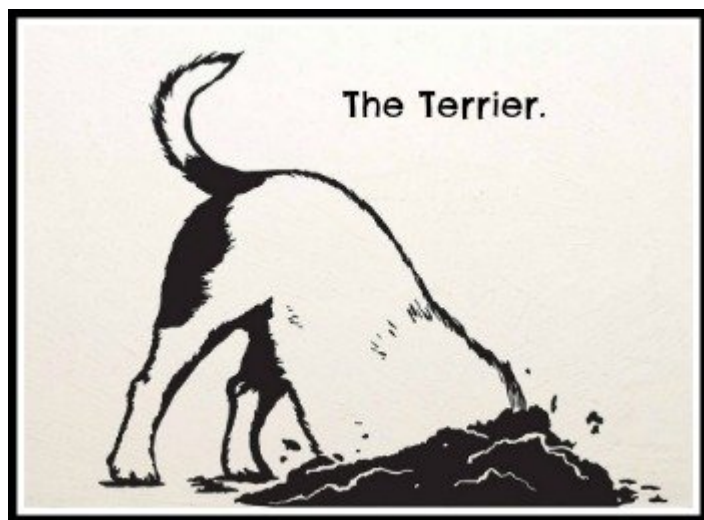


Historic trees could have been saved



Opinion/Analysis by Carol Altmann

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[/dropcap]o you remember the two giant Norfolk pines that were cut down at the Warrnambool Police Station late last year?

I do, because I couldn't believe the Warrnambool City Council didn't try harder to save them – but, as I have since learned, they actually ignored their own advice to let the chainsaws in.

Here is a photo of what we are talking about, taken after the limbs were cut off in preparation for their full removal last August:



The two mature Norfolk pines being prepared for removal in August 2016.

These weren't just any old trees.

The pair had historical links to the beautiful Church of England property next door (built in 1855) and were considered so important by the council that they were specifically mentioned in the planning permit issued in 1996 for the new Warrnambool Police Station in Koroit St.

In particular, the trees were not to be "removed, destroyed or lopped" without written consent from the council.

The new station opened in 1999 but, it appears, had immediate problems with drainage and flooding which to me says more about a poor build in the first place rather than the position of the two trees.

In 2005, a member of Victoria Police – I don't know who,

because names have been redacted from the Freedom of Information documents I received from the council – sent the council an email, saying the pine trees were continuing to cause water damage to the new building and needed to go.

“All advice we have and our own observations tell us that our problems will continue whilst the trees remain in place. I seek approval to remove both of them forthwith,” he/she wrote.

Two weeks later in November 2005, a council officer wrote a detailed response on behalf of the council’s Built Environment Committee.

The most important paragraph of that letter is this:

“...the trees have a positive contribution to the streetscape, have demonstrated historical links with the church property next door, clearly the intention of the endorsed plans is to retain the trees and therefore the removal of the trees should only be considered **as a last resort.**” (my emphasis)

Crucially, the council also recommended the police obtain a Structural Engineer’s report on what could be done to either the building (eg. adding more gutters) or to the trees (eg. root barriers) to fix the problem.

The council even offered the police a free arborist service and access to its Heritage Advisor.

But neither happened. In fact, nothing happened.

Fast forward five years to 2010 and the police wrote to the council again and – again – asked how it could get rid of the trees.

This time, however, there was no detailed response, but a six-line letter from a different council officer to that who responded in 2005.

And this time, the historic trees were suddenly considered

dispensable because they might – *might* – cause problems.

“Given the retention of the trees is **likely** to be problematic, Council does not object to their removal,” he/she wrote. (My emphasis).



It is hard to get a sense of the size of the remaining tree stumps, but you could stand on them and stretch out your arms and your fingertips. I hope that helps.

I am not sure when a written permit expires, but it *took a further six years* before it was used to cut down two Norfolk pines that were apparently causing so much trouble.

No wonder so many people were shocked – at no time has there been any public information or discussion about the trees, despite their significance.

Instead, a six-year-old permit, issued behind closed doors and by a different group of councillors (if they knew about it at all), was enough.

I have tried to talk to the police about why they removed the trees *now*, more than 10 years after they were considered a dire problem. They didn't respond.

As such, I am unable to confirm one story doing the rounds that the space will be used for extra car parking.

Surely not.

Now some of you will be shrugging your shoulders and saying, oh, they were just trees, but to me this sequence of events reveals so much about the weakness of our planning laws, the way decisions are made in private and then how they are pitched to the public.

As custodians of our natural and built heritage, we can surely do better than this.

[box]You can see all of the Freedom of Information documents relating to this story [here](#) and [here](#).[/box]

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