CM13.4. Murray River Experience - Wonga Wetlands Visitor Education and Experience Centre Project Re-scoping

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Purpose of Report

To seek Council's endorsement to re-scope the current Murray River Experience – Wonga Wetlands Visitor Education and Experience Centre (VEC) project and proceed with an alternative that will deliver an Interactive Cultural Landscape at Wonga Wetlands.

This revised approach will ensure a more sustainable long-term outcome for the precinct, better reflect current site usage, and reduce both operational and capital costs. It will also provide more accessible community facilities while minimising impacts on cultural heritage and the environment.

Background

In 2014, the Wonga Wetlands Tourism Product Development Master Plan (Attachment 1) aimed to increase visitor numbers by positioning Wonga Wetlands as a nature-based adventure destination capable of attracting overnight tourism to Albury. The Master Plan proposed a range of high-intensity adventure activities, including themed mountain bike trails, a rope and flying fox course, and overwater adventure towers. It also recommended development of a Visitor Education Centre (VEC) to support the broader Tourism Master Plan.

The proposed adventure activities were later deemed unviable due to concerns about the use of recycled wastewater for irrigation and the presence of recycled water within the wetlands. These activities were not sufficiently explored to assess their feasibility, cost, or long-term sustainability. They also presented potential public health risks and were incompatible with AlburyCity's Recycled Water Management Plan.

When the Regional Growth and Environmental Tourism Fund (RGETF) was released in 2017, the Wonga Wetlands VEC was added to Council's application to strengthen the funding case. However, at that stage, further work was still required on the building concept and subsequent operational needs and long-term viability.

A subsequent Business Plan prepared in 2022 (Attachment 2) confirmed that, without the broader suite of attractions envisioned in the original Master Plan, the VEC would not attract sufficient visitation. The facility was forecast to operate at an annual deficit of approximately $250,000, primarily due to staffing, utilities, and maintenance costs.

Since the project's inception, costs have increased substantially. The floodplain location requires complex foundations and specialised engineering, while archaeological investigations have uncovered Aboriginal artefacts, adding both cost and cultural management challenges. The estimated construction cost is now approximately $6.4 million, which is an increase of $5.3 million from the original $1.1 million estimate.

Issues

Due to cost estimate escalations within the design phase, and following on from a review of the original VEC proposal, Council officers were proactive in initiating fully internal, value management activities which have now resulted in the proposed alternative approach for an Interactive Cultural Landscape. This proposal (Attachment 3) meets community needs, respects Aboriginal cultural practices, and addresses environmental considerations, while remaining flexible and financially sustainable. Importantly, this re-scoped approach preserves the option for a future VEC, should visitation growth justify such an investment.

Site Usage by Visitors

The VEC building design, as originally proposed, included Council officer amenities, offices, and a bookable theatre with a public display area to be open on weekdays only. Quantitative data from installed visitor counters and observations from our Council officers, indicate that both school groups and other visitors come to Wonga Wetlands for the outdoor experiences which include walking the trails, observing wildlife, and using existing facilities such as toilets and BBQs. School groups primarily engage in outdoor environmental education, and they have limited need for indoor space.

Cultural Expectations

Engagement with Traditional Owners has consistently focused on landscape plans reflecting cultural practices such as cooking, yarning, and dancing in outdoor spaces. Throughout consultations with AlburyCity's Aboriginal Focus Group (AFG) during the detailed design phases of the original project, a stronger preference for interactive landscape and cultural connection featured rather than a building.

Status of Grant Funding

All commitments under the RGETF funding deed have been met, and the grant is now closed. The finalisation report for *RMSW1263 - Murray River Experience – Regional Growth Environment & Tourism Fund* has been accepted and the final payment received.

Proposed Alternative – Wonga Interactive Cultural Landscape

A key benefit of the Interactive Cultural Landscape is its accessibility. Unlike the VEC, which would have operated only during business hours, the landscape proposal enables year-round public access, including weekends and public holidays.

The landscape design will accommodate a wide range of uses. Yarning and dance circles will provide for cultural gatherings, performances, and ceremonies, while BBQ and picnic areas could support

family and community use. Walking paths and bush tucker gardens will offer recreational and educational opportunities integrated with the natural environment. Enhancing the Wiradjuri Campsite and extending walking tracks will strengthen the physical and interpretive connection between the Interactive Cultural Landscape and the Campsite.

The proposal may also provide stakeholder and Aboriginal participation opportunities that are consistent with Council's future Innovate Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP).

An existing historic cottage on site will be preserved and adapted for use as a visitor display space. Inspections have identified necessary maintenance and upgrade works. These costs, along with ongoing curation expenses, have been incorporated into the project budget to ensure the building remains suitable for exhibition and interpretation purposes.

Strategic Alignment

The alternative Interactive Cultural Landscape is a strategic investment that aligns with AlburyCity's Community Strategic Plan – Towards Albury 2050, by addressing the following key themes:

Theme One - A Growing Sustainable Economy

1.3 Albury offers and supports diverse and evolving tourism experiences.

1.3.1 Create and support authentic and engaging visitor experiences.

1.4 Albury is a nationally recognised place to do business, driving economic growth, circular economy and innovation.

1.4.5 Advocate and enable access to a broad range of educational opportunities at all levels.

Theme Two – An Enhanced Natural Environment

2.2 Albury embraces the cultural heritage of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

2.2.1 Protect, conserve and celebrate our natural, built and Aboriginal cultural heritage.

Theme Three - A Caring Community

3.1 Albury's local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community is empowered through self-determination.

3.1.2 Work in partnership to create culturally aligned services and collaborate for priorities of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander members of our community.

3.3 We share and celebrate our multiculturalism in a welcoming and open community.

3.3.2 Provide safe, inclusive and welcoming spaces for our community to enjoy.

3.7 We recognise and value our heritage

3.7.2 Protect and celebrate the best of our natural, built and cultural heritage.

Theme Four - A Leading Community

4.2 Our community's voice is considered in decision making.

4.2.1 Effectively engage the community on decisions that affect them.

Financial Implications

The current cost estimate for the VEC project is approximately $6.4 million. The proposed alternative Interactive Cultural Landscape is estimated at $2 million (Attachment 3), representing a saving of approximately $4.4 million. Ongoing operational expenses are expected to be minimal, at less than $20,000 per year (Attachment 4).

This re-scoping avoids major capital expenditure, minimises operational costs, and delivers a high-quality community and cultural outcome. It also enables the redirection of Sewer Fund expenditure to future-proof essential wastewater infrastructure, while enhancing the Wonga Wetlands in a financially sustainable manner.

Considerations for the Potential Re-scoping of Projects

To support Council's financial sustainability objectives, an internal framework is currently under development to enable the identification and assessment of capital projects that may potentially require similar 're-scoping', in accordance with defined criteria.

Leveraging off existing NSW Government best-practice guidelines, the proposed framework intends to ensure the application of robust, transparent and defendable processes when conducting project-specific value management reviews. These will be undertaken internally, incorporating high-level design or concept work as required.

Key elements of the proposed framework could include:

- The initiation of re-scoping activities once specific triggers are met. These may include but not be limited to; cost escalations beyond approved contingency, unforeseen complexity (e.g., site conditions, regulatory change, heritage or cultural sensitivities), changes in community/strategic priorities, funding shortfalls or material shift in risk profile.

- Re-assessment against the original project intent, its justification and scope. These may include but not be limited to; the project's alignment with strategic objectives, service level requirements and expectations, cost-to-benefit and whole-of-life operating cost implications, risk exposures (including cultural/heritage, environmental and stakeholder risks) and deliverability within time, budget and resourcing constraints.

- An engagement and communication pathway that is specifically outlined and tailored for the unique context of each specific project.

Risk

The following risks are associated with both progressing and deferring the project:

- **Business Risk** – the approved 4YDP allocates $6.3 million to the Wonga Wetlands project, but additional archaeological work under the Aboriginal Heritage Impact Permit (AHIP) requires a further $100,000. The potential re-scoping of this VEC project could save approximately $4.4

million, allowing the redirection of financial resources into higher-priority wastewater projects (critical infrastructure). Proceeding would commit Council to ongoing annual deficits and limit financial flexibility.

- **Corporate Risk** – the re-scoping of this project away from the construction of a VEC may attract reputational concern as a result of its original inclusion within the RGETF project (which has now had its funding deed commitments satisfied). However, in proceeding with a re-scoping of this project, and a supporting Stakeholder Engagement Plan, AlburyCity will be able to better realise community expectations around improved services and amenity at the site, whilst avoiding the potential for under-utilisation and the high costs associated with a VEC facility. Accordingly, the Interactive Cultural Landscape will more closely align with observed site usage and stakeholder expectations.

- **Cultural Risk** – discussions with the AFG and traditional owner groups indicate minimal concern about discontinuing the VEC. Their focus is on the landscape elements, meaning the proposed re-scoping aligns with Aboriginal stakeholder priorities.

- **Environmental Risk** – significant artefacts have been identified across the site. Constructing a large building risks disturbance, while a landscape approach preserves artefacts in situ and supports conservation, water quality awareness, and sustainable management — consistent with the Albury Local Environmental Plan 2010 (LEP) and Regional Natural Environment Strategy (RNES).

- **Four-Year Delivery Program or General Program Risk** – Council is currently managing several large projects within the 4YDP. Delivering the VEC would strain team capacity and project management resources. The landscape approach is lower cost, less complex, and more achievable within current resource constraints.

Engagement

If Council endorses the re-scoping, a Stakeholder Engagement Plan (SEP) will be developed to inform and involve the community and stakeholders in the design of the Interactive Cultural Landscape.

Recent engagement with Aboriginal stakeholders indicates their priorities lie in outdoor spaces such as yarning circles, fire pits, bush tucker gardens, and dance areas, rather than the VEC building.

Subject to Council's endorsement, AlburyCity will work closely with the AFG to refine the design and promote the site's cultural significance in a respectful and engaging manner.

Options

1. Endorse the re-scoping of the project previously known as the 'Murray River Experience – Wonga Wetlands Visitor Education and Experience Centre' and a supporting Stakeholder Engagement Plan to progress an Interactive Cultural Landscape at Wonga Wetlands. **Recommended.**

This option delivers a culturally appropriate, environmentally sensitive, and financially sustainable outcome that aligns with community expectations and preserves Aboriginal heritage, while providing flexible, year-round public access.

2. Proceed with construction of the VEC as originally planned. **Not Recommended.**

   The VEC would function as a standalone facility without complementary attractions, risk budget overruns, require ongoing operational funding of approximately $250,000 per year, and potentially cause cultural and environmental impacts inconsistent with stakeholder expectations.

3. Defer the project entirely without an alternative proposal. **Not Recommended.**

   This would leave the site underutilised and fail to achieve community, educational, and cultural objectives or deliver long-term sustainability outcomes.

Conclusion

Since its inception in 2014, the Wonga Wetlands VEC project has experienced a significant cost escalation - from an initial $1.2 million to approximately $6.4 million - along with an ongoing annual operating deficit forecast of $250,000. Constraints under the Recycled Water Management Plan and the inability to deliver complementary attractions mean the VEC would operate as a standalone facility with an ongoing operational deficit.

All RGETF obligations have been fulfilled, and the grant has been formally closed. Engagement with the AFG confirms greater interest in the cultural landscape elements than the building itself, indicating the current design does not align with stakeholder priorities.

Given these factors, the risks associated with proceeding with the VEC outweigh its potential benefits. The Wonga Wetlands Interactive Cultural Landscape offers a more cost-effective, culturally appropriate, and environmentally sensitive alternative that aligns with Council's strategic, financial, and community objectives.

Recommendation

That Council endorses the re-scoping of the project previously known as the 'Murray River Experience – Wonga Wetlands Visitor Education and Experience Centre' and a supporting Stakeholder Engagement Plan to progress an Interactive Cultural Landscape at Wonga Wetlands.

Attachments

1. 2014 Wonga Wetlands Tourism Product Development Master Plan (DOC14/44584).
2. Wonga Wetlands Visitor Education Centre Business Plan (DOC22/277604).
3. Conceptual Design of the alternative Wonga Interactive Cultural Landscape Design and Budget (DOC25/279026).

4. Comparative budget breakdown Wonga Visitor and Education Centre VEC and alternative Wonga Interactive Cultural Landscape (DOC25/282900).