

7.7 Freeway Golf Course reconfiguration

Abstract

In July 2020 Council and the North East Link Project (NELP) entered into a settlement agreement in response to Council's litigation about the North East Link (NEL) in the Supreme Court. Part of the settlement agreement provides Council with \$2,000,000 to complete the Freeway Golf Course (FGC) reconfiguration works required as a result of the NEL alignment.

It is understood the NELP will acquire FGC land needed for NEL construction purposes in November 2021 (**Attachment 1**). This report considers design options and construction staging options to implement the required changes to the course.

Officers' recommendation

That Council resolve to:

1. Adopt and endorse the Pacific Coast Design developed Freeway Golf Course design (**Attachment 2**) as the preferred course design.
2. Adopt and endorse reconfiguration construction staging option B (single stage construction) as the preferred construction staging method.
3. Support the Harp Golf Club and Camberwell Golf Club through the construction period by, inter alia, seeking tee times at alternate golf courses and providing access to the Freeway Golf Course club rooms.
4. Note and accept the offer of promotion and assistance from Golf Australia.
5. Write to the following to advise them of this resolution:
 - Mr James Sutherland, CEO, Golf Australia.
 - Mr Sean Gammon, Gammon Golf.
 - Mr Phil Ryan, Golf Architect, Pacific Coast Design.
 - Mr Chris Corry, President, Harp Golf Club.
 - Ms Celia Cornick, President, Camberwell Golf Club (Ladies).
 - Mr Bruce Bourke, President, Camberwell Golf Club (Men's).

Responsible director: Daniel Freer, Director Places and Spaces

1. Purpose

This report seeks resolutions from Council as to the preferred design and construction staging method for the reconfiguration of the Freeway Golf Course (FGC) required as a result of the North East Link (NEL) alignment.

2. Policy implications and relevance to community plan and council plan

This report is consistent with the Council Plan 2017-2021 and the Boroondara Community Plan 2017-2027, in particular the following themes:

- Your Community, Services and Facilities
- Your Parks and Green Spaces
- The Environment

3. Background

In July 2020 Council and the North East Link Project (NELP) entered into a settlement agreement in response to Council's litigation about the NEL in the Supreme Court. Part of the settlement agreement provides Council with \$2,000,000 to complete the FGC reconfiguration works required as a result of the alignment of the NEL. The agreement also provides for the FGC to be retained as an 18-hole golf course.

In November 2021 NELP will permanently acquire a section of the FGC to enable construction works for the permanent NEL roadway (**Attachment 1**).

With the above dates in mind, Council officers are planning for the FGC reconfiguration works to start in September 2021 ensuring the delivery of a new course for the community, optimising grass growing conditions and to minimise the duration of impacts to the players.

4. Outline of key issues/options

Issues

FGC reconfiguration design

As a result of the acquisition of FGC land to facilitate the NEL alignment, the FGC must be reconfigured to continue to provide an 18-hole, high quality, playable course.

The July 2020 settlement agreement between Council and NELP provides a golf course concept design and noted further work was required to finalise the design. Officers engaged Pacific Coast Design (PCD), a golf course architecture firm, to finalise the course design (**Attachment 2**).

The PCD design responds to a challenging environment in terms of a small footprint and sensitive environmental areas, including the Yarra River, Koonung Creek and remnant billabongs. They also worked through several issues to ensure the design considered all required elements, including:

- Maintaining an enjoyable 18-hole golf course experience.
- Providing sufficient challenge and interest for players.
- Ensuring safety issues are addressed.
- Designing the course so that both 9-holes return to the club house and carpark.
- Ensuring that there are several touch points to the club house and public amenities, including toilets.
- Maximising course distance despite the loss of land.
- Minimising impacts to native flora and fauna and enhancing biodiversity by planting additional trees and understorey vegetation.
- Minimising environmental impacts from working in a sensitive flood prone environment.

It has been a design challenge to reconfigure an appropriate 18-hole course into the reduced footprint available. As a result, some holes have walks between holes longer than the current layout and there are 60 trees requiring removal. There is a particularly challenging area of the course layout with creek crossings requiring clear signage and line marking to ensure navigation through the course is easy as possible.

Excitingly, the PCD design incorporates timber faced bunkers. This design element is common in the UK and Europe but is not a feature of any course in Australia. The FGC would be the first in Australia to have timber faced bunkers, with this feature a unique point of interest for potential golfers.

During and following the community consultation, the CGC Men's committee developed two alternative course concepts. Both alternative designs were issued to PCD for consideration and professional review, with the design review reports issued to the CGC. It is considered by PCD the CGC Men's committee final design (**Attachment 3**) has several flaws including:

- Increased walking distances between tees on the front four holes.
- Confusing course navigation around creek crossing area.
- Removal of in excess of 200 established, healthy native trees.
- A significant logistical traffic movement issue that will present a negative experience for general public golfers.
- Increased safety risks for players walking between holes.

FGC reconfiguration construction staging

The reconfiguration construction staging has required detailed consideration and understanding of golf course operations, operational budgets, golfers' expectations and market experience in similar situations.

PCD assisted this element of the project with the development of construction costs. PCD provided advice which has suggested two construction staging options, A and B detailed below, are viable for the FGC reconfiguration works.

A. Multi-stage works program.

The course would be under construction for approximately 18 - 24 months (September 2021 to March/September 2023 [weather dependent]).

- Stage 1: September 2021 to March 2022 (weather dependent).

- Stage 2: April 2022 to March/September 2023 (weather dependent).

The FGC could remain open and operate as a 9-hole course during this time across two construction stages. The large-scale construction would be visible to golfers, generating a poor playing experience with construction, dust and noise pollution across the course.

If players want to play 18-holes, they would need to book two separate tee times and pay two 9-hole green fees. This approach to course management is likely to cause frustration, particularly for club golfers.

B. Single-stage works program.

The course would be under construction for approximately 12 - 14 months (September 2021 to September/November 2022 [weather dependent]).

The FGC would close for the duration of the works and no golf would be played through this time. The course would open 6-10 months earlier than the multi-staged option.

Clubs would retain access to the club rooms throughout the single stage works program period and, additionally, would be supported by Council officers in finding alternative courses for their usual playing schedule.

In order to understand the potential issues associated with both construction staging options WellPlayed, a golf business consultancy engaged by Council, contacted management of 3 other golf courses, two public and one private, to understand their experience through construction approaches and reflections.

All 3 courses expressed a preference, with the benefit of hindsight for some, to complete construction works in one stage and to close the course for that period of time rather than adopt a multi-stage construction method which impacted the course and golfer for a longer period of time.

In addition to the three golf course examples provided by WellPlayed, Council officers and Gammon Golf have lived experience of completing construction works at the FGC. In the early 2000s reconfiguration works focussed around golfer and course safety were completed by Council on the front five holes over a period of 2 years. During this time temporary greens were used and the FGC, player numbers dropped significantly which took approximately 5 years to fully recover from.

During the early 2000s reconfiguration works golfers noted they did not want to play at the FGC because of the works and would not return until they were completed. Gammon Golf noted in their experience as golf course operators and managers, most golfers will find alternative courses to play even when their preferred or home course is open for 9-holes.

Options

FGC reconfiguration design

It is considered by officers the proposed 18-hole design developed by PCD provides Council with a playable, viable, 18-hole course. The course design offers a high quality, challenging golf experience and minimises impacts to native flora and fauna, as well as floodplain impacts. It responds to the needs of competition golf while providing an experience for social players.

The FGC reconfiguration design options available for consideration are:

1. Acceptance of the PCD developed 18-hole course design.
2. Seeking alteration to the PCD developed 18-hole design.
3. Rejection of the PCD developed 18-hole design and seeking to engage an alternative golf course architect to design the course.
4. Acceptance of the Camberwell Golf Club course design.

Based on information in the issues section, Council officers' recommendation is option 1.

FGC reconfiguration construction staging

As noted, there are two construction staging options considered to be viable for the FGC reconfiguration works:

- A. Multi-stage works program.
- B. Single-stage works program.

Based on information in the issues section, Council officers' recommendation is option B, undertaking the works as a single-stage program.

5. Consultation/communication

To provide context to the community consultation and feedback received, the two clubs represent 27% of all rounds played at the FGC. The general public, that is casual golfers not affiliated with a club, represent the remaining 73% of rounds played.

Have Your Say

The broader golfing and residential community were invited to provide feedback on the construction staging options and the final design through a dedicated Have Your Say page on the Boroondara website. The consultation opened at 9am on Wednesday 24 February 2021 and closed 5pm Wednesday 10 March 2021.

Of the 46 responses to the survey on the Have Your Say page:

- 45% supported option A (multi-stage construction).
- 55% supported option B (single-stage construction).

Respondents were invited to provide comments on and suggestions about the proposed golf course design. Feedback received included commentary about hazards on the course, fencing and the walks between greens and tees.

All feedback has been reviewed and will be considered in the refinement of the final design, with the exception of the request to close the course and install a 'pump and jump' track.

Despite expressing their on-going interest in the FGC and the reconfiguration works at the fortnightly meetings between staff, NELP did not provide a response to the survey.

Golf clubs

Council officers attended meetings with representatives from the two golf clubs that consider the FGC their home, CGC and HGC. The CGC has separate mens and ladies committees and separate meetings were held with each. The clubs were asked to nominate a construction staging preference and to advise of any assistance they would like to receive from Council for both construction staging options.

Harp Golf Club

HGC nominated Option A (multi-stage construction) as their preferred option. They did preface this preference with a note that as the course would remain open and operational, this option would allow them to continue to access the clubrooms for social activities. The social aspect of the Harp Golf Club has been highlighted, through discussions, as one of the critical elements of the club. This requirement can be accommodated throughout a single-stage construction process.

The club have secured tee times at other courses and retaining access to the clubrooms for social activities through either construction staging option would be welcome assistance to the club.

Camberwell Golf Club - Ladies

CGC Ladies nominated option B (single-stage construction) as their preferred option. They selected this option for a number of reasons, including a preference for playing 18 holes and fewer changes for the members to navigate. The CGC Ladies representatives initiated the idea of naming the holes on the new course.

Camberwell Golf Club - Men's

The CGC Men's nominated option A (multi-stage construction) as their preferred option. Their primary reason is the retention of the course as a 9-hole course throughout construction allows club members to retain contact with the course.

During the meeting the Camberwell Men's representative spoke of a need to keep members playing golf and playing together throughout the construction. Securing tee times at other courses was thought to be an action that would help the club keep playing if a single-stage redevelopment option was taken.

Gammon Golf

Discussions have been had with the Pro-shop operator, Gammon Golf. Gammon Golf operates three courses including FGC. Mr Sean Gammon's preference is for the single-stage construction option. Mr Gammon noted in his experience as a golf course operator "...operating the golf course in a highly compromised state for an extended period would be more damaging than full closure for a shorter time."

In addition to commercial considerations, Mr Gammon raised the issue of the mental health and wellbeing of his staff. Currently, his staff are raising concerns as a result of responding to and managing the feedback regarding the alterations made to the course as a result of the Yarra East Main Sewer (YEMS) works on the first hole. It is important to note the course is operating as a reconfigured 18-hole course throughout the YEMS works. In the opinion of Mr Gammon and his staff, this state of duress is likely to worsen under the multi-stage construction option.

Golf Australia

Golf Australia (GA) is the sports peak body in the country and has been a keen observer of the outcomes of the NEL and the FGC. GA have indicated they support the PCD design and also support, for various reasons, the single-stage construction option.

GA have noted they would work with Council through the construction and promote the course and the works. The market reach of GA's publications is significant and this generous offer would put the reconfigured, potentially rebranded, FGC on the radar of golfers across Australia.

6. Financial and resource implications

The settlement agreement provides Council with \$2,000,000 to complete the FGC reconfiguration works required as a result of the alignment of the NEL. This fixed budget is based on a scope of works generally consistent with the design shown in **Attachment 2**. Works will be tendered with Council structuring the contract to ensure cost of works do not exceed the available budget.

Council and Gammon Golf have the right to claim compensation from the State for losses incurred as a result of the compulsory acquisition of FGC land. It is important to note that while we can seek compensation, any claim will be subject to a legal process.

7. Governance issues

The implications of this report have been assessed in accordance with the requirements of the Victorian Charter of Human Rights and responsibilities.

The officers responsible for this report have no direct or indirect interests requiring disclosure.

8. Social and environmental issues

The social issues associated with the Council officer preferred construction staging option are potentially significant and potentially negative, although they can be mitigated through further engagement and consultation with the golf clubs. There are also positive social outcomes as a result of the project.

The clubs, Harp and Camberwell, consider the FGC their home course and have strong connections to the FGC. For many, it is the course they have been playing for up to 50 years. The clubs are concerned with any potential loss of members to alternate clubs and courses if the FGC is closed for 12-14 months under the single-stage construction option. These concerns can be partially responded to by assisting the clubs to stay and play together by securing tee times at alternate courses and allowing access to the club rooms for social activities for the shutdown period.

Council officers have contacted other golf courses and, at the time of writing, Malvern Valley Golf Course owned by the City of Stonnington, have offered the clubs the opportunity to be included in their tee time slots if they so choose.

The multi-stage construction option reduces the social issues the club have raised as it allows access to a shorter, 9-hole course and continued access to the clubrooms. There are concerns, however, that the shorter course and longer duration of works may lead to a reduction of members over a longer period of time from the clubs.

The general public golfer which accounts for 73% of rounds at FGC, generally want to play courses that are not impacted by construction. While it is expected the casual golfer will be disappointed about any potential closure of the FGC associated with the single-stage construction option, it is likely they will return, albeit slowly, in similar numbers when the construction works are complete. The retention of casual golfers on a compromised, 9-hole course is unlikely as many are expected to find alternate courses. The longer duration of the multi-stage construction option may result in fewer casual golfers returning to the FGC as they establish a routine of playing at other courses over the construction period.

No matter the construction staging option preferred, Council has an opportunity to keep golfers, both club and casual, engaged throughout the construction period. This can be through social media and promotional activities such as tours of the works, 'name the hole' competition and rebranding. There is opportunity to generate positive social outcomes from the project, aside from the high quality new course.

The environmental issues associated with the report are generally positive in that the course reconfiguration, no matter the construction staging option and design option, presents ample opportunity for biodiversity revegetation works. This is particularly exciting in areas near the Koonung Creek and Yarra River, as well as along the road frontages. There will be tree removals required to facilitate works and these will be offset by the revegetation.

Manager: **David Shepard, Manager Environmental Sustainability & Open Spaces**

Report officer: Heath Crawford, Coordinator Turf Management
Clare Davey, Senior Coordinator Transport Advocacy

Land access dates

Attachment 4: Primary & Secondary Package land access dates - FGC



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