

Enhancing quality of life

Internal Memo

TO: All Councillors
CC: General Manager
FROM: Director Liveable City
DATE: Monday 16 January 2012
SUBJECT: Mike Ellison Report

For your information, Council has reviewed Mike Ellison's report which will be discussed at the Fig Forum tonight, and we have a number of early reservations about the conclusions.

The probability of risk can be argued at length. At the end of the day, Council's extensive body of evidence shows the figs pose a significant risk to life and property and, as a responsible organisation, Council cannot simply ignore this information. Council is accountable, not only under civil liability legislation, but also OHS law, to manage risk in a pro-active manner.

Council has undertaken substantial investigation and analysis using both internal and external experts in arboriculture, engineering and other relevant professions. Council is very comfortable with the conclusions drawn from those reports and the decision by the majority of the democratically elected Council to remove and replace the trees.

The facts are that:

- four reports by professional external experts, all conclude that the trees pose a foreseeable and not insignificant risk
- trenching evidence reveals the absence of mechanically effective supporting roots, and
- there is a substantial history of Hill's fig failures in the inner city. This includes, over the past seven years, nine fig trees failing in the Civic and Cultural Precinct due to poorly developed root systems. One of these trees fell on and structurally damaged the childcare facility in Darby Street.

Over the past 10 years, 35 Hill's figs out of 121 in the inner city have failed, or been removed as a foreseeable risk – that's a failure/loss rate of nearly 29 per cent.

Specific comments about the Report

- The report does not appear to take into account the unique situation in Laman Street. The Laman Street figs are not typical – they have a crown height of 24 metres, a crown width of 25 metres but with severely restricted root plates.
- Each tree appears to have been assessed as if it was in isolation. Council believes the trees should be considered as a collective due to their interlocking canopy.
- The report acknowledges that the trees have been repeatedly damaged by utility work but doesn't appear to detail that damage or factor it into the assessment contained in the report.

- The report does not appear to factor in the continuing growth of the crowns.

Asymmetrical root structure

The report expresses the opinion that the fig trees are highly likely to have deep roots based on the ground conditions that the report states are conducive to root growing. This opinion does not appear to be substantiated with evidence.

Council's laboratory tests have revealed that the soil below the road base is sterile, with little or no nutrients, and therefore not conducive to root growth. Council is aware that some trees that failed in Tyrrell and Bruce Streets had sinker roots close to the trunk but that these roots provide no lateral support.

Council maintains there is a lack of roots and can substantiate this through trenching investigations carried out in 2006 and in 2009.

Asymmetrical tree crowns

The report expresses the opinion there are no high risks resulting from crown asymmetry but fails to substantiate this.

Council maintains that crown asymmetry particularly in relation to asymmetric root architecture is a significant factor in tree stability, and that the loss of adjacent trees would increase the risk of failure in more moderate weather events.

Branch structure

The report expresses the opinion that there is nothing wrong with the branch systems of the trees. This opinion does not appear to be substantiated with evidence.

Council considers the inherent defects in the Hills Fig branching systems to be a foreseeable risk but not as critical as the risk of whole tree failure due to root-plate defects.

Council management take accountability for managing risk to the public, and our own staff who work in the area, very seriously. Any further information that is made available will be reviewed in this context.

Please contact me on 4974 2409, if you would like to discuss this further.

Frank Cordingley
Director Liveable City