

\$71 million Budget shock for Dandenong cemetery

By Cam Lucadou-Wells

The State Government has denied forging ahead with a controversial cemetery plan in a Dandenong floodplains despite allocating up to \$71 million in the 2022-'23 State Budget.

The budget item listed as "new memorial cemetery (Dandenong)" had already received \$3.6 million ahead of 30 June, with another \$13.6 million allocated for 2022-'23.

It was estimated to cost a further \$54 million, with a finishing date by mid-2025.

Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust had been confidentially negotiating the idea of a new cemetery on the wetlands south of 1564 Heatherton Road, Dandenong.

Since the secret plan was publicly aired, it has met vocal opposition from City of Greater Dandenong and residents.

Liberal South-Eastern Metropolitan MP Gordon Rich-Phillips said the Government "need to come clean" about the new cemetery.

The Government had first committed \$65 million over three years in the 2020 State Bud-

get, but it was hidden due to the capital works budget paper not being published that year, he said.

"Having hidden \$65 million in the 2020 budget and undertaken secret discussions with Dandenong Council and Melbourne Water, the Government needs to explain why it thinks building a cemetery on a flood plan is a good idea.

"If this plan stacks up, why has the government kept it secret and why has it failed to consult the Dandenong community?"

Greens federal candidate Matthew Kirwan said the funding for the "half-baked idea" – before planning and consultation had started – was "insulting to Dandenong residents".

"On one hand the State Government has done something for the local environment with the Police Paddocks but on the other hand takes away.

"I am yet to find one Dandenong resident that doesn't think the idea of having a cemetery on a floodplain is not a recipe for disaster, particularly given the recent flood events in NSW

and Queensland and is being pushed onto Dandenong residents pell-mell regardless.

"How can they seriously say that there is going to be genuine or meaningful consultation when they are already planning spending money to construct?

"There are a lot of questions but the State Government and Southern Metropolitan Cemeteries Trust continue to refuse to give the public they serve honest answers."

Dandenong MP Gabrielle Williams said funding had not been allocated by the Government.

"There has so far been no application received for a planning scheme amendment.

"I understand, if the proponents should choose to make such an application there would be a significant process to follow, including community consultation and strict environmental assessments.

"No funding has been allocated by the government to the proposal."

A spokesperson for Health Minister Martin

Foley said several sites were still being considered as options.

In March, Greater Dandenong mayor Jim Memeti said the site was part of "95 hectares of sensitive environmental habitat within wetlands and floodplains".

It's covered by a Land Subject to Inundation Overlay, and zoned in parts as an Urban Floodway Zone, Public Use Zone 1 and Public Conservation and Resource Zone.

"Flood mitigation for Dandenong and the downstream areas, and the role the wetlands in the vicinity of 1564 Heatherton Road play in biodiversity and habitat are very important to this Council," Cr Memeti said.

The council is also concerned about being sidelined by the State Government in the planning decision process.

SMCT has been searching for a further site to add to its nine cemeteries in the South East.

Three of its current cemeteries – Springvale, Dandenong and Bunurong – are in Greater Dandenong.

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