

Schools Scenario

The Minister for Education, The Hon Noah Torle, has recently learned that school children are greatly benefited from the presence of trees in schools. Some of the advantages of healthy urban forest canopy in schools his Dept research team has found include: improved learning outcomes; children are calmer, less irritable; there is less aggression; better self-discipline; less respiratory problems; cooler learning and playing environment; protection from solar radiation, i.e. less sunburn and decreased chance of skin cancer in future years; exposure to nature; and improved sense of self-worth.

The Minister is keen to see schools maintain or improve urban forest canopy in order to benefit the students and school community generally.

Raintree Public School is seeking funding from the Dept of Education to build three new classrooms to relieve growing class numbers resulting from residential rezonings that have increased population density in the area. The proposal also includes enlarging the library. The proposed three new classrooms and enlarged library will increase the area of the school covered by buildings and surrounds by a third.

The current proposal is to build single storey buildings and remove trees from the treed area to locate the new classrooms. The library extension is on the same level as the existing library and will require the removal of a mature jacaranda and a small gum tree.

The school grounds currently have about 26% canopy overall. However asphalt and turf sports areas cover half the school grounds and buildings about a third. The majority of tree canopy is concentrated in a relatively small area with seating where children eat their lunch.

The president of the P&C Committee, Mr Skye Ward, is a retired professional cricketer as well as parent of three children attending the school. He has been P&C president for the past three years. He advocated strongly that no sports area should be lost to the new classrooms. He believes that there are plenty of trees in the school grounds, too many if anything, and that it will be best to remove trees and locate the new classrooms in the existing treed area. This would result in an overall decrease in canopy from 26% down to 15%.

The new science teacher, Ms H T Yo, thinks the buildings should be located so that most if not all the trees can be retained. The Principal is keen to get the extra classrooms quickly, so his teaching staff don't burn-out with the stress of the cramped classrooms. Mr Skye Ward is determined to keep the sports area. The teacher-librarian has been lobbying for a redesigned library space for many years due to the importance of computers in teaching and learning. The P&C Committee hasn't formally contributed its view on the development.

The Minister is unlikely to approve funding if there is a significant decline in canopy at the school as a result of the development.

Consulting arborist, Leif Morewood, has been engaged to advise on how to incorporate the new development so as to minimise both loss of trees and loss of sports area.

What are the strategies that Leif Morewood could recommend?

What contributions could other players provide to the final outcome?