

Response to Regional Art Gallery Feasibility Study (Draft 5 June 2019) from Eltham Community Action Group

Initial response

Eltham Community Action Group (ECAG) discussed this proposal at our committee meeting on 15.07.19.

We are pleased, in principle, that a positive outcome is being discussed for 895 Main Road. There seems no doubt that the idea of a gallery complex on the Main Road site has merit, is popular and could give local regional benefit.

The value of this important site becoming a community asset representing the arts, which has been a large part of the community's culture over the past 150 years, and also being open to use by all the people of Nillumbik, cannot be overemphasised.

It is not possible however for us to currently agree with the report's outcome that the gallery, as outlined, is feasible. This report shows feasibility from a very limited perspective. The study is valuable but not sufficiently comprehensive to declare the project feasible now.

Council financial capability needs clarification

The financial feasibility raises fundamental questions and it appears premature to claim that the Regional Art Gallery as suggested is feasible on the Main Road site.

- One of the significant qualifications for the complex's feasibility is stated as, "Council is prepared to invest in the capital development and/or attract external funding for the development of the Regional Gallery". This is clearly a significant statement, in order to underpin the feasibility.
- If there are insufficient funds available from council now then in order to undertake the development either public funding or a public private ownership proposal must be sought. The latter would inevitably result in a long term loss of public assets.
- Land, once sold out of public hands is an irreplaceable loss for current and future generations. This significant loss of public land or "floorspace" is not popular in the community.
- Modelling of economic impact and costs mentioned are not detailed in the report so do not allow scrutiny.
- Visitation numbers quoted are very ambitious and based on a relatively stable and successful long running gallery in a very different environment. Therefore revenue highly risky to guarantee.
- Figures are made with no reference to the governance of the gallery's development.

Comments related to study's proposed gallery purpose and components

- The feasibility study has modelled functions and sizes of a proposed gallery complex.
 - In doing so it presumes the financial council underpinning, which has not been demonstrated, as possible.
 - It prejudges a master planning process

- It has not been established what impact the heritage value of the existing Shillinglaw Trees might have on any land available for development.
- The size of the proposed complex appears to be exceedingly large – when looking at the proposed 8,300sqm. Even after deducting 1,000sqm for the outdoor sculpture park the area is still large suggesting either a multi-storey development with some landscaping or a single storey with minimal landscaping if the old Shire Office site is used.
- The report shows the proposed gallery as being 7,670 sqm but the Main Road site area as 5967 sqm. It then states that the proposal as stands would either have to be on several levels or ‘some aspects of the facility could be left out.’ This lack of detail and potential compromise of the basic concept of the proposal is a cause of concern.
- The total gallery space appears to be 2,727. Other municipal galleries cited are 3-400sqm and regional ones are 2-3,000sqm. Proposed hospitality and commercial shop space takes up 1,200sqm, at 600sqm the hospitality venue seating 150 can hardly be described as a gallery cafe. A multi storey building has the potential to dominate and overshadow the Greg Burgess library which is a feature of Eltham
- The Gallery Shop in the foyer should also be a source of tourism information for the area. Such a venue is currently lacking in Eltham.
- A children’s space, like in the NGV International in St Kilda Road, would be highly desirable given the number of families in Nillumbik and surrounding suburbs. The NGV space draws in people who possibly may not otherwise visit the gallery. It links activities to current exhibitions and so changes 4-6 times a year. Adults with the care of children become repeat visitors and make good use of the facility. The NGV space has an outdoor area and an indoor area for eating lunches (sandwiches etc). Both areas are also used by visiting school groups. The Eltham library currently runs children’s activities that are packed!
- When spaces such as the Black Box were not being used for artistic endeavours it would be worthwhile having them available for use by community groups unrelated to the arts. There is a real shortage of spaces in Eltham for community groups to use for meetings/small activities and that are low cost.

Comment on potential sites

- Of the sites listed in the report the 895 Main Road site is clearly favoured.
- The reasons for this preference include the facts that the land: is already in council ownership; has easy access to public transport and a bike trail; is within easy access to an existing commercial centre; is close to an existing public park; is near existing carparking spaces (although daytime use would be limited by existing commuter, library and park users); is near existing community facilities including the iconic library.
- The history of 895 Main Road as the former council offices also makes it a good choice for a community asset.

The next step for council

- We believe that there are currently too many questions to immediately proceed to a business case and master plan.
- We do not support the public/private partnership model of development that leads to significant private ownership of elements of the site.

- We strongly recommend that Council only pursue a proposal which leaves the land and the buildings in Council ownership. It may be best to plan for a long-term staged development to enable work to occur when funds become available.
- Discussions with architects are needed now to allow the community to have a greater understanding of the impact of what is being proposed on this site and landscape. Architects should appreciate and respond to the history, culture and valued landscape of the area in order to produce a building that complements the iconic library and sits well within the landscape

Other suggestions or views.

- Obviously, as with all projects at this early stage, the 'devil is in the detail' that is yet to be worked out.
- During 2018 ECAG conducted three community consultation sessions with different demographics to see what members of the community actually wanted on the old Shire Office site. 110 people wanted a venue that could be termed a cultural centre – encompassing music, theatre and the arts. If the arts also included cinema either indoors or outside, the number rose to 143 and, if the idea of including cultural events to make Eltham a meeting centre, the number rose again to 148, plus if informal landscaped areas linked the site with the library and park the number rose to 173 with only 59 people voting for other options.
So, from our community consultation, a significant proportion of residents will be pleased with the Gallery/amphitheatre concept.
- Many in the wider community were unaware of this art gallery option for the former shire office site. If the concept had been publicised more widely many more would have taken the opportunity to make their opinions known.

Other comments related to the proposed development

- It is important that the heritage Shillinglaw trees be retained and incorporated into the landscaping in a meaningful manner.
- It is most important that the iconic library also be incorporated into the development and that any buildings complement and are in sympathy with this important building. The bulk and form of the gallery proposal should not overshadow the library in size, colour or appearance and also literally not overshadow by preventing light from entering the library.
- The view, when entering Eltham from the city, across the Diamond Creek to the opposing treed hillside is important and should be maintained in a Gallery complex.
- It is also important that meaningful landscaping should be an integral part of the proposal and not an afterthought.
- Space to allow community events such as the craft market to continue is important.

Eltham Community Action Group is encouraged by the thought that this important site in Eltham is actively being considered for a use that will enhance the reputation of Eltham and the Shire of Nillumbik. The opportunity is there for this council to develop a true legacy project.