

CM13.2. Lavington - Jindera Shared Path

DATE	17 June 2021	FIL REFERENCE	FIL11/01780
CONFIDENTIAL	No		
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Purpose of Report

To update Council on the progress of the joint working party established with Greater Hume Council to investigate options for the construction of a recreational path between Jindera and Lavington and seek endorsement for the inclusion of funding in the 2021/22 budget.

Background

In early 2010, AlburyCity worked with Greater Hume Council to investigate the possibility of constructing a recreational path between Jindera and Lavington. At the time, preliminary field assessments were undertaken by both Councils, and an indicative alignment for a 10km (3-metre-wide) path was identified located within the Urana Road Reserve. No further detailed investigations were undertaken, and in 2012 a joint working party was disbanded due to identified difficulties associated with constructing the trail.

Following renewed community interest in early 2019, Greater Hume Council resolved at its 17 July 2019 Council meeting to invite AlburyCity to reconvene a working party. A consequent Albury City Council report was presented in August 2019 seeking endorsement to reconvene a joint working party with Greater Hume Council to undertake a feasibility study and design for the construction of a path between Jindera and Lavington.

An invitation was extended to staff and elected representatives at both Councils to commit to this working party, with an aim to investigate the viability of such a project and progress to a shovel ready stage where grant opportunities could be pursued should they become available.

The working party consists of two Councillors from their respective Councils, as well as staff from relevant Engineering, Traffic and Environment teams. AlburyCity's elected representatives are Councillors Cohn and van de Ven.

In November 2019, a site visit for the proposed path was undertaken with representatives from both AlburyCity and Greater Hume Council. The working party convened three times to consider the constraints identified in the field visit, develop community consultation material, and formulate recommendations for the next steps outlined in this report.

Issues

During the site visit, significant constraints and potential environmental impacts were identified. Much of the alignment from Jelbart Road (in the Greater Hume Council area) to Lavington would be located within E2 Environmental Conservation and E3 Environmental Management zones. This area also contains White Box - Yellow Box - Blakely's Red Gum Grassy Woodland, which is listed as critically endangered under the *Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (EPBC Act) and the *Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016* (NSW) (BC Act). The vegetation present is also likely to support numerous threatened fauna species under both the EPBC Act and BC Act, such as Squirrel Gliders and Woodland Birds. The roadside reserves of Urana Road, from Jelbart Road into Lavington, are also considered to be "Significant Roadside Environmental Areas" by the NSW Roadside Environment Committee. Several sections have also been assessed and mapped as high value conservation areas in a recent survey/assessment of roadside corridors within the Albury Local Government Area (LGA).

In addition to significant environmental issues, other identified constraints such as traffic implications, safety, cost, and alignment options will need to be considered further, prior to proceeding to design and construction of a path. Due to the constraints identified, it is therefore proposed to undertake a feasibility study to establish whether the project is viable.

The working party proposed that Albury City Council and Greater Hume Council allocate \$25,000 each in the upcoming 2021/22 budget year to engage a suitably qualified consultant to undertake a preliminary feasibility study to establish whether the project is viable. This study seeks to identify potential alignments, outline further environmental and heritage study requirements (including cost estimates), consider safety and traffic implications and preliminary construction estimates. It should be noted that preparation of a feasibility study should only be done in partnership between Albury City Council and Greater Hume Council. Accordingly, a budget of \$25,000 was included in the draft budget adopted by Council for public exhibition on 26 April 2021.

A report was presented to the 10 May 2021 Council meeting to update Councillors on the recommendation from the Working Party to fund the feasibility study in the 2021/22 budget. This report generated discussion around the merits of the project, and Council voted not to note the report.

Following this meeting a further field assessment was undertaken by the Team Leader Environment and Service Leader Assets Sustainability and Environment to consider the possibility of a fully on-road option for the path. Several sections were identified where road widening would cause significant impact on the Grassy Box Gum Woodland, which is listed as Critically Endangered under the EPBC Act. A fully on-road solution would also have significant engineering costs to widen road culverts and areas of significant cut and/or fill and high safety risks with cyclists travelling adjacent to motorists. The conclusion from this assessment was that a feasibility study was still the best approach to fully understand the options and assess viability and impacts of the project.

Risk

- **Business Risk** – By undertaking a staged approach a more informed project scope can be developed that will assist in identifying costs, environmental impacts and value for money. This feasibility study will minimise business risk to Council.
- **Corporate Risk** – The project is consistent with outcomes identified in Albury 2030, specifically to improve pedestrian and cycling infrastructure and provide positive wellbeing outcomes for the broader regional community. However, the indicative alignment of the path is located within Significant Environmental Areas, and potential environmental impacts identified are not consistent with environmental outcomes outlined in 'An Enhanced Natural Environment.' While the feasibility study will acknowledge any potential environmental or heritage impacts at a broad level, further detailed environmental investigation and approvals will be required, should the study determine that the project should progress.
- **WHS and Public Risk** – There is currently no recreational path that links Jindera to Albury. Pedestrians and cyclists are forced to use the road verge (or road reserve) if they wish to travel between these destinations. The provision of a recreational off-road path would reduce the current conflict between pedestrians and cyclists with high-speed traffic that utilise this regional road.
- **Environmental Risk** – An initial site visit identified significant potential impacts associated with building an off-road trail between Jindera and Lavington. The area contains a Significant Roadside Environmental Area, where vegetation present is likely to consist of the critically endangered ecological community White Box - Yellow Box - Blakely's Red Gum Woodland and the area is likely to support habitat for numerous threatened species. Extensive environmental investigation will therefore be required in addition to the feasibility study.
- **Delivery Program Risk** – This project is not identified in the current four-year delivery program, but can be further considered post the proposed feasibility study.

Community Engagement

Significant community engagement was undertaken to develop the Community Strategic Plan – Albury 2030. Increasing the utilisation of pedestrian and cycle networks has been identified by the community as an important outcome and has consistently been identified as a priority in Community Satisfaction Surveys.

In December 2020, a 'Have Your Say' webpage was created and shared on both the AlburyCity and Greater Hume Council websites, as well as various social media platforms. This page provided general information about the project, key considerations (environmental issues) and linked users to the survey.

In total, 655 survey responses were received with key elements summarised as follows:

- support is very evenly split between the two Councils, with 90% of respondents supporting a feasibility study into the development of a shared path linking Lavington and Jindera;

- when asked what type of path should be considered, over 80% of all respondents believe any path should be off-road, with 33% supporting a hybrid (on and off-road) shared path and only 14% in support of an on-road option; and
- those who were opposed to the path raised poor utilisation, better projects to spend money on, and environmental issues as the primary concerns.

Conclusion

In November 2019, a working party consisting of staff and Councillors from AlburyCity and Greater Hume Councils was re-established to consider the possibility of constructing a recreational path between Jindera and Lavington. A site visit was undertaken which identified a number of considerations for the project including traffic, road safety, environmental and heritage.

Prior to progressing further with the project, the working group determined it was desirable to measure community support for undertaking a feasibility study for the proposed path from Jindera to Lavington. Results from the community engagement indicated 90% of survey respondents supported undertaking a feasibility study.

Given the results of the community survey, \$25,000 per Council (\$50,000 combined) was included in the draft 2021/22 budget to engage a suitably qualified consultant to undertake a feasibility study. This study will look at options for path alignment, identify further environmental and heritage studies that will be required for approvals (including estimates for costs of these studies) and preliminary construction estimates.

Following this meeting a further field assessment was undertaken by the Team Leader Environment and Service Leader Assets Sustainability and Environment to consider the possibility of a fully on-road option for the path. The assessment identified that there were still significant Engineering and Environmental challenges with a fully on-road option. The conclusion from this assessment was that to fully assess viability and impacts of the project a feasibility study would be required to determine the best alignment should Council wish the project to proceed.

Recommendation

That Council:

- a. Receives the update from the joint working party with Greater Hume Council for a Recreational Path between Jindera and Lavington; and
- b. Allocates \$25,000 in the 2021/22 Operational Plan to undertake a feasibility study for the future construction of a recreational path between Jindera and Lavington.