

SAVE BUNGENDORE PARK!

It's not a done deal
Our Park is not for sale!

Introduction

The NSW Department of Education, working with Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council, is planning to construct a new high school in the historic heart of Bungendore, across Majara Street, Bungendore Park and Bungendore Common. The plan is rushed and deeply flawed.

It is strongly opposed by a large part of the Bungendore community. It is inappropriate for the centre of an historic town and will involve significant loss of amenity.

Our local Council is betraying the Bungendore community by handing over our parkland, roads and community assets, and refusing to take responsibility for the traffic chaos and destruction of heritage which will follow.

The State government's "consultation" and marketing process has been condescending and insulting. It has withheld information and refuses to acknowledge the weight of community opposition.

The State government has claimed that it could not find any other suitable site to build the school. The proposal has received some support out of fear that it is the only option for a high school in Bungendore – but we know that alternative sites have been identified and found suitable, while others have been ruled out for reasons that were simply wrong.

This pamphlet sets out facts which we've learned from public records, or from the Department of Education's own documents provided under freedom of information legislation.



Artwork courtesy of Jonathan, age 13

What do we know about the proposal?

The plans are difficult to pin down because things keep changing. However, it appears that it will involve:

- construction of multistorey, “design for manufacturing and assembly” school buildings which will be pre-fabricated off-site;
- closure of Majara Street and construction of school buildings across what is now the road;
- demolition and construction across Bungendore Pool and Bungendore Community Centre;
- construction of a local access road between the railway line and the rear of the Palerang Council Building, connecting to a new roundabout at Gibraltar Street;
- construction of school buildings on Bungendore Park, approximately to the edge of what is now the oval. The oval itself will be shifted to the west, encroaching on that side of the Park;
- construction of parking and basketball courts on Turallo Terrace and across other parts of the Park;
- a ban on community use of the oval during school hours;
- the existing Palerang Council Building will form part of the new school;
- the public library and community centre will be incorporated into the school buildings. We don’t know whether a Council office or “shopfront” will also be on school grounds (Council is discussing alternative arrangements but this is secret);
- construction of school buildings and the Abbeyfield aged care facility on parts of Bungendore Common, with other parts to be taken over as school facilities (the “ag plot”) – these areas are currently part of the off-leash dog park.

The School is projected to open for Years 7 to 12 with 400 students in 2023. The Department of Education estimates 478 students by 2026 and 566 by 2036.

The proposed site – including the “shared facilities” and the playing field on Bungendore Park – is approximately 3.85ha. This is materially smaller than the minimum requirement of 4ha for a new high school, which is set out in the NSW Government’s “Educational Facilities Standards and Guidelines - DG03 - Site Selection”. This 4ha minimum is itself a recent reduction from previous standards.

We’re going to lose the land marked below, forever. And be banned from most of the rest of the Park, most of the time. And lose a huge chunk of the Common:

FIGURE 1: Site Acquisition Map



How did we get to this point?

Both major parties committed to a high school in Bungendore prior to the last State election in March 2019.

In November 2019 the Department of Planning, Industry and Environment called for expressions of interest from local landowners to offer a site, requiring at least 3ha within 2.5 km of Bungendore Public School. It’s not clear how widely this was advertised, but three responses were received, proposing:

- a site to the west of the town centre, adjacent to the new Sport Hub;
- a large site to the east, between Kings Highway (towards Braidwood) and the railway line; and

- a third site, which the State Government has refused to identify (we don't know where it is, so we'll call it the **Mystery Site**).

In addition, the Department considered several parcels of Crown land:

- sites adjacent to the Waste Transfer Station;
- Bungendore Common (both the dog park and creek flat);
- the reserve around Spook's Hill/the reservoir;
- the existing Bungendore Public School (dismissed as "already well utilised"); and
- Bungendore Park (dismissed as "not suitable" in one publication and "insufficient land area and student safety concerns" in another publication).

In a March 2020 report, the State Government stated: "a recommendation has been made to proceed with [the Mystery Site]."

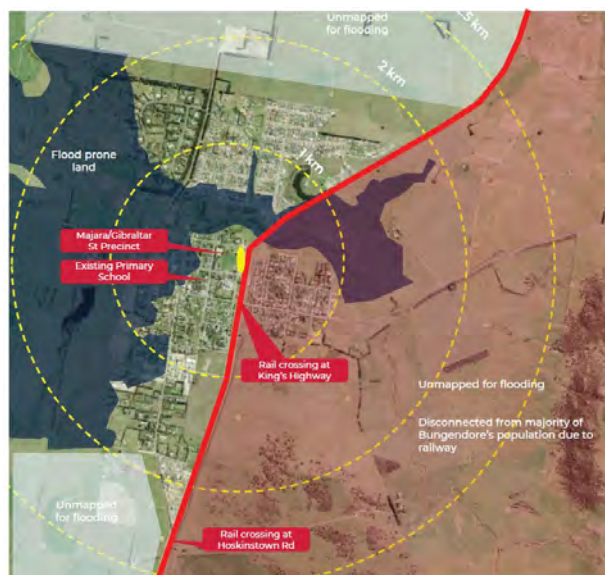
It said that it had identified a further five privately-owned sites which would be suitable, if it could not proceed with the Mystery Site. It set a timetable and started planning.

We don't know where these additional sites were. We don't know why it did not proceed with the Mystery Site. But we know that all of these sites were initially considered suitable.

We do know that the Department specified that any site must be:

"fully serviced with water, sewer, power, telecommunications, local traffic infrastructure (e.g. kerb and gutter, footpath, intersections, crossings, pedestrian pathways) and such other utilities and services infrastructure as is necessary for a school."

As their map showed, they excluded sites to the east of the railway line out of hand, for no reason other than that they were on the wrong side of the tracks:



We also know that the Department considered two parcels of grazing land on Trucking Yard Lane. According to an email from the Department, these were excluded because they:

- were "mapped for biodiversity and have the potential for biodiversity constraints" – although the relevant vegetation map does not identify any sites of significance and there are no endangered ecological communities on the sites;
- "require flood mapping" – although very long-term residents confirmed that the area does not flood, and the flood mapping was not actually undertaken;
- "have poor road infrastructure access and will require additional roads, are in areas with unknown infrastructure capacity (power, water, communications, and sewerage), and have poor pedestrian and cycling infrastructure" – even though they are immediately adjacent to a new housing estate, with main road access to the Kings Highway, other roads to the north and south, and very close to a cycle path which would join the site to Bungendore Public School; and
- "would need to be re-zoned to permit a school." Well of course – so does Bungendore Park!

So the Department of Education did everything it could, not to find a suitable site?

Yep, it sure looks like it! It claims to have surveyed over 1000ha of land and been unable to identify a single suitable location other than Bungendore Park. We do know that the 1000ha was actually a small number of sites, but included one or two very large properties.

It ruled out anything to the east (that was one site – 800+ha gone), it ruled out land with major road frontage as lacking road access, and it ruled out land which would require re-zoning. Even though Bungendore Park doesn't just require re-zoning – it also has the strict legal protections of a “dedication” under the Crown Lands Management Act.

Just remind yourself. This is the standard of decision-making going into this project. We're being asked to trust them. The Department tells us we have no choice and there is no alternative – but they couldn't find Kings Highway on a map and they didn't think there would be water, power and sewerage to a site across the road from a housing estate.

What happened next?

On 6 July 2020, the Department of Education sent QPRC a proposal to be tabled at the next Council meeting. This stated that “A total of 7 sites have been considered to date including the repurposing of existing Department of Education assets, joint-use opportunities, and lands not currently owned by any government organisation.” The State Government kept most of this proposal secret, so we don't know if they had moved on from the Mystery Site or what happened to the other five privately-owned sites they were considering.

Among these seven sites, the Department suggested vague “Option 2”:

Option 2 – Council Lands



Approximate site area: 0.17ha of council land & 2.2ha of playing field (approx.)

Proposed Method of Acquisition: Private Treaty & Joint-Use

Proposed by Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council as lands for use as a future high school. The council land adjacent to the railway line would be used for high school improvements. Joint-use agreements with council will provide open playing space at Mick Sherd Oval.

Pros

- Regular shaped site
- Located centrally to Bungendore community
- Within walking distance to Bungendore Primary School and playing fields.

Cons

- Small amount of land available for high school improvements.
- Site partially zoned SP2 – Public Administration Building. Amendments required.
- High school improvements would be located adjacent to rail line. Acoustic treatment likely to be required.
- School and playing fields would be separated via a public road.

Conclusion

The acquisition strategy proposed by DPIE presents numerous challenges including:

- Minimal improvable land available.
- Student safety of concern given movement over public roads required.
- Noise and air pollution from adjacent rail line.

This combined the then-proposed Abbeyfield site with Bungendore Park (which it stated was “proposed by Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council as lands for use as a future high school”), but would keep Majara Street open.

There was nothing about taking over the pool. Nothing about taking the Community Centre. Nothing about selling the Palerang Council Building. Nothing about closing and building on Majara Street. That was not part of the plan. And sensibly, the Department recommended against this, because of:

- *“Minimal improvable land available.*
- *Student safety of concern given movement over public roads required.*
- *Noise and air pollution from adjacent rail line.”*

Council also proposed Option 7, a large site south of Kings Highway and east of the railway line. The Department was concerned about “zoning and lack of infrastructure”. It was worried that “any site is likely not to be serviced” – although it didn't bother to check – and it thought the site was on the wrong side of the railway line. It

stated this land was “not central to Bungendore”, even though it is immediately adjacent to the town and within the original 2.5km search area. Laughably, given the legal issues around Bungendore Park, they thought the “acquisition and due diligence program would be protracted”. Again, they seemed determined **not** to find a suitable site:

Option 7 – New Council Lands



Approximate site area: Up to 827 hectares of land available

Proposed Method of Acquisition: Private Treaty

Proposed by Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council as lands for use as a future high school. The area has been id council for future greenfield development.

Pros

- Large amount of land available.

Cons

- No flood mapping completed for site. Fu mapping required (see Annexure A).
- Bushfire mapping required.
- Site zoned RU1 – Primary Production. An required.
- Site is not central to Bungendore
- Most of community lives on western side posing access and student safety problem
- Land is predominantly undeveloped, req significant community infrastructure to : school being located here.
- Any site is likely to be not serviced.

Conclusion

There are various issues with the site including flooding, zoning and lack of infrastructure. Acquisition a diligence program would be protracted.

We don’t know when the decision was made to pursue Option 2 and take over Bungendore Park. But it was obviously later than 6 July, when other options were still on the table. We do know from that the “Transport Strategy Assessment” assumed Majara Street would remain open. This is dated “August 2020” – so the decision to close Majara Street was taken in August, but before the 13 August announcement. So they thought about it for barely a few days.

While the Department of Education’s records say the Bungendore Park site was suggested by QPRC (and Department staff repeated this

claim at the Information Hub), the Council has denied this. It did, however, state that:

“Council was approached with a proposal to construct a school on Mick Sherd Oval and to acquire the Council-owned property on Majara St. A workshop was held with Department of Education representatives, councillors and staff in July 2020. During the workshop, there was discussion on minimising the impact on Mick Sherd Oval as much as possible. It was suggested during the workshop that moving the school further to the east, and utilising the road reserve may be worth consideration by DoE. This was a suggestion, not a decision or a direction. DoE representatives took the suggestion on board and revised the plan following consideration.”

Council has refused to disclose any more information in relation to its early discussions with the Department of Education which would allow us to verify this. It has claimed that there was an “overriding public interest” against disclosure, because the it would reveal a deliberation or consultation “in such a way as to prejudice the deliberative process” of Council. It claimed that the BHS project is “still in the early planning, deliberation, consultation stages.” This was surprising, given that the plan has been presented as a done deal.

As far as we know, embarrassing the Council and showing how it has betrayed our town should not be against the “public interest”. But either way, Council admits that it took it upon itself to offer up even more of our town centre, to throw in the Community Centre, the pool and the Palerang Council Building and to flog off Majara Street. This resulted in the Department of Education changing its mind about a site it had previously ruled out.

And the Minister for Education and John Barilaro, the Member for Monaro, announced the current plan on 13 August 2020 and presented this as the only option, and a properly considered plan.

They say a week is a long time in politics – in that case, maybe Mr Barilaro thought that just under a fortnight was an eternity... And certainly enough time to invent a plan to transform the heart of Bungendore.

To top it off - when he announced the school, Mr Barilaro said: “Some other sites required rezoning and infrastructure... this isn’t the cheapest site, but it’s actually the right site in relation to getting a school built in the timeline that we’ve committed to.”

So somehow, between 6 July and 13 August, they completely revamped the proposal and selected a site they had always dismissed as unsuitable. And zoning issues that ruled out other sites were suddenly not a problem with Bungendore Park, which – last we checked – wasn’t zoned for a school either.

So what does this tell us?

First, by March 2020, the Department of Education had identified at least six sites that it considered suitable for the high school. It had selected the Mystery Site and started planning. This was even after setting unrealistic requirements and excluding apparently suitable sites on irrational or factually incorrect grounds.

But for unknown reasons, it gave up on these sites and met with QPRC in July 2020.

At the meeting, QPRC looked at Option 2 and suggested changing it to something which resembles the current plan. And the Minister for Education and Member for Monaro announced the current plan only a few days afterwards – presented as the results of a long and detailed planning process.

And we know that the Department of Education was very keen to get its hands on our Oval. As the CEO of School Infrastructure NSW said in Budget Estimates in March, “the playing field was also kind of really valuable to us...”. Well newsflash, Mr Manning – it’s also “kind of really valuable” to the people of Bungendore!

What about the Education Precinct, the Sports Hub and the Shared Facilities?

The Education “Precinct”

The Department of Education’s initial search was for land within a 2.5km radius of Bungendore Public School. None of the planning documents refers to an “education precinct” or the supposed advantages of co-location. It wasn’t even mentioned until the announcement, when the Department of Education needed to generate reasons to justify its choice. Maybe it will be good for 5 year olds to share playground facilities with 17 year olds, but it’s hard to imagine there are significant benefits that couldn’t be achieved with a high school built within 2.5km, as the Department originally specified. It’s clear that the Department didn’t care about this, until suddenly it became one of the most important justifications for choosing the Bungendore Park site.

The Sports Hub

The Department of Education has implied that the Sports Hub is linked to the high school proposal. But construction of the Sports Hub is completely unrelated.

It has been planned since well before 2016, and the Bungendore Structure Plan (adopted in February 2020 – the same time that planning commenced for the Mystery Site) described the Hub as an alternative venue for organised sport, but not replacing the Park as the town’s primary sporting and recreation area. The Hub was merely “to relieve existing pressures”. It was already funded and QPRC always intended to commence construction now, so it is misleading for Department of Education to link the projects.

Further, while the Hub will provide facilities for organised sport, it is not intended to offer informal, public open space and is much less convenient to large parts of the town (including large new subdivisions planned to the north). It does not compensate for losing a large part of Bungendore Park. As for a new pool – it may still

be years away. QPRC has estimated that the new pool will cost \$10 million. While the Department of Education has offered a \$5 million contribution, the balance will be funded by Council and will require large borrowings. There are no guarantees that funds will be available or will not be committed elsewhere.

The Primary School and the Shared Facilities

The Department of Education has announced various upgrades to Bungendore Public School as part of the project. While the safety (or otherwise) of the proposed synthetic playing fields is a separate issue, this project should be funded by the State Government if it is needed. It should not be contingent upon the community sacrificing its Park, and as with the Sports Hub, it should not be presented as part of the high school project.

And the “shared facilities” – the community centre and library? These simply replace what we already have and what we will be losing. Already we are seeing users of the Community Centre being given notice to vacate; there’s no plan for where they will go. And who will feel comfortable walking through the school grounds to use the replacement facilities - if that’s even allowed?

In short, nothing the Department of Education has told us stands up to proper scrutiny.

What about the traffic issues?

We’ve been lied to and told half-truths about this all along.

Closing Majara Street

Majara Street is a major, non-residential thoroughfare in Bungendore. The decision to close it was only taken in the days leading up the project announcement, meaning there was no opportunity think it through properly. This was real fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants planning –

which might be fun in movies, but isn’t the way we want our town governed.

It is part of the town’s original grid, laid out in 1837. It is an essential transport route, connecting hundreds of homes in Elmslea with the Kings Highway, Bungendore Public School and other important facilities. It carries significant traffic volume, including large utes and 4WDs – many of which tow boats or caravans on weekends or holiday periods. Closing it will divert all this traffic onto Turallo Terrace, and then primarily to Butmaroo and Ellendon Streets. The school itself will create hundreds more car trips every day.

Bungendore Preschool is on Turallo Terrace. There are already major traffic and safety issues at pick-up and drop-off times. The increase in through traffic will make this worse. The plan to construct school parking on Turallo Terrace will only increase the number of pedestrians (many with children) crossing back and forth across this road. Traffic chaos and pre-schoolers should never mix.

Even the initial transport assessment (looking at how kids would travel to school) raised concerns about the lack of footpaths and kerbing along Turallo Terrace and Majara Street. The consultant was concerned about the lack of safe crossing opportunities, as well as:

- “... traffic during the school peaks...
- *Lack of formal separation between the road and verge (Butmaroo Street, Turallo Terrace, Majara Street);*
- *Lack of formal footpath network around and to the high school;*
- *In summary a major upgrade to active transport network in proximity to the school site is recommended.”*

So even if the proposed location looks convenient, some major changes will be needed. Such as (we’ve just learned) a roundabout at the intersection of Gibraltar and Butmaroo Streets!

Both the Department of Education and QPRC have refused to tell us how they plan to address any of these issues, saying only that they will be considered much later as part of the development approval process. But they've been strangely vague about the advice they've received so far.

In its FAQs published in September 2020, just after it announced the proposal, the Department of Education stated that "the transport assessment has found that there will not be any negative impacts to traffic caused by the school being built at this site." And then in a letter dated 22 December 2020 to the Shadow Minister for Education, the Minister stated that:

"traffic studies to identify any impacts that might occur regarding the closure of Majara Street thoroughfare between Turallo Terrace and Gibraltar Street have been undertaken. The traffic studies established that the closure is not anticipated to cause congestion within the Precinct."

This was an outright lie.

At that stage, the Department had undertaken the *transport* assessment. This looked at how kids will travel to school, not at how traffic flows would affect surrounding streets. This study was dated August 2020 and assumed that Majara Street would remain open.

In January, the Department of Education advised that:

"there were no records located regarding: assessment of traffic impact on Turallo Terrace and Butmaroo Street of the closure/redirection of Majara Street; measurement of current traffic flows on Majara Street; assessment of traffic diversion following closure of Majara Street; and safety assessment relating to parking, pickup and drop-off on Turallo Terrace. School Infrastructure NSW have advised no records regarding these matters exist."

In other words, there was no traffic assessment. The Department lied to us in the FAQs. The Minister for Education did not just lie to the Shadow Minister in that letter; she invented the conclusions of reports that had never actually been written.

Then QPRC announced in February that it was planning to close Majara Street. When asked if it had seen a traffic assessment, it told us yes, it had seen a "rapid traffic assessment". We had to point out that this was in fact the "rapid *transport* assessment" cited above, prepared for the Department of Education in August before it had even decided to close Majara Street.

So not only had QPRC not made any investigation, but it tried to deflect us by claiming to have seen a report which didn't exist, when what it had seen (but apparently not read) was both wrong and irrelevant.

The Current Situation

We know that a study has now been undertaken and a draft report discussed with QPRC in early March. The draft was then sent back for revision. We have tried to get hold of it, but QPRC refuses to release it, while the Department of Education told us that it would be published on its website.

What was finally published – only at the end of March after months of fighting – was a summary assessing whether any congestion would arise at peak hour at "six intersections of interest", being Majara and Butmaroo Streets, with Turallo Terrace, Kings Highway and Gibraltar Street. Nothing about whether pre-schoolers would be safe arriving at school, or dog walkers or kids on bikes would be bowled over by 4WDs on Butmaroo Street.

It was based on measurements taken over three hours on a single day in November 2020. It did not make any assessment of total traffic volumes, or any assessment of the impact outside peak hours.

It did not consider pedestrian safety and it did not assess noise or any issues arising from traffic, pick-up or drop-off at the pre-school, or arrivals and departures as cars reverse out of parking to be constructed on Turallo Terrace.

And unbelievably, it assumed Majara Street would remain open. That's right – they couldn't even get that much right. It's easy to say that there will be no congestion at an intersection, when that intersection has ceased to exist.

So they have taken every possible chance to delay and withhold information, and then what they did release was simply wrong.

We still don't know what the full report says (or will say, after repeated workshops and re-writes). The Department of Education has delayed our request for the report under FOI, and told us that it will be released as part of the Development Application – but that's well after the decision will have been taken to close the road and sell the land.

And they claim that this is a proper, sensible, open and consultative planning process.

What about heritage issues? Surely it's just a park?

Bungendore Park and Majara Street form part of the original town grid, laid out by preeminent Colonial Surveyor James Larmer in 1837. There are very few public places in New South Wales, let alone the rest of Australia, with such a long European history.

Its size and shape have not changed since. The Park existed long before, but was formally gazetted in 1884 and "dedicated ... for Public Recreation". It has played a huge role in the culture and life of the town ever since. It has been home to the Tigers since 1908, hosted countless football and cricket grudge matches against Braidwood, Tarago and Captains Flat since well before the turn of last century

(all reported in great detail in the local press and invariably ending with festivities continuing at the Royal or the George (or Harp Inn, as it used to be)). This sort of history can't be invented or rebuilt overnight.

The Common is even older, and was managed by Trustees until they wrote to the former Yarrowlumla Shire Council in 1979, asking the Council to safeguard it for the long term:

337. TRUSTEES BUNGENDORE COMMON (P1/1) (No. 19 on Precis): Advising that they have found that with rising costs and falling returns they are no longer able to administer the Common in the manner required to keep it at a standard considered by them to be desirable and they believe that the best course of action to safeguard the long term viability of the Town Common as a recreational asset to be used by the people of the town and district would be for the Council to administer it as a Recreational Reserve.

It was resolved that the Trustees of the Bungendore Common and the Department of Lands be advised that Council would be prepared to take over the care, control and management of the area as a Recreational Reserve and at the same time protect the levee bank along the creek which was built by Council some years ago.

Council promised to preserve it as a recreational reserve – at least (it seems) until the Department of Education offered to buy it. The Common is heritage protected due to its historic cultural and social significance.

The indigenous heritage of the site is older still and has never been properly examined. 20,000 Aboriginal artefacts were unearthed during construction of the defence facilities at HQJOC in 2007. The consulting archaeologist, Doug Williams said:

"There's just a fascinating array of heritage material in this valley once you actually start to look. Although I suspect that its fairly characteristic of these sorts of landscapes in the local area, and the next valley across will be an archaeological gold mine for someone else."

Residents of Gibraltar Street have found important artefacts just in the last few months. Construction would hide this heritage and obliterate this ancient history forever.

The whole of Bungendore Park is listed as having heritage protection, but we're told this only protects the Soldiers' Memorial and the Memorial Fountain on the southwest corner. It is the site of an historic grave (possibly a

bushranger or indigenous person), while some of the mature trees which will cut down are descendants of Gallipoli's original Lone Pine.

The railway station precinct is listed as "state significant" and carries the highest level of protection. The school project will involve significant impingements to the station forecourt, as well as to the heritage listed guard's and stationmaster's cottages adjacent to the railway line as the new school access road is crammed in around them.

The former Yarrowlumla Shire Council commissioned David Scobie, a heritage architect, to prepare the definitive heritage assessment of Bungendore in 1982. He recognised the importance of the town's "traditional town park" as a "significant precinct" and a "major area of visual importance".

He saw the need to "maintain the town park character with its formal setting opposite the major town institutional buildings." Scobie also recognised the consistency of the buildings in the town centre, the importance of the open backdrop along Gibraltar Street to the hills beyond and stressed the need to preserve this. This vista and the view to Gibraltar Hill will be obscured by the multistorey, prefabricated school building.

No one knows yet what this school will look like. But this approximates the height – although probably doesn't show it encroaching far enough onto the oval (and the trees will go, of course):



Palerang Council's Heritage Advisory Committee prepared a conservation planning strategy in 2010. The Committee noted the importance of Bungendore as an intact, early 19th century town.

It found that:

"the relative intactness of its early buildings and layout allows Bungendore to demonstrate the typical attributes of a late 19th century service village with representative examples of residential, commercial, retail, rural, educational, and religious buildings, parks and reserves."

The proposed school and associated road closures are the first major change to this "intact" layout since the construction of the railway line in 1885.

The Heritage Advisory Committee recommended establishing a heritage conservation area that would include much of the town centre, Bungendore Park and the Common. It noted the importance of preserving the town park character with its formal setting, and pointed out how the town satisfies multiple criteria to warrant heritage protection.



Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council commissioned an updated Heritage Study in 2018, but the authors were instructed not to examine public open spaces and monuments. Given that, they specifically recommended that Council undertake “a follow up study of non-building heritage items” such as Bungendore Park.

In spite of sitting on these reports for years, there has been no formal assessment of the Park itself. We’re told QPRC was planning to do this in the next year. By then it might be too late. QPRC fobbed us off by noting that:

“the heritage impact of this School project will be required to be considered as part of the development application process that is being conducted by School Infrastructure and that this will be available for comment by Council and the community during the exhibition period for the project.”

Again, it seems Council just won’t accept any responsibility for protecting the town. In the haste to build, we risk destroying the Park and important parts of Bungendore’s history before ever undertaking a proper study.

But the Community supports the proposal to build on Bungendore Park, right? And the Department of Education didn’t make up its mind without speaking to the community?

The Department of Education has claimed “overwhelming” community support for the plan, based on surveys conducted online and at its information hub.

The Online Survey

The online survey received several hundred responses, mostly supporting the idea of a high school in Bungendore. But the survey was never designed to ask whether the community supported this proposal. The survey report was called “Prioritising Design Principles”, and its

stated aim was only “to gain insight from the local residents and school community (staff, parents, carers and students) on prioritising the design principles.”

According to the survey report, the questions “mainly focused on design principles for the proposed new high school in Bungendore.” The results were supposed to:

“enable SINSW to determine whether the design principles are aligned with community expectation and help develop an understanding of local residents’ and school communities’ views on the provision of amenities, cultural inclusion and school environment.”

We don’t know what those buzzwords mean either. However, it’s clear that the survey was never intended to find out whether people wanted to see a school built on their Park. It did not ask about this and did not invite long-form responses. The report did not report on the location of respondents or verifying the integrity of responses.

The Information Hub – and the 54 people showing “overwhelming” support

The Department of Education then surveyed visitors to the “Community Information Hub” it set up at the Primary School grounds in September. This was a slick marketing effort, with 90 people registered to attend. Of the 90, 74 completed the survey. Of those 74 people, 74% “felt it was an appropriate site”. That’s 54.7 people. And of those 54, only 36 people “strongly agreed”.

That’s it. 36 people, plus another 18 who were only lukewarm. Based on that, the Department briefed the Minister for Education on 21 October that there was “overwhelming support” for the project. It quoted the 74% figure, without telling the Minister that this represented only 54.7 people. The Minister then approved a briefing paper and a presentation for Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council, quoting the 74% figure

and failing to note the very small (and self-selecting) sample size.

Meanwhile, a petition opposing the proposed site has collected 400 hard copy and online signatures with limited effort. How is it that 54 people are “overwhelming” support, while 400 (and counting) are simply ignored?

But what about the consultation with “stakeholders”?

When proposal was announced, the Department of Education claimed in a brochure that, prior to deciding to take over our Park, “consultation ... occurred with ... several stakeholders of Mick Sherd Oval.” We asked for the reports of this consultation, to find out what the Department had been told, and what it had reported back to senior management and the Minister for Education – but it turns out these records don’t actually exist. It’s not clear whether they told an outright lie and the consultations simply did not occur, or if they just didn’t bother to keep records. This is just another example of the standard of decision-making we’re seeing over and over again in relation to this project. Either outright lies, clear incompetence or deliberate obfuscation.

To be fair, we know from the Department’s own records that it spoke to the Tigers and the Mudhooks in late July 2020, and 7 other community groups on 22 September – after the plan was announced. So maybe it simply lost the records of these meetings? Either way, they’d made up their mind once and for all ahead of the public announcement on 13 August, having only bothered to speak to the Tigers and the Mudhooks (and without keeping a record of anything discussed).

So what’s the latest?

The formal notice of the proposed closure of Majara Street finally gave the Community an opportunity to express its views to Council (albeit only about this one small aspect of the plan). According to Council’s report in this feedback

released on 23 April, it received 171 submissions. Of these, 11 were from Government departments ticking boxes, leaving 160 from members of the community.

Thirty-eight people took the time to make long-form, written submissions. Of these, 33 opposed closing the road. One made the very sensible suggestion that the best way to manage the traffic impact would be to close McCusker Drive to Turallo Terrace, diverting through traffic from Elmslea to Tarago Road. This may actually be the only way to make things work – although it may cause its own problems.

122 people made submissions via the “your voice” portal on the QPRC website. 50 opposed it, for all the reasons we know all too well. A few others raised important concerns but didn’t express a view. 63 people said they supported closing the road – but most of these did not address the issues at all – they were one-liners such as “I support the road closure and the new high school development”.

So when the Bungendore community was finally asked what it thought of massive disruption in the historic heart of the town, 88 people strongly opposed closing Majara Street, taking the time to set out all sorts of detailed and different reasons. And even though we know supporters of the plan engaged in a massive effort to generate responses, only 68 supported it – the vast majority being one-liners to the effect that a high school is worth it regardless of the price to the community.

Most submissions opposing the road closure noted the lack of a traffic study. We know that a study exists, it’s being kept secret and we’ve no idea what it covered and what it says. What we do know is that the summary released to the public was so deficient that it ignored the closure of Majara Street and didn’t bother to think about pre-schoolers on Turallo Terrace or kids walking their dogs on Butmaroo Street.

The most powerful submission was from one brave local parent, who strongly supported the

high school, but knew this was the wrong way to do it:

"I strongly object to this proposal. I have an 8 year old child who will benefit from a high school in Bungendore which I have joined in the crusade for. So it is heartbreaking to see the planned high school site. This site is just not appropriate for a high school. It is too small, and shows complete lack of planning for the future, and will not be able to accommodate the growing population of high school students in Bungendore.

There will be safety issues in terms of traffic, with the road closure creating all sorts of issues - it will increase the traffic pressure on Butmaroo St and surrounding streets and affect access to Elmslea. Without a flow through system, school drop off and pick up will become a congested nightmare and create a real hazard for pedestrians, the majority of which will be children.

Also the Bungendore pool is a community hub over summer, our family and others use it to cool down, get exercise and catch up with friends. Our daughter is developing a love of swimming and enjoys the local swim club, which is an important community group that has taught local children to swim for years. It is a great asset to the town and one which Bungendore cannot afford to lose. There are no other nearby swimming options, how could anyone possibly approve the removal of the local pool for a tiny compressed high school that will be soon outgrown? This block, including Mick Sherd oval is so important to the community and needs to be left as is. The high school site needs to be somewhere else - we are surrounded by so much open space with so many, better options.

Please don't wreck the whole town by this one very bad choice of site."

How can QPRC, John Barilaro, the Minister and the Department of Education continue to claim that they're doing the right thing and the

community supports their plan? The evidence to the contrary is overwhelming.

But are they listening now?

We know that the strength of opposition has surprised and embarrassed the State Government. It embarrassed QPRC to the extent that the General Manager appeared on ABC Radio Canberra to promote the project. But so far we are seeing obstruction and stonewalling. The Minister for Education has responded to members of the community with a standard-form letter, stating:

"the Department has demonstrated a willingness to consult as changes have been made to the location of the primary school library, the shared zone and the development of the transport strategy following feedback from the community."

We would think she'd be embarrassed that it took shocked community members to point out that it was a bad idea to put the primary school library hundreds of meters away from the primary school, on the far side of the high school, across a road. Or that it took various facebook pages to point out that their "transport strategy assessment" which proposed bus drop-off points on Majara Street may not have been appropriate, given that part of Majara Street will no longer exist....

In short, they know we're here, but they're stonewalling us and hoping we give up and go away. Shout it from the rooftops - we will not just go away.

What happens from here? Should we just give up?

There's a lot of water to flow under the bridge. It's not a done deal. And the State Government

never expected this level of passionate opposition.

Council still has not agreed to sell the land. Of the 10 members of Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council, five have opposed the plan. We just need to convince one more. The others are probably convinced by the misleading claims of community support, or they just haven't had a chance to understand the issues – which is understandable given how fast the Department of Education is trying to barge this plan through.

Keep writing, emailing and calling the Councillors. Make submissions to each Council meeting whenever any aspect of this plan comes up for discussion.

Our local MP, John Barilaro, admitted that this plan was only chosen because it was “the right site in relation to getting a school built in the timeline that we’ve committed to.” We know that timetable is completely unachievable. So tell him there’s no reason to keep flogging the dead horse. He doesn’t respond to letters or emails, but that’s no reason not to keep sending them.

The Minister for Education, Sarah Mitchell, also needs to sign off. She’s from Gunnedah – a country town in northern NSW with a population not much larger than Bungendore, boasting 13 town parks and a huge central golf course. If Ms Mitchell looked at this properly, it’s hard to believe she would demand another small country town gives up its Park because her Department can’t find any other piece of land to take over. Let’s write to her and ask her to think again.

The Auditor-General of NSW only a few weeks ago published a report slamming the State Government’s approach to school construction, finding that it prioritised politics over need and sensible planning. This plan is far more expensive than it needs to be given the infrastructure that will be demolished and need to be rebuilt. It’s been rumoured (and mentioned in Parliament) that Council is selling the land for \$12 million dollars, but this is being kept secret so we don’t know if this is true.

Either way, John Barilaro admitted that it’s expensive and driven by timing, and we now know that the timing is a pipe-dream. We could achieve a better result, on a cheaper site, and faster – if they realise they have made the wrong choice.

The planning process will be difficult and complex, requiring multiple approvals from different branches and levels of government, including the State Parliament itself.

Both Bungendore Park and Bungendore Common are subject to various legal restrictions, intended to preserve them for the public forever. It may be very difficult for Council and the State Government to un-do these arrangements.

What about the planning process?

Because the construction relates to a school, this is considered a “state-significant development”. That means that it’s taken out of the hands of Council (although it can only happen if Council agrees to sell the land), and planning permission will be granted by the Minister for Planning in Sydney, on the advice of his Department.

However, if more than 50 people object, the matter will be referred to the Independent Planning Commission, which conducts public hearings. We can be certain that this plan will end up before the Commission.

This process will take a long time, and there are multiple opportunities to appeal and object. Even if it goes ahead, the original timeframe for the school to be open for Term 1, 2023 will be very difficult to achieve. In the meantime, the Department of Education has been wasting time. It had the opportunity to buy a property on Mecca Lane which looked ideal – at a fraction of the cost of Bungendore Park. The longer it delays, the more opportunities will be missed.

Conclusion

Many people have worked very hard to campaign for the school. Some of them still support the current proposal, although many now realise that it is so flawed that they can no longer stand behind it. Either way, it is clear that there is limited support for the current plan and overwhelming opposition to it.

Both the complexity of the planning process and the strength of opposition mean that even if the plan proceeds, it is likely to face significant delays.

Both the Council and the Department of Education have refused to address clear issues, with the excuse that these will be considered as part of the Development Application process. But we don't need to wait until then. Listen to

Let's make this a win-win instead.

the people who live here. The people who elected you. It's not good enough to make this someone else's problem. We have to live with this.

The best thing for everyone – the State government, high school advocates and community members, would be to focus on a more appropriate site that the whole community can get behind.

Building the school on Bungendore Park is a winner-take-all outcome, when the prize is second-best.

The school can be built on any of the multiple sites that the Department of Education has identified. But if it's built on Bungendore Park, we lose the Park forever.

Contacts

You can reach the Bungendore Park Action Group by email:

bungendoreparkactiongroup@gmail.com, or keep an eye on the various Facebook pages (@savebungendorepark or Keep Bungendore Park in Bungendore Community Hands).

Sarah Mitchell MLC, the Minister for Education and Early Childhood Learning, wouldn't like to lose one of the 13 parks in Gunnedah. Tell her you don't want to lose our Park in Bungendore: Office@mitchell.minister.nsw.gov.au.

You can tell John Barilaro what you think (although he probably won't respond: monaro@parliament.nsw.gov.au

You can write to Peter Tegart, the General Manager of Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council, who is leading this project on behalf of the Council: peter.tegart@qprclr.nsw.gov.au.

And of course, write to your Councillors:

Tim.Overall@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

Brian.Brown@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

Mark.Schweikert@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

Trudy.Taylor@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

Trevor.Hicks@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

Kenrick.Winchester@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

Michele.Biscotti@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

Peter.Marshall@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

Pete.Harrison@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

Radmila.Noveska@qprclr.nsw.gov.au

They still believe we're just a small minority. Let's show them how wrong they are.

About the Bungendore Park Action Group

The Action Group is an apolitical, informal group of passionate, engaged members of the Bungendore Community. We support a high school for Bungendore, but believe the proposed site is a poor choice.

We're passionate about calling the State Government and our local Council to account, and looking beyond the superficial and deceptive marketing campaign we're seeing.

Version 1.03