



THE ROYAL SYDNEY GOLF CLUB



Championship Course Project



Introduction

The Royal Sydney Golf Club

The Royal Sydney Golf Club is the largest area of managed landscape in the Woollahra municipality. It is also home to a renowned Championship Golf Course. Neither the landscape, nor the golf course, can presently be managed and presented in the most optimal way – whether for the environment or for the game of golf. The challenges to optimally address both are interconnected, not least being considerations around long-term sustainability.



For the best part of the last 100 years, the Championship Course has been developed in an unstructured way. It is now demonstrating the inevitable consequences of the lack of a cohesive long-term philosophy and land management strategy. This is reflected in its Australian golf course ranking declining from 4th to 48th in the past 30 years and has coincided with growing broader community concern with long-term environmental issues including water efficiency, climate change and biodiversity (all issues raised in Woollahra Council's *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy*).

A 'do-nothing' option is not a viable proposition due to a combination of factors – the ageing infrastructure will need renewal and rationalisation; the dominance of senescent and mature age trees suggests hundreds of trees will need to be removed over the next decade or so; and the dramatic decline in the course's rating reflects an on-going deterioration in a number of the course's design elements and an increasingly-recognised lack of strategic intent within the course's current layout.

RSGC believes the key elements of its proposed golf course renovation and landscape rehabilitation project, being contemporary, comprehensive and holistic, will significantly address all of these factors. The Club's intent to be more environmentally friendly and to make necessary changes to the golf course are entirely compatible and could provide an excellent model for other land managers.

Central to the proposal is the bold, forward-thinking concept to return the course to its original coastal heathland environment; restoring the natural 'sense of place' and connecting with the growing broader community concern for high quality environmental management.

The philosophy behind the proposal is drawn from the late golf course architect, Dr Alister MacKenzie, who is widely considered to be one of the greatest of all golf course architects and who believed that the features of a golf course should be shaped in a way as to be 'indistinguishable from nature itself'. The proposal at Rose Bay aims to achieve this in a way that will be aesthetically appealing, sustainable and much more biodiverse, while remaining friendly to the needs of golfers.

In an effort to meet these dual environmental and sporting challenges, the Club has embarked on an ambitious long-term plan. It will require some 'sacrifice' in the early years, especially with the understandably emotive issue of tree removal. However, short term pain will result in major long term gains. It is proposed that 595 trees be removed from the property and be replaced with 1,888 new trees of very diverse native species - **resulting in an actual net increase of 1,293 trees on the course itself.**

In approximately 10 years, the existing canopy cover will be fully restored and will increase by a further 6-19% by 2040-2045. The understorey will be infinitely more biodiverse with the planting of a rich array of 500,000 native plants endemic to the Eastern Suburbs, in addition to those that regenerate naturally. Water consumption, along with chemical and fertiliser usage, will be significantly reduced. Simultaneously, the course should regain its position as one of the top Australian golf courses by reverting to its traditional heathland character and providing a heightened strategic golf challenge.



The Championship Course



The centrepiece of the Club is its Championship Course - which has evolved over the last 100 years, but never with a single design vision to guide its development. The course saw major changes throughout the 20th century. However, without a consistent philosophy or master plan, this has resulted in a disparate collection of stylistic ideas, inconsistent with the best golf course design principles, as well as muddled and outdated irrigation and drainage infrastructure which is urgently in need of rationalisation and renewal.

By far the biggest change to the original coastal heathland character of the course was the planting of over 2,000 trees, mostly of a single species - *Melaleuca quinquenervia* (Broad-leaved paperbark) - in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Within two decades the course changed from a heathland to a parkland character with virtually all the delicate heathland flora lost. In addition to creating its now relatively sterile environment, the trees and their root systems have encroached onto the fairways and their shade and density is not conducive to the health of the grass, nor do they provide ideal playing conditions for golf. Having been planted over a relatively short period some 70-80 years ago, they have now, as a group, reached maturity with some being senescent and in need of replacement. However, this deterioration presents a unique landscaping opportunity.

Royal Sydney Golf Club c1920's, showing the original golf course landscape and natural vegetation.



Current Planning Circumstance

RSGC submitted a Development Application (DA) to Woollahra Municipal Council to upgrade the Championship Golf Course on 22 October 2019.

Council requested further information and this was provided in March 2020.

Council had aspects of the proposal peer-reviewed by a number of external consultants and provided additional referral requests to the Club in June 2020.

Through its recently-submitted amended DA, the Club has now comprehensively responded to all issues raised and to the requests for further information.

Whilst the broad principles that guided the proposal have not changed, nor have the reasons that have driven the need for change, the initial comments from Council and the additional information it requested have been very helpful and caused the Club to undertake considerable introspection – the outcomes from which have resulted in a number of positive enhancements to the initial proposal, principally with respect to the landscape rehabilitation and tree retention aspects.

KEY CHANGES SINCE THE ORIGINAL DA WAS SUBMITTED

More specifically, dialogue with Council since the DA was originally lodged has resulted in changes to the initial proposal that now includes:

- A revised landscaping design that involves, by comparison with the original DA, 188 additional trees being retained and 1,888 native trees being planted (which will result in a net increase of 1,293 trees on site), as well as the planting of around 500,000 native plants and shrubs.
- A *Biodiversity Development Assessment Report* (completed by Cumberland Ecology), which confirms that the proposal will:
 - > result in greater habitat with improved structural variability providing more diverse habitats for native fauna;
 - > have minimal impact on biodiversity during the construction phase through a variety of mitigation measures;
 - > provide habitat for the re-introduction of several threatened species - also confirming that there are no existing threatened ecological communities nor threatened fauna species on the site;
 - > enhance and improve the habitat diversity across the site in the long term; and
 - > comply with Woollahra Council's *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy* 'to increase the extent, diversity and resilience of natural flora species and vegetation communities'.
- A *Canopy Changes Report* (completed by EcoGeo Spatial) that has confirmed that, while under the revised proposal there will be a 23.5% loss of tree canopy, this will be recovered in approximately 10 years and then further improved in the years thereafter.

	EXISTING COURSE	AMENDED DA (APRIL 2021)
Total trees	2,696 trees	3,989 trees
Tree removals	-	595 trees
New trees*	-	1,888 new native trees to be planted
Tree canopy	15.35 ha	Canopy regained in approximately 10 years plus an increase of 6-19% by 2040-2045
Heathland	Nil apart from recent trial areas	13.79 ha (largely replacing mown grass)
Native heathland vegetation	Nil apart from recent trial areas	350,000 plants planted in first 12 months 150,000 plants planted in years 2 & 3
Water saving	-	20%

* the amended DA includes the planting of an additional 1,185 native trees identified by Woollahra Council to be 'prescribed trees' due to their species type and size.



Why is Change Needed?

The Royal Sydney Golf Club, and its Championship Course, face many challenges that require decisive action.

1. LONG TERM SUSTAINABILITY

- The Club desires to be more environmentally appropriate and sustainable, as well as be more economically sustainable by lowering costs for water, fertiliser and landscape maintenance.
- Lack of current capacity for water storage.



2. AGEING INFRASTRUCTURE AND TREES

- Poor drainage impedes turf quality and results in regular flooding.
- Ageing and inefficient irrigation and stormwater drainage systems.
- Upgrades to internal roads and pathways are required.
- Many of the trees were planted about 70 years ago and are reaching the end of their safe life expectancy and are failing at an increasing rate.

3. PLAYING CONDITIONS AND RANKING

- Dense, congested playing corridors where trees restrict airflow and create heavy shade has promoted infestation by undesirable grasses, the loss of grass and tree root invasion on greens, tees and fairways.
- A decline in the quality and attractiveness of the course for both members, visitors and major competitions.
- Need for improvement in the construction of greens, bunkering and course setup to meet international standards, as well as be more flexible and attractive.
- Royal Sydney's Australian Golf Digest course ranking has declined from 4th to 48th. By regaining its former status, RSGC can contribute to the community through the attraction of major golf events.



4. LEGACY

- Leave a positive legacy for the Club and the local community - that should last the next 100 years.
- Improve the quality of the golf course to match the exceptional quality of the Club's other sporting and social facilities.
- Establish an enduring framework for the restoration and long-term management of the maintenance of the course.



5. INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL AND SPORTING STANDARDS AND TRENDS

- Enhance social and environmental values at the core of the game, including increasing biodiversity, wildlife conservation and sustainability.
- Return the course to a modified, though generally original heathland coastal environment, that is then regarded as one of the top Australian golf courses.



6. SAFETY

- Ten of the existing eighteen holes present safety issues with balls either straying outside the property or creating hazards for players on the course. These safety issues have potential significant impacts in respect of liability for the Club and have been addressed in the redesign.

7. COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS IN ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT

- The proposal conforms with and responds to the following:
 - Woollahra Council's *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2015-2025*.
 - *NSW Environmental and Planning Assessment Act 1979*.
 - *NSW Biodiversity Conservation Act 2016*.



Environmental and Community Benefits



Significant improvement in biodiversity through a dramatic increase in native plant species and the attraction of insects, birds and animals.

An opportunity, at no cost to the public, to implement approaches to the restoration and maintenance of coastal heathland environments in urban Sydney - including seed collection and natural regeneration experiments.

20% reduction in water use, saving 73 million litres per year (equivalent to over 29 Olympic swimming pools).

Setting an example for other golf courses, and other open spaces, to develop more environmentally sensitive approaches to landscape development and management.

A community that values biodiversity in its 'backyard' appreciates the value of biodiversity globally.

Because of the size of its property, the Club has an opportunity to be one of the most important sanctuaries of native flora and fauna in Sydney's Eastern Suburbs.

The proposal has been influenced by the Woollahra Council's *Biodiversity Conservation Strategy 2015-2025*.

The vision for this strategy is: "a high level of urban biodiversity through protected natural landscapes and systems; conserved and restored bushland areas; active wildlife corridors; clean and healthy waterways and creeks and a clean and healthy harbour".

The proposal responds to this vision and all of the nine principles outlined in the strategy - including improved biodiversity, control of aggressive and invasive species, provision of wildlife corridors, restored bushland, contribution to the community's understanding and valuing of biodiversity and providing habitat for birds, insects and fauna species.



For further details, please visit championshipcourse.rsgc.com.au