

0.0 PROPOSED WALLAROO SOLAR FARM

SUMMARY

To present a report on the proposed Wallaroo Solar Farm. The proposal is a State Significant Development and the Independent Planning Commission is the Consent Authority. Key issues for Yass Valley relate to compliance with the *Yass Valley Settlement Strategy*, road infrastructure, visual impacts, the community enhancement fund and community engagement.

RECOMMENDATION

That a submission be made to the Department of Planning & Environment on the proposed Wallaroo Solar Farm on the following grounds:

- *The location is inconsistent with the Yass Valley Settlement Strategy as the proposal does not preserve the rural and landscape character of the area and is likely to negatively impact on the visual amenity of the area.*
- *Locating the development within the 5km buffer area undermines the intended objectives to protect the open rural landscape and environmental values of the area.*
- *The visual assessment does not take into account the existing and proposed Ginninderry development within the ACT or the proposed Parkwood area in NSW.*
- *The Department of Planning & Environment be requested to hold a public hearing locally as part of the assessment process.*
- *If approved, all road work and upgrades are required to be consistent with Council's Roads Standards Policy and the road access route to the site to be maintained throughout construction phase of the development.*
- *If approved, a fund is to be established in accordance with Council's Community Enhancement Fund Policy based on 1% of the capital cost for the project or alternatively a \$150,000 initial contribution plus an annual contribution of \$50,500 (adjusted in line with CPI) while ever the project is in operation.*
- *If approved, the project is to be commenced within 5 years of a Consent being issued and completed within 5 years of commencement.*
- *If approved, any landscaping plan is to incorporate species which are endemic to the local area and planted prior to construction commencing.*

FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

Resources for development assessment are provided for in the Operational Plan.

POLICY & LEGISLATION

- *Environmental Planning & Assessment Act 1979*
- *Yass Valley Settlement Strategy*
- *Road Standards Policy*
- *Community Enhancement Funds Policy*
- *Large Scale Solar Energy Guideline 2022*

REPORT

1. Background

A Development Application has been lodged with the Department of Planning & Environment (DP&E) for the Wallaroo Solar Farm. The site is approximately 400ha and is located on the NSW/ACT border. The site adjoins the Ginninderra Creek and the Gooromon Ponds. Existing overhead transmissions lines are located along the eastern boundary of the site. Access is from Southwell Road via Gooromon Ponds Road, Wallaroo Road and the Barton Highway. The land is currently used for grazing purposes. A Locality Plan is included in **Attachment A**.

The proposal is classified as a State Significant Development and as such the Minister for Planning/Independent Planning Commission is the Consent Authority for the proposal.

Council's role is similar to that as any other third party in the planning assessment process. However, Council does retain an approval role as the Roads Authority for work on any local roads.

2. Project Description

The project involves the development of a 100 MW solar farm and associated infrastructure, including battery storage facility. Plans and photographs are included in **Attachment B**.

The project would incorporate the following permanent infrastructure:

- 182,000 PV modules arranged in rows mounted on single axis trackers with driven or screwed pile foundations
- 18 Power Conversion Units (PCU's) composed of two inverters, a transformer and associated control equipment to convert DC energy generated by the solar panels to 33kV AC energy
- One onsite 132kV substation containing up to two transformers and associated switchgear to facilitate a dual connection to the National electricity grid via the two existing 132kV transmission lines onsite
- Underground installation of substation fibre optic cable link on site.
- Underground internal reticulation of power and data
- Nine battery storage facilities, each consisting of four containerised modules DC coupled to nine of the PCU/inverter stations scattered throughout the site (it should be noted that the *Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment Report* indicates there are 36 Battery Energy Storage Systems)
- Site access (sealed) off Southwell Road and internal access tracks, 4m wide for construction, operation and maintenance activities.
- Two watercourse crossings for internal access tracks
- Buildings to accommodate a site office, 33kV switchgear, protection and control facilities, maintenance facilities, staff amenities and parking
- Approximately 11.6km of perimeter security fencing with a height up to 1.8m high
- 17ha of screen trees and landscaping vegetation to reduce visual impacts for specific receivers

The proposal is supported by a comprehensive Environmental Impact Statement including expert consultant reports and an assessment of the following issues:

- Visual amenity
- Biodiversity
- Aboriginal heritage
- Noise and vibration
- Social and economic impacts
- Hazards and risks
- Compatibility
- Cumulative impacts
- Hydrology, erosion and water resources
- Traffic, transport and safety
- Land and soil assessment
- Resource and waste generation
- Historic heritage
- Air quality and climate

The EIS and associated reports can be view online at <https://www.planningportal.nsw.gov.au/major-projects/projects/wallaroo-solar-farm>

The assessment of the impacts identified in the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) indicates that avoidance, mitigation and management measures will adequately address these matters.

The proponents indicate that the EIS meets all relevant planning provisions and guidelines and is considered justifiable and acceptable.

The proponents consider that on balance, the project is considered appropriate to the:

- Site's location, where it will supply nearby population centres and the grid with renewable energy to assist the transition away from coal generated electricity.
- Site's environmental values, where it has demonstrated key values can be retained or improved in the long-term. This includes specifically:
 - Biodiversity
 - Water quality
 - Soil health and agricultural productivity

The proponents consider the specific values identified by the project's neighbours, local and broader community have been incorporated into the project to ensure it is one which will maximise social license to operate.

3. Key Issues

The key issues for Yass Valley are:

- Consistency with the Settlement Strategy
- Road impacts
- Visual impacts
- Community Enhancement Fund
- Community consultation

3.1 Settlement Strategy

The site is within the nominal 5km 'buffer' area around the ACT/NSW border established by the *Yass Valley Settlement Strategy* and supported by both the ACT and NSW planners. The purpose of the buffer is to preserve the rural amenity, landscape values and restrict urban development in these areas. While Council initially envisaged a statutory zoning approach to protect this area, the DPE opposed this as it wasn't provided for in the standard LEP zones. However, DPE accepted this as a policy position that could be considered in the assessment of any Planning Proposal or Development Application.

A solar farm is more akin to an industrial activity and is inconsistent with protecting the landscape values of the locality and the rural character and amenity as envisaged in the buffer area along the border of Yass Valley and the ACT.

3.2 Road Impacts

The existing traffic on the local roads is estimated to be:

Wallaroo Road	1,500 vpd
Gooromon Ponds Road	1,000 vpd
Southwell Road	20 vpd

The proposed traffic route to the site (including heavy vehicles and over dimensional vehicles) is:

- Federal Highway
- Barton Highway
- Wallaroo Road
- Gooromon Ponds Road
- Southwell Road

The traffic assessment indicates the following increases in traffic on local roads:

Road	Current Traffic	Average construction period		Peak construction period	
Wallaroo Road	1,500 vpd	1,558 vpd	+ 3.9%	1,590 vpd	+5.6%
Gooromon Ponds Road	1,000 vpd	1,058 vpd	+ 5.8%	1,090 vpd	+8.3%
Southwell Road	20 vpd	78 vpd	+ 290%	110 vpd	+81.8%

The additional traffic on Wallaroo and Gooromon Ponds Roads are within the capacity of the existing roads, however Council is well aware of the sensitivity of local residents in the Wallaroo area to heavy vehicle on the local roads especially speed, driving in the middle of the road and the number of vehicles.

The following mitigation measures are proposed:

Roads	Traffic Analysis	Consultation and comments
Wallaroo Road and Gooromon Ponds Road Intersection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The intersection is suitable and within capacity. 	<p>Council consulted.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No upfront works required.
Southwell Road from Gooromon Ponds Road to Site	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Southwell Road is currently unsealed and unmaintained by Council. Intersection does not allow for heavy vehicle movements and passing. 	<p>Council consulted.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intersection upgrade and sealing of 730m of Southwell Road to a minimum width of 6.5m included in project to maintain appropriate construction and operation access and accommodate simultaneous two-way vehicle movement.
Wallaroo Road and Gooromon Ponds Road	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Roads have traffic capacity. Gooromon Ponds Road, Wallaroo Road and Southwell Road are not B Double routes A culvert on Southwell Road, between Gooromon Ponds Road and Brooklands Road (excluded from haulage route) has a weight limit. 	<p>Consultation with Council has established:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Permits required for B-Double use and road weight limit exceedances. Temporary changes to weight limits for project traffic are to be supported by a geotechnical review of the structural adequacy of the pavement for endorsement by Council's Local Traffic Committee.

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Construction Traffic Management Plan requirements to include <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Commitment to post development road condition to be same or better than pre development – Dilapidation report to include geotechnical investigation – Road repairs to be undertaken progressively as identified at no cost to Council.
--	--	--

All road work upgrades and maintenance are to comply with Council's *Roads Standard Policy*.

3.3 Visual Impacts

The proposal is supported by a *Landscape & Visual Impact Assessment*.

A total of 2,001 residential receptors have been identified within 4kms of the project. It should be noted that the Parkwood and West Belconnen (Ginninderry) area were not identified in the landscape and visual assessment report.

There are 19 public receptor sites with a direct line of sight to the project. A total of 8 were identified for detailed assessment. Two sites were identified as having a moderate visual impact with one requiring mitigation works.

There are 92 residential receptor sites in NSW and 14 in the ACT. A total of 21 were identified for further assessment of which 4 were identified as needing a detailed assessment of which 4 were identified as having a moderate visual impact and one of these required mitigation measures.

The proponent is proposing:

- Screen planting as the main mitigation measure to minimise the visual impacts.
- The choice of building material colours for the Power Conversion Units, battery facilities, buildings and storage sheds to assist with minimising the contrast and help the buildings and structures with blending into the surrounding landscape.

If the proposal is to be approved this screen planting should be undertaken prior to the commencement of construction work and reassessed with the impacted landowners after construction is completed to determine if additional planting is necessary.

3.4 Community Enhancement Fund

The *Large Scale Solar Energy Guidelines* prepared by DPE provide details on benefit sharing for the whole community. Benefit sharing is administered by a planning agreement. As a general guide the total funding for benefit sharing should be between \$200 and \$300 per Megawatt per annum (indexed to CPI) over the life of the development. The proposal indicates it will generate 260,000kWh/year which is equal to 260mWh. The annual contributions would be \$52,000/year to \$78,000/year or over 30 years is a total of \$1.56M to \$2.34M.

Under Council's *Community Enhancement Fund Policy* the annual contribution is 1% of the capital cost divided by the estimated operational life of 30 years. The contribution continues while ever the facility is operating. The project has an estimated capital cost of \$166M so a 1% contribution is \$1,660,000. Over 30 years this is \$55,333/year (indexed to CPI).

The proponents are suggesting an initial contribution of \$150,000 with an annual contribution of \$50,000/year. This would generate an income of \$1,600,000 over 30 years.

The following table provides a summary of the options:

DPE Guidelines	Council Policy	Proponents Offer
\$52k-\$78k/year	\$55,333/year	Initial contribution - \$150k Annual contribution - \$50k
30 year total: \$1.56M to \$2.34M	30 year total: \$1.66M	30 year total: \$1.6M

The proponent has indicated a preference establish a community fund, with Council to administer the funds, via a Voluntary Planning Agreement should the project be approved. This administration arrangement is consistent with Council's policy. It is recommended that the project, if approved, establish a fund in accordance with Council's *Community Enhancement Fund Policy* based on 1% of the capital cost for the project or alternatively a \$150,000 initial contribution plus an annual contribution of \$50,500 (adjusted in line with CPI) while ever the project is in operation.

3.5 Community Consultation

Community consultation for the project includes:

- Pre-lodgement consultation with the community and government agencies
- Formal public exhibition of the Environmental Impact Statement
- If the project is approved:
 - Construction phase consultation (including arrangements for complaint management, community updates)
 - Operational phase consultation (including ongoing complaints management arrangements, community newsletters)

Both the pre-lodgement and proposed post approval consultation mechanisms are considered satisfactory. Consideration should also be given to the establishment of a Community Consultative Committee (similar to wind farm projects) or the like if the project is approved.

The form and length of the community consultation for the formal public exhibition is determined by DPE. It is important that DPE takes into account the complexity of the project and the extent of the documentation which can be daunting to laypersons. This is the fundamental flaw with the DPE's approach to formal public exhibition. An extended public exhibition process should be granted.

It is also important that the planning assessment examines all the issues raised by the local community and provides adequate forums for concerns to be raised and examined. DPE should consider holding a local forum for submitters to clarify the concerns and to seek responses from the proponent prior to finalising its assessment report.

The assessment report should be available to all submitters and the proponent prior to any hearing or determination.

Any public hearing should be held locally and provide the opportunity for all submitters to address the members with their concerns before any determination is made. Ideally the hearing should be to receive representations from those submitters wishing to address the Commission following which the Commission should retire to properly consider these representations, the assessment report and make a considered and reasoned decision.

4. Conclusion

The proposal is inconsistent with the *Yass Valley Settlement Strategy* which envisaged a buffer along the NSW/ACT border to preserve the rural amenity, landscape values and restrict urban development in this area. The site is not in a location envisaged by Council in its strategic planning. In addition, the *Landscape & Visual Assessment* has not taken into account the existing and proposed Ginninderry development within the ACT or the proposed Parkwood area in NSW.

If approved the project should incorporate the following:

- All road work and upgrades are required to be consistent with Council's Roads Standards Policy and the road access route to the site to be maintained throughout construction phase of the development.
- A fund is to be established in accordance with Council's Community Enhancement Fund Policy based on 1% of the capital cost for the project or alternatively a \$150,000 initial contribution plus an annual contribution of \$50,500 (adjusted in line with CPI) while ever the project is in operation.
- The project is to be commenced within 5 years of a Consent being issued and completed within 5 years of commencement.
- Any landscaping plan is to incorporate species which are endemic to the local area and planted prior to construction commencing and reassessed with the impacted landowners after construction is completed to determine if additional planting is necessary.

It is recommended that a submission be made in the terms of this report.

STRATEGIC DIRECTION

CSP Theme	Our Civic Leadership
CSP Strategy Objective	CL3: Our community is informed and engaged in decision making
Strategies	CL3.4 - We value the voice of our community, and their input informs our decisions
Delivery Program Action	Increased promotion of community input when items are put out for public comment and submissions

ATTACHMENTS: A. Locality Plan
B. Project Plans and Photographs