



Letter to Whau Local Board members, 14/1/21

Rosebank Domain lease: separate the racetrack from the native forest

Members of the Whau Local Board were recently shown around Rosebank Domain as part of the lease renewal process. Unfortunately, all they were shown were the racetrack and its various buildings and facilities and were guided by the KartSport President. They were not shown the forest and no council officers or other experts were present to explain its importance in terms of the lease renewal.

The Tree Council believes that any new lease that is drawn up must restrict the sports clubs to the area that they use for sports purposes and that the surrounding forested margin should be removed from the lease so that it can be properly managed by the Council and community volunteers in perpetuity. We understand that the kart club is not opposed to this proposal.

This is a common sense decision and an easy opportunity for the Whau Local Board to demonstrate its interest in protecting the environment.

Why?

At present, the whole of the Domain is zoned for active sport and leased to the sports clubs (kart and motorbike speedway) but this area includes significant native coastal forest which is also the site of an old Maori settlement, Rangimatariki. The current lease, written in 1977, makes no reference to these, which probably reflects how such forest was perceived generally at that time, as waste land.

The forest is narrow and much is sloping but is made up of many native species and as such is valuable habitat for native insects and birds. Much of it faces north-west and it is rare that such aspects are not taken up by housing or other uses, making it ecologically uncommon in the Auckland region. The north-western edge has been saved from collapse due to weed infestation in recent years by a small number of volunteers but it is too narrow to manage itself due to extreme edge effects and it still suffers from past canopy damage; - if neglected it will again succumb to exotic weeds.

Since 2012 and probably much longer, the sports clubs have made no effort to maintain the forest areas in a good state, despite clause 8 of the lease which says that they have to keep the premises weed-free. According to this clause, costs incurred by the Council in removing weeds can be recovered from the lessees, but in practice neither lessor nor lessees have taken any action whatsoever with weeds, at least since 2012. Historically, individuals have used it as a place to throw rubbish, especially tyres, dozens of which have been removed by environmental volunteers, although this practice is not sanctioned by the clubs. However it continues as of January 2021 and cannot be addressed as illegal dumping because the forest is part of the club premises.

By 2012 the forest had been severely damaged by infestation from weeds including moth plant, climbing asparagus, brush wattle and privet, and community volunteers started to restore it. From 2014 to 2016, Causeway Alliance did some weed control and planting as mitigation for the motorway widening, but at present nobody does any forest management except one or two committed community volunteers, one of whom was trespassed by the kart club last year while working among the trees. The leaseholder has a right to trespass people (because of the lease in its present form) but The Tree Council considers that this lack of understanding and appreciation for the work required to maintain the forest is the main reason why the ecological area should be removed from the kart club's leased area. This would enable volunteers to work with Council's permission to restore the native forest on an ongoing basis and guarantee them free access in the future.

Whau River Catchment Trust maintains a trapline around the Domain and has helped with one planting bee and one rubbish day. Auckland Council has no program of maintenance because that is (in theory) the responsibility of the lessee.

At present, the kart club requires any forest volunteers to obtain permission before going there and no-one except the sports clubs are allowed to keep keys to the gates, making vehicle access difficult. Volunteer foot access to the western and southern forest strips is nearly impossible because of fencing erected by the clubs. As a result, those areas are still infested with weeds but are not yet beyond restoration. In our view the perimeter paths away from racetracks and buildings should be publicly accessible.

Foot access is already possible from the cycleway and no fence separates it from the racetrack area, so it is not anticipated that legal separation of the forest areas will lead to any loss of security for the clubs: the general layout does not need to change. A legal change in its status is unlikely to lead to any change in the number of people wanting to enter the Domain. There are no open spaces or paths for the public to use in the forest and the forest entrance (from the cycleway) is barely visible, and far from the nearest car parking.

Conclusion

Removing the entire forested strip around the Domain from the lease and bringing the strip under Council control is the solution to its long-term ecological restoration. The current kart club President is sympathetic to the volunteer effort, but otherwise the sports clubs have shown over the years that they have no interest in the forest. This is reasonable enough given that it is far from their core business, but the Council has allowed a key lease clause regarding weeds to be completely ignored, rendering the current lease unfit for purpose and risking the survival of this forest remnant.

The status quo is precarious in terms of survival of the forest as it depends on one or two individuals volunteering their time and energy. These and future volunteers should be allowed easy access to all parts of the forested perimeter and they should not have to beg sports clubs to grant them access to do the weed control that those clubs are supposed to do. Gate keys should be made available to trusted individuals maintaining the forest and the perimeter path should where possible be public.

The Tree Council urges the Whau Local Board members to support public notification of the new lease and recommends that in the proposal the entire forested margin be legally separated from the sports club leased areas in recognition of the fact that the clubs are not the only stakeholders to Rosebank Domain. If the forest is again included in the lease, volunteers will face continuing difficulties in accessing parts of it for many more years in a period where maintaining native biodiversity is ever more critical and it is likely that in the future it will once more become infested with weeds.

The Tree Council is happy to provide any assistance it can in this matter. If you would like more details on the forest or our proposal please feel free to contact our Board Member David Smith, info@thetreecouncil.org.nz

Thank you for your time considering this matter.

Ngā mihi maioha

David Smith

Board Member, The Tree Council