

Welcome Ladies and Gentlemen

I'm here today to talk about the Maleny Community Precinct. I want to discuss where we've come to, spend a little bit of time talking about how we got here, and where we might go from here.

I'd like to say, before I begin, that some people like to paint this as a fight about trees versus golf, or trees versus horses. Green Hills is not about that. Our interest is in the environmental values of the land, plain and simple, nothing more.

The Precinct is a large enough and an extraordinary enough piece of land that, if properly managed, it can encompass the aspirations of everyone.

For those of you who are not quite sure what the Precinct is, I'll summarise. It's a piece of formally dairy country, 124 ha in size. It's almost adjacent to town, the boundary at that point being only 400m from the Riverside Centre; it is directly adjacent to Cloudwalk. The northern boundary runs along North Maleny Road and Obi Lane. The rest of the boundary, about 5kms of frontage, is formed by the Obi Obi Creek.

A Master Plan, completed in 2010, divided the land into various uses - a golf course, a heritage area including a revitalised Pattemore House, sports fields, Barung Landcare's nursery, parklands, and walking trails, including a pathway to Gardners Falls. In amongst it all, there are wetlands, and, snaking along the banks of the Obi Obi, protected environmental areas.

This Plan was never locked in hard and fast – site work was estimated to take 20 years and it was always understood that there would be modifications and changes over time. It was also understood that the project would have to be staged, meaning that some aspects of the Plan would, in effect, take priority over others.

The role of decision-maker was taken by Sunshine Coast Council, which is also the owner of the site, and the manager of the project.

Maleny community expected that the process followed by Council in deciding what to prioritise, what changes to make, would be transparent, reasoned, based on

agreed principles, supported by sound evidence, clearly explained and regularly communicated.

This has not occurred.

Council did establish a representative group to advise it on the Precinct – but this is not the same as, nor a substitute for, quality process.

One of the effects of this situation is that the development of the Precinct in the three or so years since 2010 has been beset by widespread bewilderment. This probably began with Council's decision to prioritise the northern part of the site (golf and heritage) over the part nearer to town (walking trails and parkland), even though the latter had been overwhelmingly favoured in a community poll.

Bewilderment very easily translates to resentment and the lesson to be drawn, surely, is not that Maleny is full of difficult people, as some like to pretend, but that when decisions appear to be made in a cavalier fashion, they reap difficult consequences.

As to the changes that have been made to the Master Plan: Here are some:

Barung Landcare agreed to lease a site on the north eastern part of Precinct. They then agreed to another site and have since re-located to a third, to make room for a heritage trail, and an access road and car park mainly useful at this stage to patrons of the golfing range.

Barung's latest home is that of the proposed Aquatic Centre which has withdrawn from the Precinct to a site near the Primary School due to the expense of building a swimming pool on solid rock.

Sports and Recreation, representing 39 different groups, has approached Council about relinquishing their agreement to lease in favour of having their facilities at the showground and at Witta upgraded.

Sport and Recreation have also proposed that an equestrian group take over the land they were proposing to lease.

Sports and Recreation represent a large part of the Maleny community. Their lease would have provided space not only for various sporting activities and events but

also for general leisure. The dedication of the site to equestrian pursuits – quite apart from representing a reduction in community access – also threatens the integrity of the Obi Obi as a wildlife corridor, raising the issue of whether a more suitable site on the Precinct might be found.

But let me come back to that.

These changes are, as I said, par for the course. But somewhere in the last three years something more troubling has occurred, in our view: a denial or forgetting of the vision of what the Precinct is about.

The Vision Statement from the Master Plan states:

*The Maleny community Precinct will be a place for the whole community to enjoy.*

*It will become a unique sustainable community precinct of regional significance nestled in the hills of Maleny providing recreational, sporting, cultural, educational and ecological experiences.*

*Parallel to the community facilities will be the preservation and rehabilitation of environmental and historical areas of regional and state significance.*

*Defined by the Obi Obi creek and Blackall Range, this precinct will establish a best practice precedence of sustainable development for a community facility in south east Queensland and will reflect the sunshine coast Regional council's intent of becoming the 'most sustainable region in Australia - diverse, green and vibrant'.*

What this vision includes, at least inherently, if not explicitly, is the idea of the Precinct as a space of great value for the whole region, not just Maleny.

Let me remind you, this is a unique piece of land. It has particular environmental value – I'll come to that in a minute – but It's also a remarkable tourist attraction in the making. Walking trails, access to the creek, rainforest, wetlands. This is what people who visit the range are calling out for. At the moment 1.5 million people visit the Range each year, and rising. Mary Cairncross Park is groaning under the pressure. Council's off-shoot tourism body Suncoast Directions is pairing up with the

State Government to find iconic attractions on the Range to bring more people here – recognising that tourism is the single largest industry in the Hinterland – but everyone seems to be ignoring the Precinct and what it offers.

Green Hills have consistently put the environmental values of the land centre stage. We've also put our money and our work where our mouths are.

In order to pay for the rehabilitation and planting of environmental and open space land – which we've undertaken through our Memorandum of Understanding with Council – we have secured no less than \$200,000 from the Federal government, and another \$145,000 from other sources, \$54,000 from Council itself. This doesn't include the in-kind value of the thousands of volunteer hours donated by the community.

We also pushed vigorously for the inclusion of a wetland and rainforest area in the Master Plan, yielding \$3 million from Unity Water which is undertaking that aspect of the development as a convenient, environmentally sound way of spreading the outfall from its upgraded sewage treatment plan. The result will be about 17ha of rainforest and a network of trails.

This would not have happened except for Green Hills lobbying Council to make the land available.

The trouble is that the whole endeavour, our whole endeavour, to create wildlife corridors and creekside buffer zones is now under threat.

I do not think I need to give a lecture on the value of riparian zones to this audience. Suffice to say they are important for all sorts of reasons:

- they clean water coming off paddocks before it gets to the stream,
- they provide shade to the river keeping the water cooler so there's a higher dissolved oxygen count,
- they stop erosion, and
- they provide habitat for animals and birds and

- facilitate their movement.

The reason we were able to attract so much funding was that the Precinct is not simply important in itself, it is the missing link in the development of wider corridors that will enrich the biodiversity on the Range.

Downstream there's a reasonable riparian corridor flowing all the way to the dam and beyond. Upstream there are moves to expand these corridors, also in Bridge and Lawley Creeks and in the Mooloolah Catchment.

There is however a gap here on the Precinct. The Federal Government recognised the importance of planting this out. They were prepared to invest in our group to see it done.

Green Hills planned to plant a 40 metre zone of creekside vegetation - the same width required on housing estates that include a waterway. This width appeared on all earlier plans, including, I may say, the golf course plan.

When sports fields were mooted we had conversations with the principals and came to a compromise: we agreed that, no matter where the lease boundary fell, the corridor should be no less than 20 metres.

20 metres being the minimum practical width for such zones.

With a change of use from sports to horses, so to speak, this agreement seems to have disappeared, at least on the other side of the table.

Eighteen months ago, when it was first proposed that 'sports talk to horses', Green Hills made representation to be included in the negotiations. This same request was made on at least five other occasions to Council, including in a meeting with the Mayor attended by Council staff and our local member Jenny McKay.

This request was entirely ignored. About three months ago we were invited to view the site and were delivered a *fait accompli*: the riparian zone would be reduced in some places to a mere six metres. Six metres is six paces. It's room for one tree. It does not a wildlife corridor make. Not only is it wrong to suggest it does, the whole process around this is wrong.

But then some might say a lack of adherence to process has been endemic to the management of the precinct.

I do not intend to revisit the schmozzle which was the allocating of lease boundaries. Suffice to say it took a further eighteen months after the signing off of the Master Plan. It also ended up including a network of what are called 'Licence to Use areas', a term that has, just this last week, morphed into what is now called 'transitional zones'.

It doesn't matter what you call them; they are a legal fiction and nobody, lawyers included, can seem to understand what they mean, who they belong to or what for. What I do know is these zones were served up to Green Hills – despite our Memorandum of Understanding with the Council putting us at centre stage in this area – as another *fait accompli*. A place we weren't allowed to plant trees even if these same areas fell within the scope of our project.

Under a transparent project management process, one in which the the financial, environmental and practical value of each proposal were transparent and openly discussed this could not have occurred.

Similarly, efforts to discover the business case justifying the parameters of a lease, how much it will cost to develop, where the funds will come from, how it will be raised, and how long that is likely to take – have been confounded.

I am not anti-golf, but with the best will in world it is difficult to understand the business case for an 18-hole golf course at a time when the sport is declining and courses are closing.

Let us be clear, the facilities most people want, not just in Maleny, but nation-wide, statistically proven, are walking trails, gardens, open space, areas to have a picnic. Maleny itself, when questioned on the subject in a formal survey by Council, said that almost unanimously.

What is mystifying to the people of Maleny is the *process* that has led Council to focus on the least financially viable, the most physically challenging and expensive and unpopular options instead of going for the most popular, least expensive, most

environmentally sound ones; ones which, it just so happens also offer the best economic return to our business community.

Maleny expects Council to protect the banks of the major watercourse through the Precinct and the district. The creek needs protection, and according to every principle of decent management, it should be getting it.

According to the Master Plan's vision for the Precinct to provide *a best practice precedence of sustainable development* it is *obliged* to provide it.

SEQ Water, by the way, is spending millions of dollars trying to persuade landholders in the catchment to create buffer zones. If we can't persuade Council to do it on publicly owned land what chance do we have?

Green Hills has received funding to create a wildlife corridor. If we can't do that to best practice standards, we will not only breach our own principles, we will breach our agreement with the Commonwealth Government to use the funds as intended, and we will breach faith with the Maleny community.

We are not prepared to do this. We don't think you want us to.

At Green Hills we have shown ourselves capable of compromise. Time and again. We have shown ourselves patient. Time and again. But we will not compromise on this. We don't think you want us to and we want you to support our stance.

Thank-you.