

Save Coomoora Reserve Coalition

MEDIA RELEASE ~ Spokesperson Damon Anderson
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State Government gives green light to bypass environmental protection

A devastating blow has just been dealt to *Coomoora Woodland Flora & Fauna Reserve* and environmental conservation in metropolitan Melbourne by the State Government. The Minister responsible for administering the *Environmental Effects Act 1978*, Justin Madden has decided that no Environmental Effects Statement (EES) is required for the Dingley Arterial Project. The Minister's decision gives VicRoads the green light to proceed with its plans to remove a substantial area of native vegetation in *Coomoora Woodland Flora and Fauna Reserve* in Keysborough; one of the few nature reserves in the City of Greater Dandenong, and one of the last remaining areas of native bushland in the south-eastern metropolitan region of Melbourne.

The Dingley Arterial Project ("Dingley Bypass") involves the construction of a four-lane, 3.5km dual-carriage extension of the existing Westall Road extension, from Springvale Road to the Dandenong Bypass. The Dingley bypass comprises two sections: a short 1.3 kilometre section between Springvale and Cheltenham/Perry Roads in Keysborough; and a longer 2.2 kilometre section between Cheltenham/Perry Roads and the Dandenong Bypass. The shorter section of the proposed bypass runs directly through the *Coomoora Woodland Flora and Fauna Reserve* (Melway 88, K6) and the adjoining strip of open grassland that includes Aboriginal cultural heritage sites and a wetland.

"The Minister's decision runs counter to environmental and community interests", according to Damon Anderson, spokesperson for the Save Coomoora Reserve Coalition (SCRC). Formed in September 2009, the SCRC is a coalition of residents from Keysborough and surrounding areas and members of community and environmental groups concerned about the negative impact of the shorter section of the Dingley Bypass on the environmental and cultural heritage values of Coomoora nature reserve and nearby Aboriginal cultural heritage places. The SCRC made a detailed submission to the Minister in mid-October to highlight the need for an EES. It argued that pushing the Dingley Bypass through Coomoora nature reserve would contravene the objectives of the *Flora and Fauna Guarantee Act 1988* (FFG Act), and that a comprehensive flora and fauna assessment is therefore required.

One of the main reasons the Minister gives for his decision is that the "project is unlikely to have significant effects on biodiversity values". Damon Anderson says, "The Minister has clearly been ill-advised. The VicRoads EES Referral and recommendation to the Minister, that no EES is required, was based on a seriously flawed, flora and fauna assessment conducted at a single point-in-time when most of the rare plant and bird species that inhabit Coomoora were dormant or absent. Had the survey been conducted in spring, the findings would have been vastly different. In the past few weeks, four rare native orchids have been in full bloom, but only one of them was recorded during the VicRoads' flora and fauna survey in winter. All four of these superb rare orchids grow only in the section of the nature reserve VicRoads plans to bulldoze". Like other plant families in the reserve, all four orchid species are protected under the FFG Act: *Acianthus pusillus* (Mosquito orchid); *Chiloglottis trapeziformis* (Dainty Bird orchid); *Dipodium roseum* (Hyacinth orchid); and *Pterostylus nutans* (Nodding Greenhood orchid).

Under legislative guidelines for deciding whether an EES is required, the Minister must take into account "the potential for significant adverse effects on individual environmental assets". Damon Anderson says, "Coomoora nature reserve is a native landscape and indigenous ecosystem of regional and metropolitan significance, as confirmed by several independent experts. Construction of the Dingley Bypass will destroy up to one half of this precious nature reserve, thereby decimating or endangering already threatened ecological communities and rare flora and fauna species. All of this was documented in our submission to the Minister, but he appears to have ignored or dismissed the evidence in favour of VicRoads' misleading and self-serving advice".

Coomoora Woodland was classified by the National Trust in 1984, due to its "regional and metropolitan significance" and "important scientific, recreational and educational values". The National Trust noted

that “in terms of botanical significance, diversity etc. the Coomoora woodland is of particular value (as) few areas of natural woodland remain throughout Melbourne”. The National Trust recommended that because “this area contributes to the heritage of Australia ... its preservation should be encouraged”. As a result of the National Trust classification, Coomoora nature reserve was saved from residential development in the mid 1980s. Damon Anderson says, “Rapid encroachment of urban development and the resulting loss and fragmentation of nature reserves in the region over the past two and half decades have markedly increased the value of this small, but significant, metropolitan nature reserve”.

Coomoora Woodland Flora and Fauna Reserve contains three Habitat Zones of “High” to “Very High” conservation significance, including two Ecological Vegetation Communities (Damp Sands Herb-rich Woodland and Plains Grassy Woodland) officially listed as “vulnerable” and “endangered” respectively in the Gippsland Plain Bioregion. These habitat zones and their fragile EVCs are located in the direct path of the Dingley Bypass between Springvale and Cheltenham/Perry Roads. The City of Greater Dandenong’s *Management Plan for Coomoora Woodland Reserve*, prepared in early 2009 by environmental consultants, states that: “The area within the VicRoads freeway reserve ... supports some of the most intact and diverse native vegetation in the reserve”.

Among the 13 threatened fauna species that definitely or potentially occur in the area are: the Swift Parrot, which is listed as “endangered” at both national and state level; the Growling Grass Frog, which is listed as “endangered” in Victoria and “vulnerable” nationally; the Glossy Grass Skink, which is listed as “near threatened” in Victoria; and the Grey-headed Flying-fox, which is listed as “vulnerable” nationally under the *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*, and in Victoria where it is protected under the FFG Act.

Under the EES guidelines, the Minister is also required to consider “the range and complexity of potential adverse effects”. Damon Anderson says, “This key criterion has been overlooked by the Minister. Even VicRoads conceded in its EES Referral to the Minister that there would be habitat loss and fragmentation; damage to trees and understorey vegetation; weed and pathogen invasion; erosion of soil and ground conditions, and increased dust. Other adverse environmental impacts with complex effects, such as changes to hydrological conditions in the nature reserve, were ignored by VicRoads”.

Another reason the Minister gives for his decision is that the “reservation for this section of the Dingley Arterial Project has been long established”. The State Government set aside a tract of land for road construction about 40 years ago. Damon Anderson says, “This is true, but the native vegetation was there 400 years and more ago when the Bunurong people owned and cared for this land. Community attitudes and priorities have also changed since the 1960s. Back then we used leaded petrol and built roads regardless of their environmental impact. Climate change makes such practices unacceptable now. We must not continue repeating the mistakes of the past. We have to plan for the future and protect our children’s inheritance. Let’s ask them if they want a nature reserve or another road.”

The Minister states in his decision that “there is no realistic alternative alignment available for the Dingley Arterial that would warrant investigation”. Damon Anderson says, “This is simply not so. VicRoads has identified three alternatives, including tunnelling under Coomoora reserve, shifting the road southwards through existing factories, and enhancing existing roads to avoid the nature reserve. Each of these options is as viable and cost-effective as laying 1.3 kilometres of asphalt through the nature reserve at a cost of around \$74.6 million. Yet the Minister is prepared to sacrifice a unique and irreplaceable metropolitan nature reserve simply because a road was planned there forty years ago.”

VicRoads claims that the Dingley bypass is a key link in the region’s transport infrastructure, and that any change to the proposed route would compromise its supposed benefits. Damon Anderson disputes these claims: “In fact, there would be no net gain or improvement in traffic flow from building the shorter section of the bypass; as there would be no reduction in the number of signalised intersections in the section between Springvale and Cheltenham/Perry Roads. Moreover, the bypass will only allow traffic to travel at 80 kilometres per hour, which is no faster than the existing speed limits along Springvale and Cheltenham Roads. In other words, the VicRoads bypass offers nothing more than what already exists, but will sacrifice a valuable nature reserve and cultural heritage sites for the sake of laying a 1.3 kilometre section of asphalt.”

According to Damon Anderson, “Coomoora nature reserve is an important community asset that will be lost if the Dingley Bypass is built. Coomoora is a natural oasis and tranquil retreat in a rapidly

industrialising area. It's used for educational purposes by local schools who conduct classes in biology, ecology and environmental conservation on site. It's also used by local residents and others for passive recreation, including bushwalking, bird-watching, photography and other nature appreciation activities. As one of the few remaining green spaces in the region, it counterbalances the adverse health effects of pollution, overdevelopment and environmental degradation, and enhances the quality of air, water and life in general. As a green oasis in a brown industrialised desert, Coomoora nature reserve makes a significant contribution to reducing our carbon footprint and helps address the serious problem of climate change”.

The Save Coomoora Reserve Coalition is urging local residents and other concerned members of the public to contact State Ministers and their local MPs to insist that an EES be conducted. Damon Anderson said, “Unless we make our voices heard now and take urgent steps to protect our valuable nature reserves and heritage, they will be lost forever. This is our last chance to preserve this valuable community asset in its present state for the well-being of current and future generations”.

For media inquiries, please contact:

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The rare, FFG-protected *Dipodium roseum* (Hyacinth orchid) flowering now in
Coomoora Woodland Flora & Fauna Reserve

