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Tuesday, September 10, 2024

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Confused and debated

By Emily Waite

CHANGES to Mitchell Shire Council's Landscape Assessment Study (LAS), set to affect Significant Landscape Overlays (SLOs) in the region have been endorsed, but not without much confusion and debate.



SAY NO TO SLOs: Protect Our Farms attended August's Council meeting armed with signs in protest of poorly designed SLOs.

The endorsement follows months of protest from local group Protect Our Farms, a not-for-profit organisation seeking to protect farmers' lands, rights, and livelihoods from being affected by the proposed SLOs.

Their lobbying, which included partaking in 16 drop-in sessions, 112 written submissions, and 10 verbal submissions, aimed to prevent the proposed SLOs from blocking important farming activities such as regrowth removal, emergency works, and fire safety measures.

At the August Council meeting, Councillor Fiona Stevens addressed Council to provide two alternate motions to the LAS. The first was to endorse the LAS with 'subject to' conditions, and the second was to defer the endorsement until the new conditions had been assessed.

Cr Stevens noted such conditions should include exemptions relating to native vegetation and agricultural buildings, amendments to the SLOs objectives, and the undertaking of an impact study and broadened consultation.

After lengthy debate, the motion to endorse the LAS and its new conditions was passed, four votes to three. Councillors Nathan Clark,

Annie Goble, Rhonda Sanderson, and Stevens voted in favour of the motion, while councillors Bob Cornish, Rob Eldridge, and David Lowe voted against.

However, when speaking in response to Cr Stevens' original motion prior to the vote, Cr Goble stated she was 'uncomfortable advancing this item', and 'would like it to be deferred', suggesting she would be voting against, not in favour of, the motion.

Yet later, after the motion had been carried with a vote of her own and discussions around the substantive motion arose, Cr Goble stated she was 'confused' as to 'whether [she was] speaking to the right item.'

Cr Lowe echoed Cr Goble's confusion, asking what Council was discussing as they had 'already voted,' while Cr Eldridge expressed his disappointment at Council's handling of the matter.

Cr Clark then sought clarification from Director of Economy, Growth,

and Infrastructure Les Stokes on how the alternate would affect the endorsement of the LAS, who stated it would 'deliver on the intent of the SLO'.

However, Cr Eldridge was not satisfied, stating the process was 'horrendous'.

Cr Lowe shared his concerns.

"Endorsing it with conditions just turns into nonsense because we have no way of knowing whether those conditions will ever be applied or not," he said.

Cr Stevens responded by offering further clarification on her motion.

"We're endorsing the document to allow it to proceed to the next stage, not the wording of the document, per se," she said.

For the Protect Our Farms group, the endorsement was both good and bad news.

"The result represents a small step forward for affected farmers," they said.

"While Council finally made some important amendments after months of pressure, they did so unilaterally without directly engaging with us or seeking input on the amendments.

"Significant concerns remain about whether [the alternate motions] will be implemented effectively. At one point, there was even confusion among councillors about what they were voting on and what it meant, highlighting the problematic nature of endorsing something subject to such extensive and convoluted amendments."

However, Mitchell Shire Council Chief Executive Brett Luxford stated that all councillors had been thoroughly briefed on the proposal.

"Councillors are thoroughly briefed on all items that come before Council to ensure they are fully informed about the decisions they are being asked to make. The SLO project is no exception," he said.

"Due to the short time frame between the Glenaroua Land Man-

agement Group meeting on August 15 and the Council meeting on August 19, there was no opportunity for direct collaboration with Protect Our Farms. However, the next steps of this project will provide further opportunities for collaboration with Protect Our Farms.

"Council staff will now begin preparing the Planning Scheme Amendment documentation in line with the Council's resolution. A report is expected in early 2025, which will outline how the amendments have been incorporated, ensuring full accountability and transparency as we move into the next phase of this process."

To learn more about the LAS, visit www.mitchellshire.vic.gov.au/news/community-consultation-shapes-landscape-assessment-study. To learn more about Protect Our Farms, visit www.farmprotect.org.

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