

Re: Laman Street Fig Trees

My name is Sean Freeman, I am a consulting Arborist living and working in Queensland. I have been engaged in professional Horticulture and Arboriculture for twenty-one years. I have provided expert advice and comprehensive management plans to individual tree owners, corporate bodies, local government authorities (through Queensland NSW and Victoria) and the managers of woodlands, forest reserves, and National Parks.

In 2009 the International Society of Arboriculture Australian Chapter national conference was held in Newcastle and during the four days I was in the city I took the opportunity to visit Laman Street and each of the fig trees. The long term management of larger older trees is an area of Arboricultural practice that I have focused on in the past five years.

I had therefore read with great interest all the reports and associated documents made publicly available on the Newcastle City Council (NCC) website relating to the professional advice being provided to Newcastle Councillors. In my opinion it is not at all surprising the concerns over the misrepresentation of assessable risk from the Laman Street Figs, being presented as falling into the grossly unacceptable range has led some Newcastle rate payers to request a review of the previous reporting.

As a licensed user of the Quantified Tree Risk Assessment (QTRA) system I was deeply concerned with what appeared to be very serious and significant errors in the documented risk analyses and calculations provided to NCC in relation to the Fig trees located in Laman Street.

Due to existing project deadlines and commitments I was unable to personally assist concerned Newcastle residents in revisiting the Laman Street site and prepare a formal document examining the serious errors contained within the previous QTRA reports. I did however write to Mark Hartley and ask if he would in his capacity as both a licensed user of QTRA and a provider of QTRA training in Australia manage to travel up to Newcastle and review the published reports.

I read the report presented by Mark Hartley prior to its public submission and found it to be an accurate critique of the significant errors contained within the calculations that informed the conclusions of the previous QTRA documents.

I have had extensive experience assisting Local Government Authorities across Queensland (and Northern NSW) in developing management plans for their urban trees based on best practice standards. I am acutely aware of the very real problems faced by the various asset custodians when it comes to long term planning decisions that potentially impact on established vegetation of the significance of the Laman Street Figs.

Mark Hartley has not stated either directly or by inference that NCC should not be developing long term improvement plans for the city. I believe that he like me thinks it is entirely appropriate in fact necessary that Local Government make decisions for the future of all the constructed and living assets over which they hold responsibility.

In the specific case of the Fig trees in Laman Street risk and its management has been presented as the principal factor informing the decision making process. This is the clear impression given by the presentation of information to Newcastle residents and by the content of the published professional reports.

It is extraordinary and incomprehensible to me that a valid critique of flaws in the underpinning assumptions of a documented and auditable risk assessment (by a qualified and experienced licensed user and trainer in that specific risk assessment system – QTRA) should be misrepresented in the way it appears to have been.

Elected council officials should be able and willing to dispassionately and rationally consider dissenting views on aspects of public policy; it is after all an intrinsic part of their role within local government. It is equally incomprehensible to me that the professional opinion of a consulting Arborist as highly qualified and with the wealth of relevant experience as Mark Hartley should be treated with such disdain.

I would make the following final observations based on my own experience and the experience of other professionals engaged in the management of urban trees.

There will always be subjective differences between professional Arborists in their assessment of trees, this is perfectly normal and it is an important expression of individual perspective...it enriches the social and cultural fabric of our communities. When it comes to long term planning decisions that have the potential to impact significantly on existing urban vegetation, open recognition and discussion of the range of professional opinions is essential to maintain public support and confidence.

However the degree of disagreement and the level of specific significance in the case of the Fig trees exceed what would be expected through normal subjective variations of perspective. In my opinion it reflects a fundamental disagreement in the assessment of the basic structural integrity of the trees in question. This is an area of disagreement that I believe could have been largely resolved, utilising the static or dynamic testing outlined by Mark Hartley and Ken James.

Consensus building demands open and balanced community engagement, and where past mistakes and errors are identified these should be recognized and addressed as quickly and honestly as possible. The loss of community trust in the motivations underlying public policy, and the methods employed by public officials can be a corrosive force that undermines support for existing decisions and threatens the success of future decisions.

Regards

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