted and unwarranted developments.**