**2023-24 Mount Alexander Shire Council Draft Budget Submission**

**FRIENDS OF THE BOX-IRONBARK FORESTS**

Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests (Mount Alexander Region) is a long-standing and respected community group with around 150 members. **Our group was formed in 1998 by people in the local community interested in working towards highlighting the significance of the Box-Ironbark Forests and Woodlands.**

**The Friends exist:**

* **To promote respect for Indigenous culture and understanding of Indigenous land management practices.**
* **To work towards a common community approach to a healthy, sustainable, and productive landscape through conservation of natural vegetation on public and private land in the Mount Alexander Region.**
* **To campaign for wise and effective management of the Parks, Reserves and State Forests of the region and to support the inclusion of more crown land in conservation reserves.**

Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests recommend the following for the 2023-24 Mount Alexander Shire Council draft budget:

1. **An increase in staff time for caring for the natural environment**

In the [Mount Alexander Shire Council Environment Strategy 2015-2025](https://www.mountalexander.vic.gov.au/Page/Download.aspx?name=Environment/Mount_Alexander_Shire_Council_Environment_Strategy_2015-2025.pdf&size=5904368&link=../Files/Environment/Mount_Alexander_Shire_Council_Environment_Strategy_2015-2025.pdf), under ‘Priority Area 4: Sustainability and Environment Team is a corporate resource’, one of the Key Strategic Tasks is to *‘Utilise internal sustainability and environment expertise particularly at project scoping stages’*. As much faith as we have in the Natural Environment Officer, we do not feel that this task can be achieved with just one staff member. A great deal of time is required to achieve the bare minimum when it comes to such a role. Additional team members with environmental science or equivalent qualifications should be employed to aid in providing internal expertise and other support.

In order for Council to meet the legal requirements of noxious weed management and flora and fauna conservation (e.g. pest species management as laid out in the [Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994](https://www.legislation.vic.gov.au/in-force/acts/catchment-and-land-protection-act-1994/064), the conservation of critically endangered Spiny Rice Flower on Council-managed roadsides), we need a qualified and experienced staff team with adequate resourcing. An environmental bush crew would go a long way towards helping Council achieve these goals. This could be led by an experienced mentor, and be a great opportunity to employ young people in our region who want to gain skills in land management and conservation.

Over the past eight years, we have observed that roles dedicated to the natural environment in Mount Alexander Shire Council transitioned from a department to a small team, then to a single part-time (thankfully now full-time) role in the Parks and Gardens department.

We recommend that Mount Alexander Shire Council allocate sufficient funds in the draft budget for more permanent paid staff time to:

* deliver on the goals described in the MASC Environment Strategy 2015-25
* undertake environmental restoration works (such as pest species management and revegetation) on Council-managed land
* plan and enact conservation actions for local biodiversity and threatened species.

1. **Commitment to ongoing funds for environmental works each year**

Management of environmental weeds relies on long-term planning and commitment of resources for follow-up control. Seeds of many noxious weed species can remain in the soil for decades after initial treatment. Without ongoing monitoring and management, the outcomes of previous control will quickly be lost, meaning that the initial efforts and funds put towards the work were essentially wasted. Effective ongoing weed management also leads to a reduced need for herbicide use in the long run.

A commitment to increased ongoing funding for on ground environmental works is needed in order to protect and enhance our Shire’s biodiversity values and natural resources.

While we acknowledge that this Council runs on limited resources, we believe that the proportion of spending on the environment in our Shire does not accurately reflect how highly it is valued by our local community.

Funding for the environment in Australia has been cut further and further back over the past decade (see [**here**](http://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2017/dec/13/environment-funding-slashed-by-third-since-coalition-took-office) and [**here**](http://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/10/coalition-government-spent-just-16-cents-on-climate-crisis-out-of-every-100-analysis-shows?fbclid=IwAR20WhjzrqYPBEhrdaJtYX5ec0QsLnBNcLLAoBnZqL6Vc6TvGLsv7zbHaso)). In the face of the biodiversity crisis, now is the time to increase spending on caring for biodiversity values. We believe that Mount Alexander Shire Council has a leading role to play. As well as increasing funds for the natural environment in the draft budget, we request that Mount Alexander Shire Council advocate to higher levels of government to invest not only in new environmental projects, but also in the day-to-day activities which are key to caring for our natural environment in the light of human disturbances (e.g. pest species management, revegetation, protection of remnant vegetation).

Thank you for your attention in reading our submission.

Friends of the Box-Ironbark Forests

[www.fobif.org.au](http://www.fobif.org.au)