Submission to ACT Government: DV372 Watson Section 76

March 2021

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak non-government environment organisation for the Canberra region. Since 1981, we have spoken up for a healthy environment and a sustainable future for our region. We harness the collective energy, expertise and experience of our more than 40 member groups to promote sound policy and action on the environment.

We campaign for a safe climate, to protect biodiversity in our urban and natural areas, to protect and enhance our waterways, reduce waste, and promote sustainable transport and planning for our city. Working in the ACT and region to influence governments and build widespread support within the community and business, we put forward evidence-based solutions and innovative ideas for how we can live sustainably.

At a time when we need to reimagine a better future, we understand that the changes we need will only happen with the collective support of our community.

For further information please contact:

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Introduction

The Conservation Council welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on DV372, which proposes to rezone Watson Section 76 from its current Commercial Leisure and Accommodation overlay to RZ4 Medium Density Residential and PRZ1 Urban Open Space. DV372 aims to promote urban living for new residents whilst retaining and protecting the ecological values of the site, specifically the Superb Parrot habitat. The site will contain demonstration housing, new residential dwellings and a one-hectare neighbourhood park.

Situated between Mt Majura and Goorooyarroo nature reserves and located within close proximity to Throsby Ridge breeding site, Watson Section 76 has important regional connectivity values for the threatened Superb Parrot. The Conservation Council welcomes efforts in DV372 to retain the existing mature trees and other habitat for Superb Parrot onsite.

The Council's feedback relates to expanding the green corridor on the block, selecting appropriate native plants and other vegetation for replanting efforts, incorporating water sensitive urban design in the landscape plan, and expanding active travel facilities onsite.

Development footprint and Superb Parrot habitat

The Final Tree Assessment Report (p.6) suggests that the northern and western boundaries of the block have considerable importance to Superb Parrot and subsequently should be retained, protected and managed in their entirety. This is also recognised in DV372 (p.7). However, under the current proposal for Watson Section 76, the building footprint extends to the northern boundary. We would suggest that all existing trees and vegetation along the northern boundary should be retained and managed with revegetation efforts also focussed on this boundary. This will have multiple benefits including increasing canopy cover on the block, maintaining a noise buffer between the development and the Federal Highway, and maintaining the representation of mature trees onsite. As the entrance into the Bush Capital, retaining and maintaining the trees that border the Federal Highway will also improve general amenity for incoming visitors to Canberra.

Recommendations

1. Set the residential development back from the northern boundary and retain all existing trees and vegetation along this boundary.

Existing trees and vegetation onsite

DV372's commitment to retain trees onsite, particularly mature trees, is strongly supported. Yet with the loss of mature hollow bearing trees listed as a 'Key Threatening Process' in 2019, more mature hollow bearing trees should be protected on the site, particularly those on the northern boundary. Green space under mature trees should then be restored to maintain them in a way that is safe for residents (eg. by planting native grass beds etc) and the ongoing health of the tree.

Although Section 76 is not a significant breeding site for Superb Parrot, it does host important foraging locations. The existing grasses onsite are a valuable food source for many local species including Superb Parrot, and should be retained and managed effectively as recommended in the Final Tree Assessment Report. Other food sources for Superb Parrot, such as mistletoe and native cherry (Exocarpos cupressiformis), should also be retained as recommended in the Final Tree Assessment Report.

The Final Tree Assessment Report states that the vegetation along the southern (Aspinall St) and eastern boundaries has poor or adverse contribution to Superb Parrot survival. Whilst some species on the site do not support Superb Parrot, tree canopy cover will become increasingly important in the future with a hotter, drier climate. The existing tree corridors that border the site have the potential to offer benefits to residents such as urban cooling and amenity which will encourage outside activity. Rather than remove the entire corridor on both the southern and eastern boundaries, it would be better to remove detrimental species or dangerous trees, and replace these species with appropriate natives species when revegetating the site.

Recommendations

2. Maintain the representation of mature hollow bearing trees onsite, specifically those on the northern boundary, and manage them in a way that supports the safety of residents and the health of the tree.
3. Retain existing food sources for the Superb Parrot, including native grasses, mistletoe and native cherry.
4. Maintain the tree corridors on the southern and eastern boundaries for safety and amenity, and only remove trees where they are detrimental to good ecological outcomes.

Proposed new plantings

The Conservation Council welcomes the inclusion of new plantings in the landscape plan for DV372. This will add diversity to the urban forest on a broader scale, and also diversify the age of trees onsite - an important consideration in an ageing forest with increasing susceptibility to the impacts of climate change. However, further consideration should be given to protecting existing self-set seedlings on the site, particularly in areas where revegetation is proposed. This will reduce the quantity of new plants required and reduce planting labour time. Maintenance regimes with regular watering schedules should then be established, with activities such as mowing regulated to avoid these areas until juvenile plants are well established.

Overall revegetation efforts onsite should include species recommended for Canberra's urban forest in the Urban Forest Tree Species Research report[1], specifically species that support biodiversity and pollinators, and should be selected on a whole-of-landscape basis. Planting endemic Eucalypt species is also encouraged, as it has been recognised as a useful management strategy for enhancing Superb Parrot habitat across the landscape.[2]

The Council also supports the recommendation put forward by the ACT Conservator of Flora and Fauna to include plants favoured by Superb Parrot for food in the proposed new plantings.

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[1] The Australian National University (2019) *Urban Forest Tree Species Research for the ACT Consultants Report*, Canberra.
[2] ACT Government 2019, *ACT Native Woodland Conservation Strategy: Superb Parrot Polytelis Swainsonii Action Plan*, p.176.

This includes Elms, native Eucalypts such as Blakely's Red Gum and wattles that bear immature pods between October and December, including Silver Wattle, White Wattle and Snowy River Wattle.

Recommendations

5. Protect and maintain existing self-set native seedlings on the site.
6. Re-vegetate the site using species highlighted in the Urban Forest Tree Species Research report[1], planting species that suit the surrounding landscape and that support biodiversity and pollinators.

Urban edge effects

Threats to Superb Parrot populations are still not well understood, but known negative urban impacts include construction disturbance, predator exposure, noise and light pollution and increased human activity[2], all of which will evolve from this development. DV372 should provide greater consideration of the future urban impacts that the development will have on Superb Parrot and other local species.

To prevent predation of Superb Parrot, cat containment should be implemented immediately on approval of the development application and prior to residents purchasing or moving in. Consideration should also be given to enforcing dogs-on-leads on the block, as Superb Parrots are known to forage on the ground.

Noise and traffic disturbance should be minimised as best as possible between September and January when Superb Parrots are most prevalent in the region[3] to prevent potential deterrence from the site during breeding periods, with further consideration given to minimising noise and light pollution in the longer term.

Recommendations

7. Implement cat containment prior to residents moving in.
8. Consider enforcing dogs-on-leads across the entire site to reduce impact on Superb Parrot ground foraging behaviours.
9. Investigate ways to minimise noise and traffic disturbance between September to January during construction to prevent deterring Superb Parrots from the site during breeding, and ways to minimise noise and light pollution in the longer term.

Permeability and WSUD

Water Sensitive Urban Design (WSUD) and landscape permeability will be an important consideration as the climate becomes hotter and drier. The Conservation Council welcomes DV372's acknowledgement of the 30% tree canopy and 30% permeability targets set out in the Living Infrastructure Plan 2019, and strongly encourages DV372 to work towards exceeding these targets, rather than just maintaining them.

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[3] ACT Government 2019, *ACT Native Woodland Conservation Strategy: Superb Parrot Polytelis Swainsonii Action Plan*, p.173.

Watson Section 76 has a gentle downwards slope towards the north-west corner which should be utilised to divert water away from the development, with vegetated swales implemented to catch water on the block's lowest point. A permeable surface should also be used for the proposed public path on the western boundary to reduce stormwater runoff in rainfall events and promote further urban cooling.

Recommendations

10. Utilise the slope on the north-west corner for WSUD, including vegetated swales.
11. Use a permeable surface for the proposed public path on the western boundary.

Active Travel

Given the close proximity of North Watson to a range of amenities and transport routes, the inclusion of active travel routes through the site is strongly supported. Paths should be safe for people from a range of ages and abilities, including people with disability, older people and parents with prams, to encourage walking as a form of active travel. Facilities that support active travel, such bike and scooter storage should also be incorporated on the block.

Recommendations

12. Facilities that support active travel should be incorporated on the block, and active travel routes through the site should support cyclists and walkers.