

7.3 HOCKEY FEASIBILITY STUDY UPDATE - MCDONALD RESERVE

Director Community, Eamonn Fennessy

Community Wellbeing

Officer Recommendation

That Council:

1. Endorses the current design for sporting, active recreation and transport options at McDonald Reserve (Attachment 1) for public exhibition during February and March 2025.
2. Notes the community engagement which has taken place to date regarding designing sporting facilities at McDonald Reserve (Attachment 2) and thanks the community for their feedback.
3. Refers the \$3.5 million required to deliver Stage 1 of the project to the 2025/26 Council budget process for consideration.
4. Notes indicative costs to deliver Stage 2 of the project are upwards of \$10 million for further consideration in future budgets.
5. Requests a further report to Council in April 2025, incorporating the final design, potential staging options and any additional budget implications that arise following public exhibition.

REPORT

Executive Summary

In 2021, the Brunswick Hockey Club approached Council seeking support for the construction of a second synthetic hockey pitch. Council resolved in June 2021 to commission a feasibility study to investigate and identify a suitable location.

The feasibility study was considered by Council in September 2022 and Council noted that McDonald Reserve Coburg was the preferred site for a second hockey pitch in Merri-bek. Council also resolved to receive a future report on the consultation and benefits of a phased approach to facility development which would allow the construction of a hockey field and the installation of temporary facilities.

In 2023 Council conducted a feasibility into appropriate locations for a second Hockey Pitch in the Merri-bek municipality. Many locations were considered, McDonald Reserve was deemed the best location primary due to the sub surface condition and location.

Council worked with key stakeholder groups and a proposed design was developed and was supported by sporting clubs, and Coburg High School for officers to move forward with wider community consultation in late 2024. Council conducted a range of community consultation sessions and Conversations Merri-bek was open for a 4-week period to facilitate community feedback. The findings of this consultation are discussed further in this report.

The feedback from this consultation has been considered within the revised design and approach for public exhibition which this report is recommending to Council.

Previous Council Decisions

Hockey Feasibility Study – 14 September 2022

That Council:

1. *Notes the Brunswick Hockey Club Second Hockey Field Feasibility Study, at Attachment 1, and supports in-principle the provision of a second field for the Brunswick Hockey Club.*
2. *Notes that Hockey is a growing sport particularly amongst gender and culturally diverse communities, in particular South Asian communities and international students, which form a large component of our growing community.*
3. *Notes that Parker Reserve North Coburg and McDonald Reserve Coburg are recommended by the feasibility study as possible sites for a second hockey field, and supports in principle McDonald Reserve Coburg as the preferred site subject to further detailed site investigation, including of industrial land through the current open space review, community engagement with other clubs using the reserve, Coburg High School, nearby residents and people who use the reserve for dog walking and passive recreation and funding availability.*
4. *Notes the Hockey Feasibility Study's estimated capital costs and that more detailed cost planning will be required based on site conditions, potential staging of works and further efficiencies in delivery in consultation with users of the reserve.*
5. *Notes that Hockey is played on synthetic grass fields with recyclable options and that Merri-bek council is in the process of reviewing the environmental sustainability of different sports playing surfaces.*
6. *Council resolves to receive a future report on the consultation and benefits or otherwise of a phased approach that could allow the construction of the hockey field and the installation of temporary facilities in the first phase, followed by a permanent pavilion in subsequent phases.*
7. *Notes that the North Coburg Rebels Baseball Club has year-round allocation at Parker Reserve.*

Developing a policy regarding sports playing surfaces in City of Merri-bek – 10 August 2022

That Council:

1. *Requests a report and development of a policy on managing our sports field surfaces in particular, and open spaces surfaces more generally, that gives consideration to our stance on the Climate Emergency, Integrated Water Management, Urban Heat Island Effect and our goal of zero waste by 2030, including:*
 - a) *Consideration of the triple bottom line principles of environmental, social and financial sustainability including new and emerging natural turf and soil management, soil organic carbon sequestration or carbon sink potential options and best practice turf management.*
 - b) *Consideration of the impact of other synthetic surfaces being used by other land users within the municipality (e.g., schools) on community wellbeing.*
 - c) *Tabling a report to Council by 30 June 2023, given the breadth and complexity of the imminent Open Space Strategy Review.*
 - d) *Noting the process will follow Council's consultation and engagement processes with the community, including tools like Conversations Merri-bek, and submissions and throughout review process.*

Feasibility study for a second hockey pitch in Merri-bek – 9 June 2021

That Council:

- 1. Undertakes a feasibility study to identify a suitable location for a second synthetic/hybrid hockey pitch including all surface options within Merri-bek which would include a triple bottom line - environmental, social and economic - assessment of the pros and cons for the different playing field surfaces options.*
- 2. Receives a report to determine whether Merri-bek has a suitable location for the establishment of a second synthetic/hybrid hockey pitch in Merri-bek.*
- 3. Refers the funds required (\$40,000) to action this resolution to the 2021/2022 budget for consideration.*

1. Policy Context

This report aligns with key policy documents:

- Community Vision 2021-2031 (Theme 3: A Healthy and Caring Merri-bek and Theme 4: Spaces and Places in Merri-bek)
- Council Plan 2021-2025 (Strategy 3.3: Ensure Merri-bek residents are more active more often at all stages of life by providing a diverse range of accessible and affordable recreation opportunities that reflect our diverse community and develop and maintain partnerships to enhance participation options).
- Sport and Active Recreation Strategy 2020
 - Increase participation by Merri-bek residents in sport and active recreation and foster strong relationships with local recreation clubs, associations, peak bodies and government agencies
 - Ensure an adequate supply and distribution of good quality sporting infrastructure used in the most effective and efficient manner possible.
- Sportsground Surfaces Policy 2023 - this Policy outlines Council's approach to the management of our sports grounds and considers the triple bottom line principles of environmental, social and financial sustainability.

2. Background

The Brunswick Hockey Club was established in 1923, making it one of the oldest sporting clubs in the municipality. The club is also one of Melbourne largest hockey clubs with over 450 members with an affordable fee structure that encourages participation from many parts of the community. Since 2008 the Brunswick Hockey Club have been playing at Brunswick Secondary College synthetic hockey pitch which was constructed by Merri-bek City Council in partnership with the Department of Education and Training Victoria. The club leases two player changerooms and one umpire changeroom from the school. In 2017 the changerooms were modified to create a small canteen and small storeroom.

These modifications were fully funded by the club. The synthetic field was refurbished by Council in 2018. The club has enjoyed considerable growth particularly in the junior and women's sections. Due to continued growth in player numbers the existing synthetic hockey pitch is now at full capacity for training, matches and active community programs.

In 2021, the Brunswick Hockey Club approached Council seeking support for the construction of a second synthetic hockey pitch within the Municipality. Council resolved in June 2021 to commission a feasibility report to investigate and identify a suitable location.

The feasibility study was considered at the September 2022 Council meeting with the recommendation that Council, in principle, note that McDonald Reserve was the preferred site for a second Hockey pitch in Merri-bek. Council also resolved to receive a future report on the consultation and benefits of a phased approach which would allow the construction of a hockey field and the installation of temporary facilities.

In 2023, Council conducted further investigations into the feasibility for a second Hockey Pitch at McDonald Reserve. McDonald Reserve is already a popular place for structured and non-structured sport with tennis courts, wide open space and a popular place for dog walking. Council worked with the current users of McDonald Reserve including four sporting clubs: The Brunswick Hockey Club, East Coburg Tennis Club, Brunswick Juventus Football Club and Brunswick Cricket Club, alongside discussions with Coburg High School.

Council worked closely with these sporting groups to create a concept for that that includes the following:

- A hockey pitch
- Additional tennis courts and dedicated pickleball courts
- Open space and seating to continue to support soccer training and recreation
- Sports lighting to suit both hockey and soccer
- A new shared tennis and hockey pavilion and storage
- Upgraded walking trails
- Additional site parking and strategies to address child drop off zones

A design was achieved and was approved by the sporting clubs, and Coburg High School for officers to move forward to wider community consultation in late 2024. It is proposed that this design would be a staged implementation beginning with the hockey pitch.

Stage one includes:

- A Hockey Australia approved hockey pitch and fencing
- Lighting for both the hockey pitch and the school oval. Noting the school oval would require training lighting levels only, not for competition
- A shelter for spectators, parents and to also house storage of some equipment from the clubs

Stage two includes:

- Additional tennis courts and dedicated pickleball courts that would also be the Hockey warm up zone
- Open space and seating to continue to support soccer training and informal recreation
- A new shared tennis and hockey pavilion
- Upgraded walking trails
- Additional site parking and strategies to address child drop off zones and other close-proximity parking opportunities

Community engagement on the draft design occurred in November and December 2024 and included a conversations Merri-bek page, a community pop-up session and attendance at the Coburg Farmers Market. The findings of this consultation are discussed further in this report.

Officers have considered the community feedback received during the consultation and this is reflected in the revised design which is recommended for public exhibition and any further community feedback between February-March 2025, prior to returning to Council for final consideration in April 2025.

3. Issues

In November 2023, Council endorsed the Sportsground Surface Policy. Our community's growing demand for access to quality public open spaces, driven by population growth, urban densification, and increased diversity of sport participants, necessitates crucial decisions about the types of playing surfaces and management practices that can accommodate this need to be made by Merri-bek City Council. In the deliberation of a second synthetic Hockey field in Merri-bek, this policy provided the framework for the decision regarding the development of this Facility Design Plan.

Climate emergency and environmental sustainability implications

Competition field hockey is only played on synthetic grass fields, in line with Hockey Australia Hockey turf and field standards. The following mitigations will be considered within the final design.

Microplastic Mitigation

- Use non-microplastic alternatives for infill – Instead of traditional rubber crumb, organic options infills like cork, coconut husk, or wood fibres, which break down naturally and do not contribute to plastic pollution will be incorporated
- Install containment systems – Fitting edge barriers, drainage filters, and sediment traps will prevent microplastics from leaving the pitch and entering waterways
- Regular maintenance practices – Implementing best-practice maintenance strategies, such as proper brushing and infill top-ups, will ensure minimal displacement of synthetic fibres and infill material

Sustainable Infill Alternatives

- Cork and coconut blend – A natural, biodegradable alternative that provides shock absorption and retains moisture, reducing heat levels on the field
- Olive pit granules – A sustainable by-product of olive oil production, offering durability and reduced heat absorption
- Silica sand – While not organic, this infill is an inert, non-toxic alternative that minimises the risk of microplastic pollution

Cooling and Water Conservation

- Use organic infill, which holds moisture and stays cooler than rubber-based options
- Incorporate surrounding tree planting and shading structures to reduce surface temperatures
- Explore irrigation systems that utilise recycled or harvested rainwater for pitch cooling

End-of-Life Considerations

To further enhance sustainability, Council will plan for the responsible disposal or recycling of synthetic turf at the end of its lifespan. This includes partnering with manufacturers who offer take-back programs or repurposing turf will ensure materials are diverted from landfill.

Human Rights and Gender Considerations

Whilst a formal Human Rights assessment was not undertaken, the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities (2006) were considered in the preparation of this project, specifically in relation to:

Right to Participate in Public Life (Section 18): The introduction of further sporting and active recreation facilities will enable greater participation in sport and general active and healthy living pursuits.

Right to Equality (Section 8): Further decisions regarding the built form and environment will be made without discrimination, ensuring the design and use of the facilities and area considers all community members equally, regardless of age, gender, socioeconomic status, or disability.

Gender equity is a critical aspect of planning community sports infrastructure in Victoria. A synthetic hockey pitch and associated facilities will provide a platform for increased participation by women and girls in organised sports, aligning with Merri-bek's commitment to improving gender equity in sport and active recreation. The design for the future multipurpose pavilion will incorporate features such as gender-neutral change rooms, safe lighting, and seating areas to encourage diverse participation.

4. Community consultation and engagement

In 2024, Council worked with the current users of McDonald Reserve including, The Brunswick Hockey Club, East Coburg Tennis Club, Brunswick Juventus Football Club, Brunswick Cricket Club, and Coburg High School to develop the design for current and future demand. Council then went out for wider community consultation on the concept design.

Conversations Merri-bek for the McDonald Reserve Facility design plan was open from November 14, 2024, to December 13, 2024. In addition to this, Council completed a local letter box drop of approximately 500 local residents with details about this project. Council received 188 contributions into Conversations Merri-bek.

Council also delivered a community pop up session on November 24, 2024. This saw close to 200 people attending. In addition, Officers attended a Community Pop-up at Coburg Farmers Market on December 7, 2024, with great attendance and feedback at this event.

More detailed community consultation information can be found in Attachment 2.

A summary of community feedback includes:

Prioritise Hockey Facilities

- Address the community's emphasis on hockey by allocating resources to build or upgraded pitches
- Engage with local hockey club to ensure proposed solutions meet their specific needs

Improve Parking and Accessibility

- Incorporate designated parking areas into design plans and create innovative parking and drop off solutions
- Conduct a traffic impact assessment to mitigate potential congestion

Promote Sustainability

- Integrate green spaces and sustainable practices for the environment into infrastructure plans
- Ensure there is microplastic run off solutions, and organic infill

Update existing Organised Sport facilities

- Upgrade existing tennis courts and add additional courts

5. Officer Declaration of Conflict of Interest

Council officers involved in the preparation of this report have no conflict of interest in this matter.

6. Financial and Resources Implications

Cost estimates for the delivery of stage 1 is \$3.5 million including future cost escalations. Stage 1 of the project includes:

- A Hockey Australia approved hockey pitch and fencing
- Lighting for both the hockey pitch and the school oval. Noting the school oval would require training lighting levels only, not for competition
- A shelter for spectators, parents and to also house storage of some equipment from the clubs

This report is seeking to refer the \$3.5 million additional budget required to deliver stage 1 of the project to the 2025 – 2026 Council budget process for consideration.

High level estimates for the cost to deliver stage 2 of the project is upwards of \$10 million, including future cost escalations. This would include:

- Additional tennis courts and dedicated pickleball courts that would also be the Hockey warm up zone
- Open space and seating to continue to support soccer training and passive recreation
- A new shared tennis and hockey pavilion
- Upgraded walking trails
- Additional site parking and strategies to address child drop off zones and other close-proximity parking opportunities

The delivery of stage 2 is not feasible within the 2025 – 2029 budget timeframe without delaying existing capital works projects. This report is recommending that this cost is noted and considered in future years budget deliberations.

7. Implementation

Subject to the outcome of this Council report, officers will commence detailed design and tender specifications in readiness for the future capital works program.

Attachment/s

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| 1 | McDonald Reserve Concept Design V2 2025 | D25/55240 |
| 2 | McDonald Facility Design Plan_Community Consultation and Engagement Report | D25/58350 |