

PEER REVIEW – Mon 20th September 2010

Via email: JTATE@ncc.nsw.gov.au

Dear Councillors

I have been working as a horticulturist and an arborist within both the public (local Government and agencies) and private spheres for the past 26 years, with the last 14 of those as a consulting arborist in my own business based in south east Qld. I have been following the debate in relation to the Laman Street Fig trees with concern since I have a particular interest and some experience in the preservation and management of older significant and veteran trees. The decisions that you make in relation to these trees will have implications and influence beyond your city. This is a task that I am sure you all understand is not one that can be taken lightly. Decisions in relation to the management of our older tree population have a profound effect on the viability of our urban forest and the legacy we leave for future generations.

While attending an industry conference held in Newcastle in May 2009, with some awareness of the public debate at play, I took time to observe and enjoy the trees with other colleagues and to consider their situation. More recently I have read the decision made by Newcastle Council and further comments provided by Mr Mark Hartley in his report commissioned by the Friends of the Laman Street Figs. I am also aware of some comments offered by individual councillors in relation to the decision and to Mr Hartley's report.

With some considerable concern regarding the direction, tone and consequence of the debate I wish to offer my support to the evidence submitted by Mr Hartley within his report that highlights what appear to be substantial errors in fact that have informed both the debate in relation to tree condition/longevity and the tree risk assessments provided by other consultants.

On the matter of risk, while this may not be the only factor considered in the debate that has led to the current decision to remove and replace the trees, it certainly appears to have initiated and driven the debate to its consequential and imminent drastic conclusions. As a QTRA licensed arborist I do not question that Mr Hartley has authority in commenting on the correct application of QTRA methodology and it is implicit that he has a sound understanding of the principles applying to risk assessment in general. He is correct in pointing out the error in application of the methodology and the fault in underlying assumptions by the arboricultural consultants.

The evidence of complete tree failure and justification for use of such a high probability of failure has not been substantiated by any of the submitted assessments.

Further, I wish to make comment on the matter of the application of SULE and the assertion by some that the Laman Street Fig trees have a projected remaining lifespan of between 5 and 15 years. I am astounded by the use of the SULE methodology (arguably superseded) in this instance to provide an estimate of the tree longevity and the value of the trees in their current situation. As Andrew Simpson states (Peer Review report by IVM section 2.3) *The SULE method is a type of pre-planning tree assessment for establishing the relative usefulness of existing amenity trees in order that decisions can be made in the design of new development.* Clearly this is a public street and not a development site.

More to the point, it appears that this gross underestimation of tree longevity is again based on an erroneous assumed history of tree failure at the root plate. This has promulgated an impression that the trees will all die or fall over within the next 5-15 years. Based on my experience in managing fig trees and my observations of this species in urban situations I can advise you that if this were the case, we would be right now experiencing many complete failures and deaths of similar aged fig trees across the country. The implication for our remaining historic avenues would be catastrophic.

Mistakes are not uncommon and differences of opinion are too common within the range of professional associations that inform our daily decisions. I have personally been in the position of having had errors in my reporting and risk assessments pointed out by other professional associates. Some might take offence at the challenge, professionals are grateful for the critique where this is provided with good intention and without personal or commercial bias. Peer review provides opportunity to learn and enriches debate. Where critique is misdirected towards political or personal aims it is entirely unhelpful in building trust within the public domain.

The misrepresentation by some individuals of Mr Hartley's report is disappointing and unhelpful to this debate.

It is my opinion that the community has a basic expectation of elected representatives to reach final management decisions in relation to the Laman Street Figs through a transparent process, based upon substantiated evidence and supported by rational debate. I urge you to explore all options in relation to the examination of the stability of the Fig Trees as proposed by Mr Hartley. I also put to you that the potential cost of further investigations via the application of the pull testing proposed would be money well spent if it further satisfies the community, elected representatives and commissioned Arborists that the decisions made by Council in relation to ongoing management of these undeniably significant trees is based on sound fact, or in the least, the best evidence available.

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