

Dear Harcourt Community and HPA Membership,

After two years of preparation by Council we have reached the point where the Harcourt Community have the opportunity to provide feedback on the proposed amendments to the local planning scheme. The Public Exhibition phase of the Plan Harcourt process has begun, with two public information sessions and a four week window for submissions remaining.

The scope of the proposed planning scheme amendments is broad and much has been considered by Council, Community and the HPA throughout the process. In general the amendments are focused in worthwhile directions and they attempt to be constructive in seeking solutions to the challenges of Harcourt's projected future growth. However, the robustness of controls on development and harm mitigation in relation to environment and agriculture is yet to be proven. The three main areas of concern as expressed to me by community members are:

**Preservation of the town's character and the valley's natural amenity.** The density of housing in Harcourt is low, there is a feeling of space and the ribbons of native vegetation connect people with the flora and fauna. Many will tell you how they enjoy the rural charm of Harcourt and how they do not want to see residential development distort the sense of space or interfere with trees and other natural assets.

Of course development is not inherently destructive, however more comprehensive planning controls are required to ensure development does not come into conflict with the environment, ensuring Harcourt's natural appeal and its significant indigenous flora, wildlife habitat and wildlife corridors are protected, preferably expanded. Such controls could also be used to ensure that: the density of proposed developments is appropriate, the buildings are sustainable, the development provides a mix of housing, while also providing new public space and remaining sympathetic with the town's character.

**Management of the expanding town's impact on agriculture and the environment.** The proposed town expansion areas will result in ~30-100ha of land being rezoned from farming to residential land. More consequential than the rezoning is the interface between the expanded town, agriculture and the environment and potential conflicts which can arise. The town's boundary will be approximately 9km in length under the proposed amendments. That is 9,000 metres where a compromise between agricultural use and residential use must be reached. The proposed town boundary is often aligned along natural features in the landscape which invariably host native vegetation and wildlife. Caught in the middle, these habitats need protection.

A buffer zone is mentioned in the proposed planning amendments, yet there is no definition or suite of protections which are targeted at resolving the inherent tensions between these land uses.

**Harcourt needs a cohesive town centre which provides for retail, services and public space.** Harcourt has a long history and the de-facto town centre has had many shapes. Plan Harcourt acknowledges the need for an urban design and attempts to provide a planning framework for the town centre. However, there are some areas which need more attention: The need to review the placement/size of the proposed retail zoning; A comprehensive plan to remove the dominance of old highway, create cycling and walking connections across the town and interconnect public green space; The need to review alternate town centre options based on historic development or emerging opportunities. Many aspects of a plan for the town centre are beyond the scope of the planning scheme amendments and the authors should be given credit for pursuing any of these issues, however, the planning scheme does provide a basis and has a strategic impact on the development of the town centre.

For anyone with suggestions or concerns about how Harcourt grows in to the future and the character of the valley after it expands, now is their final chance to give voice to those views. Let's plan Harcourt's future and realise its fantastic potential as a place of natural beauty, with thriving native flora and fauna, sustainable development, productive agriculture, and a vibrant community.

Thank you to the Council and the Community for their contributions to this process so far.

Visit <https://www.harcourtprogress.org.au/plan> for more information.

Regards,

David Foley