

PRE-CHALLENGE TASK – AUSTRALASIAN MANAGEMENT CHALLENGE

TEAM: “CITY SPIRIT”

COUNCIL: DEVONPORT CITY COUNCIL, TASMANIA

PROJECT: MERSEY BLUFF PRECINCT – “TAKING THE NEXT STEP”

LINK TO YOUTUBE VIDEO: <https://youtu.be/sBOPO-f4Fgo>

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MERSEY BLUFF PRECINCT – “TAKING THE NEXT STEP” PROJECT

OBJECTIVE

To determine future actions that will ensure the strategic development and protection of the “Mersey Bluff Precinct”.

RELEVANCE TO COUNCIL’S PLANS & POLICIES

Council's Strategic Plan 2009-2030:

Strategy 2.3.4 Provide accessible and sustainable parks, gardens and open spaces to appropriate standards

BACKGROUND

The Mersey Bluff precinct ('precinct') encompasses an area of approximately 20 hectares. The precinct, located to the north of the Devonport CBD, can best be described as a mixed-use community space with supporting historic and contemporary infrastructure. The area is renowned for its cultural and historical significance.

This unique headland features a lighthouse and Tiagarra Aboriginal Culture and Art Centre; Devonport's primary swimming beach, Surf Club building with two tenanted restaurants; a playground, skate park, caravan park, walking paths and outdoor public spaces. As a result, the precinct is enjoyed by a diverse range of users.

Devonport City Council ('Council') has ownership of part of the land and has a long-term lease with the Tasmanian Government for the balance land to enable its ongoing management and development.

Historically, development at the precinct has been somewhat spasmodic with a noticeable lack of strategic direction. The Mersey Bluff Caravan Park has been the subject of numerous concept plans in the past but due to financial constraints and site limitations, further development in the precinct has not occurred.

The precinct is popular with recreation users with the playground and skate park experiencing high-usage in the summer months. There are regular fitness training and sporting events such as surf carnivals, Australian triathlon series and other water sports taking place. Over 200 people gather each week for the “Park Run” which is a free 5 kilometre timed run for people of all fitness levels with the event commencing and finishing at the precinct.

The area adjacent to the precinct incorporates various sporting activity with playing fields used for hockey, soccer, touch and junior football.

A concern which has been raised with Council on several occasions is the perceived lack of parking within the precinct, particularly during the summer months when both the restaurants, surf club and caravan park experience increased activity and visitation. Council attempted to address the issue with a car park extension occurring within 12 months of the new surf club building being completed.

There is a clear need for Council to continue to plan and develop its assets in the precinct to cater for continued growth. In looking to develop a plan for the precinct's future, Council is seeking guidance for future actions that will ensure the precinct remains of high value to Devonport as well as protecting its natural, cultural and heritage values.

PROCESS

The City Spirit Project Team ('Project Team') was selected by Council to determine the future direction of the precinct. The Project Team developed a brief and submitted it to Council's Executive Leadership Team (“ELT”). This was subsequently endorsed by ELT on behalf of Council.

It was determined in the first instance that a community engagement process was required and as part of this, a small but diverse group of key users and community members were interviewed and asked to outline their current use of the precinct, any perceived issues and future desires for this popular and culturally significant area.

Council's Community Engagement Plan checklist was used to identify the stakeholders, the questions required to draw out any issues and perceptions of the area, and how the engagement would ultimately be presented to Council. The Project Team's aim being that it would provide some initial anecdotal evidence as to whether the area is suitable as is or whether further work is required with stakeholders around the use and development of the precinct.

The identified key users and community members included; a local couple; member of a fitness group; restaurant operators; event organiser; Tiagarra Aboriginal Culture and Art Centre Board member; a mother of two young children; and representatives of the Devonport Surf Life Saving Club. All those engaged were asked the same three questions and their responses recorded. This was then compiled into a video for Council's use and to assist in considering the Project Team's recommendations (video can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/sBOPO-f4Fgo>).

A summary of the responses are detailed in the table below:

QUESTIONS	FEEDBACK
How do you use the Bluff precinct?	For daily walks and children's parties Fitness and relaxation Commercial operations (restaurants) which includes events as part of their operations Major events (music) For healing, connectivity to culture and background, aboriginal ceremonies Family activities (fishing, playground, skatepark, events) Conduct of surf club training and patrols Assisting with Triathlon and other water events
What do you believe to be the current issues, if any, concerning the Bluff?	Rubbish laying around Language/smoking at skatepark and surrounding area Preservation of the area's natural and cultural values Further development is a big risk to the area Severe lack of parking Lack of water fountains in children's areas Restricted by 'hard sand' and high tides Communication with other stakeholders Children's safety, Occupational Health and Safety, access issues to the beach Being able to function in the future as have had done in the past
What would you like to see here in the future?	Leave as is – developed perfectly for current use Beautiful views – maintain as is Up market accommodation at Caravan Park required Link between CBD and the Bluff precinct More support for events at the precinct Keep updating the playground equipment Install shading on grassed areas Ensure Tiagarra retained as a culture and tourist destination Keep the area family friendly Be careful not to hold too many events and ruin the natural surroundings Ensure protection of the cultural and natural aspects of the headland Interpretative walk/signage around the headland More events More landscaping

In summary, the feedback received could be divided into two distinct categories. Those who use the precinct for family activities, fitness reasons and/or attending events believe that the area is developed sufficiently to suit their needs. They enjoy the facilities and open spaces that exist there and do not foresee any great changes are required other than keeping it clean, tidy and accessible to all.

Users with a more commercial interest (restaurant operators/event organisers) believe that Council needs to continue to develop infrastructure (particularly around parking facilities) to cater for the growing demand and higher visitation during summer periods.

A main concern by all user groups however is that by increasing infrastructure in the area, it places a significant risk to the protection of the natural assets (fauna and flora as well as aboriginal sites on the headland).

RISK IMPLICATIONS

Any further community engagement processes with stakeholders of the precinct could create expectations of development that may not be undertaken for many years due to Council's financial constraints and/or conflicting project priorities.

CONCLUSION

The Mersey Bluff Precinct in its current form is an iconic and well utilised feature of Devonport, and to quote several stakeholders "*the jewel in Devonport's crown*". However, to ensure its ongoing success and sustainability, the Project Team's advice is that Council progress with developing an overarching 'Mersey Bluff Precinct Plan' to direct the precinct's future development whilst balancing protection of its unique assets and attributes.

The Project Team also concedes that wider community engagement is required to ensure consultation results reflect a more holistic representation of precinct user views and allows ideas and input from a wider pool of stakeholders. The feedback received during this process did not provide a clear enough mandate as to the community's desire for the area going forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Council receive the report from the City Spirit Project Team and:

1. Note the feedback provided during the Project Team's community engagement and include in future processes, where appropriate;
2. Commence an expression of interest process to identify suitable consultants to develop a "Mersey Bluff Precinct Plan" with funds to be included in Council's 2017/18 budget; and
3. Ensure that broader consultation, in line with Council's adopted community engagement processes, is undertaken as part of the development of the Precinct Plan.