BEARS HILL MASTERPLAN

PLANNING FOR THE WODONGA HILLS

OCTOBER 2017
Master planning for the Wodonga hills has been guided by the eight management objectives and related set of guiding management principles applying to all the hills. See Appendix 1. These establish the preferred approach or “decision framework” to management and use of the hills.

The actions identified in this masterplan have been formulated in accordance with these objectives and guiding principles, as well as in recognition of the hill’s particular values and other characteristics (notably proximity to residential areas and accessibility, management track network, terrain, usage patterns, current facilities, biodiversity values, fire hazard management, and management regime).

Together the site-specific actions and the overall actions identified for all the Wodonga hills, will guide the planning, use, enhancement and management of the Wodonga hills.

Individual actions are described in Section 2.2, and shown in Figures 1 to 3 (along with “typical” or “example” images illustrating each action).
1.1 BEARS HILL

Wodonga Council’s owned and managed lands occur mainly in the west of Bears Hill, as well as two smaller (land-locked) parcels in the east. Together these blocks account for only just more than 12 per cent of the hill’s total area.

Nearly half of Bears Hill, mostly the central section, is Commonwealth land (managed by the Department of Defence), as shown on Figure 1.

A sizeable area of the south-eastern portion of the hill is, at present, in private ownership. These private lands are included within the Leneva-Baranduda urban growth area and are mostly identified as future Wodonga Retained Environment Network (WREN) lands which will ultimately come into public ownership. Future WREN lands have also been identified running along the southern toe of Bears Hill, as well as connecting to the hill’s eastern and south-eastern end (along Middle Creek and its tributary).

The WREN is a series of reserves across Leneva-Baranduda set aside and permanently protected to compensate for vegetation losses in development. These areas will be managed primarily for conversation gains, that is, through revegetation and will influence any use of Bears Hill.

An area of Crown land, managed by Parklands Albury Wodonga (PAW) as part of the WREN, sits at the south centre of the hill off the north end of Martins Rd. A small Parks Victoria block - the Wodonga Bushland Reserve - is located on the northern base of Bears Hill.

This masterplan only applies to the council-owned and managed portions of Bears Hill, and is chiefly focused on those accessible areas and larger council land parcels on the hill’s western end. It does give consideration to private land expected to come until public ownership.
Within the context of the overall Planning for the Wodonga Hills Strategy, this masterplan for Bears Hill is largely driven by the limited area of the hill under council's management, the existing and developing residential estates to the north and south, restricted vehicle access to the hill's perimeter, its conservation values and the WREN lands.

The masterplan proposes better identification and directional signposting within the adjoining residential areas to improve user access to Bears Hill. The need provide for more direct connections between the hill and the adjacent developing open space and pathway networks when planning surrounding residential estates is also identified.

The main leisure or recreation elements of the masterplan are new walking tracks or shared paths, new trailheads or entry nodes, and the provision of low-key lookout points and rest stops.

The masterplan proposes a walking track between two new low-key lookout points on the western crest of the hill, meandering through attractive regenerating open woodland along the hillcrest and connecting with the existing management track at the proposed southern lookout. To encourage community access to desirable locations, the masterplan also seeks to expand the track network and provide new or improved connections between these vantage points and the urban area at White Box Rise, Peregrine Place and the existing stock route along the hill's northern margin.

A new shared path link is envisaged across the hill's south-western slope to the crest and proposed southern lookout, as an alternative to the existing management track. In conjunction with the management track, it will also enable a short loop route for walkers and cyclists to and from the crest and proposed southern lookout.

These shared paths, and the hill's management tracks, will be available for both walkers and cyclists. However, given the shortness of these tracks and paths, they are unlikely to appeal to mountain bikers.

Ongoing offset and WREN management requirements and the overall "biodiversity and bushland management" objectives identified in the strategy will reinforce the hill's endangered vegetation communities, enhance its biodiversity and landscape values, and better connect with other WREN lands. Any new infrastructure will need to avoid impacts on protected areas and adhere to requirements of the relevant management plans.

Supplementary plantings are also proposed in the existing revegetation area downslope of the water tanks, as well as screening plantings in association with proposed tracks and trails where these are located on more open or visible hillslopes. As described in the overall actions for all the Wodonga Hills (in the main strategy document), the council will liaise with the Country Fire Authority regarding mitigating bushfire risks around revegetation and biodiversity enhancement areas.

The council will continue to liaise with the Department of Defence and other land owners/managers regarding the future status and management of Bears Hill. Access to and impacts on the Defence land - with its strict security protocols - will require active management.
## 2.2 SPECIFIC ACTIONS FOR BEARS HILL

This masterplan proposes 13 actions to enhance the enjoyment, conservation, landscape value and management of the council-owned areas of Bears Hill over the short to mid-term. These actions and directions are specific to the council-owned areas of Bears Hill, however, the 45 overall actions applicable to all the Wodonga Hills - as described in the strategy - will also apply. Actions 1 to 3 relate to sites beyond the hill’s boundary, while actions 4 to 13 apply to specific sites, areas or corridors within Bears Hill - as shown on Figure 2, along with “typical” or “example” image(s) to further illustrate the intent, appearance or scale of each of the proposed actions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Action</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>ACTION 1</strong></td>
<td><strong>SIGNPOST MINOR ACCESS AND ENTRY POINTS</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Signpost minor access and entry points around the western end of Bears Hill (and the future WREN lands, when council owned) within the residential street, pathway and open space network - especially those that may be mistaken for (or presented as) private land.</td>
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<td><strong>ACTION 2</strong></td>
<td><strong>PERIODIC LIAISON WITH DEPARTMENT OF DEFENCE</strong></td>
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<td>Periodically liaise with the Department of Defence regarding their policy on public access to the Defence lands on Bears Hill - for transit access only, or for access and on-site uses. Also pursue the possibility of the Department of Defence divesting these lands to the council.</td>
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<td><strong>ACTION 3</strong></td>
<td><strong>PLAN FOR SUITABLE RECREATION/LEISURE ACCESS</strong></td>
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<td>Ensure the planning of future adjacent residential estates and open space or pathway networks, provides for suitable pedestrian, cyclist and vehicle access to the hill’s margins (at regular intervals or to suitable locations) and to potential trailheads.</td>
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<td><strong>ACTION 4</strong></td>
<td><strong>NEW SHORT WALKING TRACK ALONG WESTERN CREST</strong></td>
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<td>Establish a new short walking track along the western crest of Bears Hill - connecting the existing informal and undeveloped vantage point viewing westward (see action 5) and a potential lookout offering low elevation views northwards (see action 7). Care will be required to route this walking track without impacting existing native vegetation in accordance with the offset management plan, and supplementary plantings may be warranted.</td>
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<td><strong>ACTION 5</strong></td>
<td><strong>NEW LOW-KEY LOOKOUT AND REST STOP, WEST</strong></td>
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<td>Formalise the existing informal vantage point near the Defence lands entrance, directly accessed from the existing management track past the water tanks (walker and cyclist access only). Provide platform table(s) and/or seating and wayfinding and orientation information (with low-key shade if required) at this low-elevation vantage point offering attractive views westwards over West Wodonga to Federation Hill and the Hunchback Hill Complex. Design around existing trees and locate to avoid adverse impacts on landscape/scenic values.</td>
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<td><strong>ACTION 6</strong></td>
<td><strong>ADDITIONAL REVEGETATION MEASURES, LOWER WESTERN SLOPES</strong></td>
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<td>Reinforce and extend the existing revegetation plantings downslope (west and north-west) of the water tanks, predominantly using endangered Grassy Woodland community species. To occur in consultation with the Country Fire Authority and in accordance with relevant fire management and vegetation offset management plans.</td>
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ACTION 7  NEW LOW-KEY LOOKOUT AND REST STOP, NORTH

Provide limited low-key lookout and rest facilities (platform table(s) and/or seating) and wayfinding and orientation information at an easily accessed lookout point at the north-west corner of Bears Hill - providing attractive low-elevation views north over the White Box Rise Estate and Wodonga urban area to the Murray River and Albury. Locate to avoid intruding on the skyline and retain existing mature trees as well as undertaking supplementary amenity plantings if required. Walker access only.

ACTION 8  NEW WALKING TRACK AND TRAILHEAD, NORTH-WEST SLOPE AND WHITE BOX RISE ESTATE

Establish a walking track on the hill's north-west slope - contouring up/down and across a gently, moderately sloped spur with scattered trees, to link a new trailhead from the White Box Rise Estate to the proposed western crest walking track (see action 4) and low-elevation northern vantage point (see action 7). Clumped tree and vegetation plantings - using endangered Grassy Woodland community species - are warranted to supplement existing tree and vegetation cover and assist in screening possibly more exposed sections of this route. Ensure convenient connection into open space and urban pathway network of the White Box Rise Estate.

ACTION 9  NEW SMALL LOW-KEY ENTRY NODE, FROM DONNINGTON DRIVE

Establish a small low-key entry node on the low rounded spur east of the existing Donnington Drive entry, accessed off the existing management track from where local users can radiate out into other parts of Bears Hill. Provide seating, shelter and orientation information. This site is not obvious from wider residential areas but screen plantings (to residences to the north) would be warranted and amenity and shelter plantings required, using endangered Grassy Woodland community species. Realign fencing and entry gates as necessary.

ACTION 10  SHORT SHARED PATH ENTRY, FROM PEREGRINE PLACE

Establish a short section of unsealed shared path, for both walkers and cyclists, from the end of Peregrine Place (eastern cul-de-sac) to access the track and trail and management track network as well as the proposed low-key entry node (see action 9). This formalised access is for local users only and should not provide or encourage car parking.

ACTION 11  TARGETED REVEGETATION OF NORTH-WESTERN CREST AND SLOPES

Targeted revegetation (patch, infill or connectivity plantings) across the more open vegetated areas on the north-western crest and slopes of Bears Hill - using endangered Grassy Woodland community species. To occur in consultation with the Country Fire Authority and in accordance with relevant fire management and vegetation offset management plans.

ACTION 12  NEW SHARED PATH AND LOOP ROUTE, SOUTH-WESTERN SLOPE

Establish a new shared path (unsealed) for both walkers and cyclists - from the proposed low-key entry node (see action 9) and existing management track, passing downslope of the water tanks, then contouring up and across the hill's south-western slope to rejoin the management track at the proposed low-key vantage point and rest stop (see action 5). Combined with the existing management track, this new path would offer a small shared use (walkers and cyclists) loop route in the hill's south-west. Align to avoid impacts to existing vegetation, with screening plantings at places across the more exposed hillslope below the water tanks. (Dependent on council ownership of WREN lands at the western end of Bears Hill.)

ACTION 13  NEW WALKING TRACK AND STOCK ROUTE CONNECTION, NORTHERN SLOPE

Establish mid-slope walking track along the northern to north-western face of Bears Hill. From the proposed low-elevation northern vantage point (see action 7), and connecting to the proposed western crest and White Box Rise Estate link tracks (see actions 4, 8), running eastwards and gradually descending the slope, to connect with stock route midway along northern toe of Bears Hill (see opportunity A). Clumped plantings will be required to screen sections across more exposed slopes using endangered Grassy Woodland community species. (Final link would preferably be across Parks Victoria block which would require this agency’s agreement.)
FIGURE 1
Bears Hill Masterplan

Lookouts / rest stops
5, 7 new low key lookouts and rest stops

Walking Tracks
4 new crest walking track
8 new link and trailhead
13 new walking track to Stock Route

Priority Vegetation management for biodiversity, environmental repair and landscape value
8 reinforce and extend existing plantings
11 new plantings to conserve, protect and enhance habitat

Entry Node
9 new small low key entry node (sealing, shelter and orientation information)
Planning for Bears Hill will be a long-term and ongoing process. Not all the directions or possibilities for the hill’s greater use and enjoyment, or improved protection and management, can or need to be realised in the short term or foreseeable future.

Residential estates under development, or planned (as well as areas zoned for housing), along the hill’s margins will result in increasing population pressures for leisure and recreation use of those parts of the hill open to the public. Given the council’s comparatively small landholding on Bears Hill, and the masterplan’s (and strategy’s) aim to avoid any over-development of this area or diminution of its biodiversity and landscape values, most of the future opportunities at Bears Hill are reliant on council management of the adjacent planned WREN lands.

Such opportunities largely relate to an expanded track and trail network, and the potential for additional periphery activity or entry node locations. Providing direct access to the hills margins from developing estates will be a key consideration. These will be principally along the hill’s southern side (due to the Bandiana Military Area flanking much of the hill’s northern margin).

However, the northern stock route, running between the hill and the military area, also offers some additional use opportunities. Bears Hill is part of the proposed Four Hills Trail and this stock route has the potential to act as a critical link in such a multi-hill route to enable transit around those parts of Bears Hill now off limits to public access.

While to a degree uncertain and potentially some time into the future, it is nevertheless useful to identify these opportunities where possible. Shorter term actions can then be shaped to “set the scene” for these later possibilities if appropriate (or at least not pre-empt or exclude them). Similarly, future actions can be recognised to enable them to be brought forward should the hill’s planning and management situation change unexpectedly - such as through altered usage patterns or pressures, evolving or emerging user demands, changing community attitudes, further biodiversity information, or the availability of additional funding or resources.

Initiation of any of the opportunities must first review and consider the impacts arising from implementation of the priority actions listed in Section 2.2 above - including environmental, social and financial impacts.

However, given the additional pressures that can be predicted for use of Bears Hill, as a result of adjoining residential development, the council’s present landholdings in this area have limited capacity to sustainably accommodate this increased leisure or recreation demand. Significantly greater leisure and recreation use of Bears Hill, as a whole, will be reliant on additional areas becoming accessible for public use and enjoyment. Bears Hill also holds a “pivotal” or central location relative to the other Wodonga Hills and on any possible Four Hills Trail, as well as possible links to the Baranduda Range. Greater public access to more of Bears Hill would therefore hold considerable potential benefits for the Wodonga hills overall.

However, the timeframe for such increased public access and use remains uncertain and beyond the “foreseeable future” time horizon used for this masterplan.
3.2 OPPORTUNITIES FOR CONSIDERATION

Possible opportunities to consider in the next stage of master planning for Bears Hill, or in the event of changing circumstances, are broadly described below and shown, indicatively only, on Figure 3.

A. The existing stock route along the northern toe of Bears Hill, from the eastern end of the White Box Rise Estate and Parks Victoria block east to Tooles Rd, could be signposted and promoted as a shared route for both walkers and cyclists. This would require confirmation of the land tenure (including any lease/licence arrangements) and status of this section of the stock route to ensure that it is open and available for public access and use. This route should also be conveniently accessible from, and preferably connected to, the planned path and open space network of the White Box Rise residential area. This connection would play a critical part in supporting development and use of any possible Four Hills Trail - enabling transit through or around Bears Hill (in conjunction with other existing or proposed tracks) pending additional areas of the hill being made available for public access/transit or use.

B. When WREN lands at the western end of Bears Hill come into council ownership a new shared path (unsealed) suitable for both walkers and cyclists could be established - connecting from the proposed shared path below the water tanks (see action 12), down and across an open grassed slope, to the existing Perimeter Fire Trail north of the Wattle Glen and Wattle Views Estates. Clumped tree and vegetation plantings would be warranted for further screening and to improve habitat on this largely cleared parcel.

C. A new shared path, passable for walkers and cyclists, could be progressively established running west-east through the (future) WREN lands along Bears Hill’s southern foot (as and when these areas come into the council’s ownership). This path could extend from the existing Perimeter Fire Trail north of the Wattle Glen and Wattle Views Estates east to Martins Rd. This link could potentially be incorporated into planning for the adjacent residential estates as these are planned and developed through hillside open space areas, as perimeter pathways, or along Perimeter Fire Trails (if/where proposed). The extension of this path should coincide with the progressive residential development along the hill’s southern side.

D. There is longer term potential for a shared path (as compacted gravel or concrete), for walkers and cyclists, along the shoulder of Martins Rd, from the junction with the southside WREN lands corridor and proposed shared path (see Opportunity C), north-east to possible future council lands (and road reserve, if included under the council’s management) on the south-eastern end of Bears Hill. This opportunity is dependent on council ownership of WREN lands, and possibly other areas, in the hill’s south-east.
Figure 2: Bears Hill – opportunities for consideration

Legend - existing
- Walking only pathway
- Shared path
- Management tracks suitable for shared use
- Unsuitable road
- Wodonga City Council managed
- Crown Land (PAW managed)
- Commonwealth of Aust.
  (Dept of Defence owned & managed)
- Parks Victoria managed
- Other sites and current WREN
- Future WREN (Land at present in private ownership)
- Future WREN (Land at present in private ownership (Wilde Bears Hill) planning reserve)

Possible shared paths
(refer sample photos for conceptual ideas)

Concept only
APPENDIX 1

OBJECTIVES AND GUIDING PRINCIPLES

Master planning of the Wodonga Hills has been guided by the seven management objectives and related set of guiding management principles applying to all the Wodonga hills.

As described in the strategy, the eight objectives that shape planning for the Wodonga Hills encompass:

1. Sustainable management and enjoyment;
2. Biodiversity and habitat values;
3. Aboriginal cultural heritage values;
4. Visitor, neighbour and community safety;
5. Landscape and scenic values;
6. Accessibility, connection and integration;
7. Leisure, recreation and tourism; and,
8. Awareness, appreciation and understanding.

Each of these eight objectives, supported by a set of guiding principles, establish the preferred approach or “decision framework” to management and use of the hills.

A set of overall actions provide directions and guidelines for key planning and management challenges or issues that are likely to be common across all hills.

These are detailed in full in the strategy.