

Green Wedge under threat

MORNINGTON Peninsula's extensive Green Wedge Zone could face intensive development under far-reaching proposals released last week (July 18) by Planning Minister Matthew Guy.

He claims his "sweeping reforms" of rural zones, which include GW, will promote agriculture by removing what he describes as "the onerous requirements for a planning permit".

Seventy per cent of the peninsula is GW, much of it productive farmland currently protected from development. Mr Guy's plans strip away that protection.

With the shire and many local conservation groups fighting to preserve GW, two of Mr Guy's changes in particular deal possibly a catastrophic blow to their efforts.

They are:

- An end to the requirement that tourist and other businesses must be built on 40 hectares or more.
- An end to the requirement that many such businesses must have an essential link to agriculture.

New businesses including restaurants, convention centres and residential hotels have been stymied by the need to meet the land size and agricultural link requirements.

With those curbs swept away and many new non-agricultural uses of GW land introduced by Mr Guy's plans, the battle to preserve the GW could become near-impossible.

The proposed new uses include primary and secondary schools, medical centres, "residential buildings", research centres and rural stores. It is unclear if service stations and display homes would also be permitted.

Abattoirs, rural industry and the sale of primary produce will also be allowed. Of these, only abattoirs will need to seek a permit.

Service stations and display homes have been removed from the list of prohibited uses on GW land, but the GW proposals do not indicate whether they will now be allowed in the zone. One document refers to many prohibited uses becoming discretionary.

In his press release, Mr Guy said: "Green Wedges are not stagnant zones, their intention is to be a working agricultural buffer for niche industries; these reforms will provide a much greater ability for the intention of the zone to be fully realised."

He does not give examples of "niche industries", nor expand on how they would expedite "the intention of the zone".

But elsewhere his department's documents state that the proposed changes "will support agricultural activity, allow more tourism related uses and support population retention to sustain rural communities".

Mr Guy's states in his press release: "Proposed reforms to rural" (including GW) "zones will promote the growth of agricultural activity and give Council's [sic] much-needed flexibility to adapt

planning requirements to local circumstances."

But Mornington Peninsula farmers could be heavily disadvantaged if Mr Guy's proposed changes lead to increased demand for agricultural land, pushing up its price and their rates bills and making it difficult for them to acquire more land.

Considerable confusion surrounds the changes, which are referred to in a discussion paper on the Planning Department website as "reformed rural zones".

Under the head "What changes are proposed?" a number of dot points do not differentiate between GW and the Farming Zone – essentially broad acres outside metropolitan Melbourne where the bulk of Victoria's farming is done. The Mornington Peninsula is part of metropolitan Melbourne for planning purposes.

Some of the dot points apply in GW. Others may not. Mr Guy does not differentiate between them in his discussion paper. He claims that:

"The proposed reformed rural zones will:

- Support agriculture by making most agricultural uses 'as of right' instead of needing a planning permit.
- Respect the rights of farmers by removing permit requirements for farming related development.
- Provide flexibility for farmers by allowing the sale of farm produce without the need for a permit.
- Facilitate business by no longer prohibiting complementary retail uses.
- Facilitate tourism by reducing or removing permit requirements related to tourism uses.
- Make many prohibited uses discretionary in all rural zones."

Further confusion arises because of the two classes of GW – Green Wedge, and Green Wedge A. In the latter, land can be subdivided to lots down to 8ha. Most other proposed changes are common to both GW zones. Mornington Peninsula is largely "GW", retaining a minimum subdivisible lot size of 40ha.

Several Guy proposals are remarkably similar to the shire's Green Wedge Action Plan, released some 18 months ago. In it the shire advocates breaking the link between agriculture and GW businesses, and making land use proportional – that is, allowing GW businesses to be proportional to land size – effectively abolishing the 40ha rule.

The shire also seeks to increase tourist accommodation in the GW – which Mr Guy's changes would allow.

Ironically, at the same time the shire is seeking more intensive GW development, it advocates "rigorous opposition" to any amendments to the Green Wedge Zone "which would reduce the minimum lot size requirements".

The closing date for commenting on Mr Guy's proposed changes is 21 September.

The website is www.dpcd.vic.gov.au. Click on "Get involved in planning" and follow the links.



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