

# “Yeronga Memorial Park Project”

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## Introduction

*“Thank you so much. You have no idea what this means to our family”* (Yeronga resident and relative of one of the 97 serviceman from the district represented by a plaque in Honour Avenue).

In fact, this serviceman was one of three brothers from the same family who each lost their lives in World War 1. For their living relatives, their memory, each represented by a tree in an avenue in a park, is a very real reminder of the tragedy of war and the lingering impact on families since.

This is what the Yeronga Memorial Park Project is really about. It was never about spending an allotted amount of capital funds in xyz park in xyz financial year. What a colossal waste of a privilege that would be. The purpose of this paper is to provide a snapshot of the key learnings from this project that enabled it to chart a way from difficult beginnings to having someone express the quote given above. In doing so, my hope is to inspire other councils and authorities to invest in similar projects that make a real difference to real Australian families.

## Context

Yeronga Memorial Park is a large (23ha) park in Brisbane’s inner south, serving a range of recreational and sporting needs of the community. It also happens to contain a number of memorial features, including two significant tree-lined avenues planted at the end of World War 1.

The whole park was placed on the Queensland Heritage Register in 2005 to recognise a number of attributes including:

- the pattern of Queensland's history, being a recreation reserve established in 1882, and later a memorial park from 1917
- the process of grieving that was occurring across Stephens Shire, Queensland and Australia at that time evidenced via the memorial avenue, gates and pavilion
- the layout and characteristics of a public park, since 1882 and a war memorial since 1917 the layout and elements of the park
- its significant aesthetic values
- its social significance via a strong and ongoing association with the local community.

In 2010, Council set aside \$500,000 to deliver some improvements to the park, with the scope to be determined in consultation with the local community, including a specially formed Community Advisory Group (CAG). Some of the members of the CAG were also part of a community group with strong interest in the park, known as the Friends of Yeronga Memorial Park (FoYMP). Allowing the community to influence the scope of a project can often lead to different outcomes than those originally expected but nonetheless is a genuine way to create ownership of a place to maximise Council’s investment. In this case, the CAG made Council acutely aware of what they wished the focus of the project to be, and it wasn’t for recreational improvements.

The park did not have a Conservation Management Plan in place so it was felt that without one the project could not proceed. Whilst Council did not believe one was completely necessary at the time, it turned out to be a contributing success to the overall project. As an added bonus, the exercise was later recognised by the Queensland Heritage Council as a leading example of heritage conservation. But it was not all roses at the beginning.....

## Difficult beginnings

The project could have very easily not got off the ground. It certainly had its fair share of hurdles including:

- Qld regulatory big brother – State legislation required every change to the park to follow a highly scrutinised exemption certificate process
- The historic record of the park was known to be incomplete
- A number of myths were held by people about historic details
- Some CAG members were untrusting that Council would listen to their views
- The general public were disengaged due to past inaction in the park and a perception that the vocal minority would always get their way
- The two primary WW1 avenues were incomplete and in struggling condition
- The park had little capital spends or maintenance in the recent past due to continual conflict from a vocal minority
- The timing for the project was during the lead up to a local government election
- The local press tended toward provocative representations of project information
- There was conflict in the community about recreational and conservation priorities
- Some existing memorial trees were a public safety hazard
- Unrealistic timeframe set for completion

All of these issues needed careful consideration if the project was going to succeed, and it needed a robust process.

## Project Process

I am a firm believer in good project management practises. Without them it is difficult to plot a project's future through the maze of issues that will confront it. The following is an outline of the key steps in sequence as applied to this project.

**Establish governance model** – Decide right upfront who is going to call the shots. Who will play what role? What approvals are needed? Will the community be given power to decide or advise?

**Develop a communication plan** – Plan how all stakeholders will be involved. What are their key interest areas? What is the goal of the project? What are the key messages?

**Research and detective work** – Find out what you don't know. Ask questions. Develop a sound base of knowledge supported by evidence on which to make future project decisions.

**Develop a conservation framework** – Outline how the body of knowledge and evidence will be applied to the site. What will be made prominent? What will be understated? What is the justification?

**Design options** – develop options for how the funding can be spent. Consider different points of view. Consider impacts on future operational costs.

**Prioritise the works** – Seek stakeholder feedback to choose an order of importance. What must be done? What can wait? What dependencies exist? Factor in a contingency figure.

**Implementation** – Deliver the agreed scope of works. Don't deviate. Start when you say you will.

Dedicate the new work – Formally celebrate the completion of the work. Re-confirm its meaning. Invite stakeholder participation.

**Provide interpretive opportunities** – Provide opportunities for site users to understand points of significance. Consider how people take in information. Be interactive as much as possible.

**Ongoing maintenance investment** – Look after what was established. People will be watching. This is the big chance to prove you meant it.

So what did this process deliver for the Yeronga Memorial Park project?

## Achievements

After the successful establishment of the Land and Conservation Management Plan for the park, a range of recreational and conservation improvements were developed, and community feedback was sought. A balanced approach was decided on which led to some quality recreational infrastructure being installed, along with the following key conservation outcomes for the project:



**Restoration of Honour Avenue** – Consolidation of the memorial planting forming the avenue including removing unhealthy and unsafe trees and those of wrong species, planting of new Weeping Fig trees, formative cathedral pruning, and mass-mulching to improve soil condition.



**Replacement of Honour Avenue name plaques** – Re-establishment of lost, damaged, and buried name plaques representing the 97 servicemen from the district that lost their lives in World War 1. Historical research uncovered an original plan showing the original order of placement of the names beneath the trees and this was carefully followed.



**Restoration of Anzac Parade** – Consolidation of the memorial planning forming the avenue including removing unhealthy trees and those park trees that interfered with the avenue, planting new palm trees, and mass-mulching to improve soil condition.



**Memorial gates restoration** – Refurbishment of the two original sets of memorial gates marking the two main park entrances, including the entrance to Honour Avenue.



**Cenotaph maintenance** – Restoration of the structure's metalwork. (The stonework was restored two years prior.)



**Interpretive signage** – Installation of a suite of interpretive signage that invites park users to appreciate the historical, cultural, and environmental significance of the park.

The conservation works were completed just prior to the 2012 Anzac Day service. I could not imagine a more fitting setting. Council took a back seat and the local RSL Sub Branch arranged the proceedings, to ensure the meaning of the works was given upmost priority. Standing side by side during the playing of *Reveille* with some of the most vocal stakeholders at the beginning of the project, there was no feeling of resentment, for we all knew the purpose of this moment was far greater than any of our efforts.

So, what are the key learnings to take from this project that I consider played a part in its success? Here they are in a nutshell, and in no particular order.

## Key Project Learnings

**Know your funding strategy upfront** – there is little point commencing a project that you cannot afford or at least identify a possible funding stream for. Stakeholder expectations can get away on you.

**Consider whole-of-life costs** – Funding the capital project is just the beginning and is often the cheapest part of the whole-of-life cost of the project. Consider as an example the cost of maintain one tree for 100 years compared to the cost of planting it in the first place.....

**Professional advice can be worth every cent** – For those critical parts of the project that everything hinges on, do it right the first time, and if you don't know how, seek help. Case in point - professional historians are well worth their fee.

**No egos and have respect for all opinions** – Don't go into a project thinking you know better than others because there is a very good chance you don't, and it will be proved to you at the worst possible moment. Listen to others and stay teachable.

**You don't know what you don't know** – Don't go into this kind of project thinking you have it fully scoped. Be open-minded and prepared for some things to come out of left field.

**These are more than just capital projects** – The project leader really needs to appreciate the meaning at the crux of the initiative. This needs to sink in from the beginning. If they don't get it, move them on.

**Be transparent with information** – There is no point hiding what you know, particularly when it comes to uncovering history. Get it out in the open. This builds trust and helps contain conspiracies.

**Have a robust rationale for change/decisions** – If you cannot back it up with sound evidence or rationale, don't run with it. These things have a habit of coming back to bite you when you least expect it.

**Make time for people** – After all, that is what these projects are about. Find out who knows what and listen to them. Even the antagonists often have useful points to consider.

**Allow time for changes to sink in** – Nobody likes change, especially if it's happening to them. If something is going to shake someone's tree, you have to make time for things to settle. Rushing things will cause delays in the long run.

**Maintain one point of contact** – Clear communication is the key to managing expectations so it is best to channel this through one person if possible. This is a great strategy for rumour control.

**Staging a project is not a failure** – Not completing a project by running out of money or resources is. If the outcome has to be staged, do it, and communicate the rationale clearly.

**Attention to detail** – A project can quickly be tarnished by a stuff-up. Always check the details and triple check spelling and references. Don't rely on Spellcheck; it is waiting to make a fool out of you.

**Celebrate success and achievements** – Hard work pays off so take the time to enjoy the wins. Be sure to involve all those who had input into the project.

## Conclusion

It is a privilege to be able to contribute to the lead up to the centenary of Anzac in 2015. Brisbane City Council is proud to be working toward the restoration of its memorial and plantings as we approach this milestone. Since 2007, Council has completed a different scale projects across the city including one at Tennyson, Graceville, Toowong, Chermside, Balmoral, and Tarragindi. Yeronga Memorial Park now joins this list as we plan for further projects to be implemented.



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