

Comments on Draft Bellarine Peninsula Statement of Planning Policy

Thank you for the opportunity to make a submission on the draft Bellarine Peninsula Statement of Planning Policy.

Firstly we commend the Department for its efforts to recognize the importance of the Bellarine as a declared Distinctive Area and Landscape under the Planning and Environment Act.

We have lived on a rural land holding on the Bellarine for 22 years and during that time have seen incredible changes in the area, some good and some not so good. The attributes of the Bellarine understandably have led to increasing demand for housing in the area resulting in an increasing number of detrimental pressures on the environment.

It is critical to contain existing settlement boundaries to protect the natural assets and green areas between the various townships if the nature and character of the Bellarine is to be saved. The price paid for land used for agricultural purposes on the east side of Banks Road between Shell Road and the Bellarine Highway indicates a clear expectation by developers that this land will be made available for future housing. It is currently outside the Ocean Grove Protected Settlement boundary. This is not an isolated case and it is imperative that this expansion be prevented through the adoption of strong and effective controls that are not constantly undermined by decision makers, including VCAT. Further expansion will destroy the environment that has already attracted so many.

Greater levels of protection need to be given to areas of remnant vegetation such as the Ocean Grove Nature Reserve (OGNR). Such areas are rare on the Bellarine and they are under increasing pressure due to decisions to allow housing development to proceed in close proximity to them. This valuable environmental asset is now considered a fire threat and suggestions have been made that it should go. Of course fire safety measures are important, but there needs to be greater recognition of the importance of these biodiverse areas.

The efforts of many landholders across the Peninsula to protect pockets of remnant vegetation and to restore habitat through significant indigenous vegetation plantings over a period of years has been one of the positive outcomes in the rural landscape. However the ongoing destruction of roadside vegetation alongside areas to be developed for housing is inexcusable. Many of the trees remaining along the roadsides are old and provide habitat which cannot be replaced by new plantings that will take 20-50 years to provide similar value to native animals. This roadside vegetation destruction is exacerbated by the need for road widenings and clearing under powerlines. Where these “authorized” clearings take place, there should be a requirement for these authorities to undertake replacement plantings within the area (eg on the side of the road that is not under powerlines).

There is a movement afoot by landholders in the area towards regenerative farming practices. This is a different approach to agriculture from traditional farming methods, with a greater emphasis on the ecosystem as a whole, including a focus on soil health and water management among other things. One

of the aims is to lessen the effect of large scale soil disturbance and fertilizer use within the catchment. These efforts are often offset by the large scale clearing of topsoil and vegetation when housing development takes place. The significant changes to the water quality and flow created by such disturbance and by the increase in hard surfaces results in negative impacts on the area's waterways and Ramsar listed wetlands.

While the visions and objectives of the SPP sound good, much of the language used in the draft document does not inspire confidence that the recommendations will have much impact. Phrases such as "encourage sustainable development" and "discourage tourism development that is incompatible with landscape and environmental values" have been used in many documents, but have been largely ineffective in achieving positive outcomes.

At this time when food security, the effects of climate change and the acceptance of how important nature is to the well-being of humans and other animals, the SPP needs to provide a much stronger framework for the protection of green spaces used for agriculture and conservation on the Bellarine.