

ITEM 2. CONTINUATION OF THE COOKS RIVER ALLIANCE**FILE NO: S087958.002****SUMMARY**

The City of Sydney is a founding member of the Cooks River Alliance (the Alliance), which was established in 2011 for a three year term following the successes of the Cooks River Foreshore Working Group and Cooks River Sustainability Initiative. The other member councils of the Alliance are Ashfield, Bankstown, Canterbury, Hurstville, Marrickville, Rockdale and Strathfield.

Established through a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), the Alliance assists member councils to work with each other and their communities to improve the health of the Cooks River and its catchment. Over the last three years, the Alliance has prepared and begun to implement its management and action plans. In July 2013, the Alliance received a \$2 million grant from the Australian Government's Caring for Our Country program for the Place.People.Connections project.

During the next term of the Alliance, projects related to improvements to the Alexandra Canal in line with the City's stormwater quality improvement targets, will occur. Other projects to be investigated and further developed within the City of Sydney Local Government Area (LGA) include community engagement and education projects in Green Square and Sydney Park.

Alliance core funding comes from member council contributions, which are calculated according to catchment percentages, with 43 per cent of the City's LGA being in the Cooks River Catchment.

The Alliance MOU expires in June 2014, and continuation of the City of Sydney's membership for another three year term is recommended. It is proposed that financial contributions be set at the 2013/14 level, with an annual CPI adjustment commencing from the 2014/15 financial year. This report provides a brief background to the Alliance, highlights its achievements and recommends continued participation.

RECOMMENDATION

It is resolved that:

- (A) the City of Sydney continue membership of the Cooks River Alliance;
- (B) Council endorse an allocation of \$51,000 (plus GST) per year for three years, plus a CPI increase each year, for the City's contribution to the Alliance;
- (C) authority be delegated to the Chief Executive Officer to negotiate, execute and administer an agreement to continue the Alliance until mid-2017; and
- (D) Council continue to nominate a Councillor delegate to attend quarterly meetings of the Alliance.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment A: Cooks River Alliance Income from Members

BACKGROUND

Governance

1. The Cooks River Alliance (the Alliance) has developed robust governance systems, with one councillor from each member council sitting on the Board, which meets quarterly. In 2013, the Board was expanded to include three community board members: Ms Helen Hume, Mr John Butcher and Mr Paul Thomas. Full governance documentation for the Alliance can be found on the www.cooksriver.org.au website.

History

2. The Cooks River has been severely altered, polluted and degraded over time and, until recently, there was no long-term regional coordinating body focused on councils implementing catchment-wide, on-ground improvements and education. The Alliance was formed to build on historical council collaborations, including the Cooks River Foreshore Working Group and the Cooks River Sustainability Initiative. The Alliance's purpose is to use the combined resources, experience, knowledge and skills within the member councils and their communities to address the complex environmental problems of the Cooks River, as reflected in its mission statement: *Councils working together with communities for a healthy Cooks River catchment.*
3. This mission statement recognises that the Cooks River councils are central to the management of stormwater on public and private lands in the catchment. They can harness the collective action of communities, have regulatory relationships with the State Government and are well-placed to collaborate with stakeholders to generate change at the household, streetscape, neighbourhood and catchment scales.

Award winning management plan and action plan

4. The Cooks River Alliance Management Plan and Cooks River Alliance Action Plan identify priorities, projects and actions to achieve the goals of the Alliance. The Alliance councils winning the NSW Local Government Natural Environment Policies, Planning and Decision Making Award (Excellence in the Environment Awards 2012/2013) recognised this approach to strategic and operational management.
5. The City of Sydney made significant contributions to the development and preparation of these plans. The Alliance has made progress on delivering its action plan, including developing resources, coordinating projects, applying for grants, organising events and assisting member councils. The Alliance takes a collaborative approach to implement its action plan, such as convening the Catchment Stakeholder Group of state agencies.

Australian Government grant of \$2 million

6. The successful grant application to the Australian Government Caring for our Country program for the Cooks River Place.People.Connections project amounts to \$2 million from 2013/14 to 2016/17. The project will result in:
 - (a) seven rain gardens (bio-retention systems) across the catchment to treat stormwater runoff (two each in Marrickville and Canterbury and one each in Hurstville, Strathfield and Bankstown Councils' Local Government Areas);
 - (b) remediation of Landing Lights wetlands in Rockdale;
 - (c) intensive community engagement and education on catchment issues;
 - (d) member councils' Aboriginal advisory committees assisting in increasing capacity for environmental management; and
 - (e) substantial capacity building opportunities for member councils, including \$166,500 funding allocation in this area.

River Health and RiverScience monitoring review

7. The Alliance has been working in partnership with the Georges River Combined Councils' Committee (GRCCC) as part of their River Health program, which was extended to the Cooks River catchment in 2011. RiverScience is a joint program between Marrickville, Canterbury and Rockdale Councils that has been running since 2005. Both of these programs monitor the health of the Cooks River. The Alliance is currently working with the GRCCC to jointly fund an independent review of the River Health and RiverScience programs. The independent review has found the programs to be sound and a number of recommendations for improvements to the program have been provided. Members are currently working together to assess these recommendations.

Sydney Water: Cooks River Water Quality Improvement Plan

8. In a big step forward for the catchment and Alliance advocacy efforts, Sydney Water has announced it will be working with all relevant stakeholders on a Cooks River Water Quality Improvement Plan. The Alliance will represent member councils in the process. Sydney Water has contracted Alluvium Consulting to run the planning process, which is envisaged to take a year.
9. At the last Board meeting, the Alliance reported that the NSW Environment Protection Authority (EPA) has accepted it as being the Appropriate Regulatory Authority for areas of the river that are not with Sydney Water or member councils, following Alliance advocacy. Arising from this determination, both the EPA and Sydney Water have advised they are preparing cases to pursue additional funding for the river through the Independent Pricing and Regulatory Tribunal.

KEY IMPLICATIONS

Strategic Alignment - Sustainable Sydney 2030

10. *Sustainable Sydney 2030* is a vision for the sustainable development of the city to 2030 and beyond. It includes 10 strategic directions to guide the future of the city, as well as 10 targets against which to measure progress. The Cooks River Alliance is aligned with the following strategic directions and objectives:
 - (a) Direction 2 - A Leading Environmental Performer – the Cooks River Alliance’s purpose is to address the complex environmental problems of the Cooks River to create a healthy catchment. This aligns with the City’s targets to reduce pollution entering local waterways via stormwater run-off generated in the City of Sydney LGA. The Alliance is also working towards reducing mains water consumption in multi-residential and single dwellings. The Alliance’s Cooks River: People.Place.Connections project includes an allocation of \$881,130 for community engagement and council capacity building.
 - (b) Direction 10 - Implementation through Effective Governance and Partnerships – recognises that the long-term success of Sustainable Sydney 2030 will depend on detailed analysis and effective partnerships with all tiers of government, the private sector and the community. The Cooks River Alliance is a model for effective governance and partnerships of local councils, government agencies, local community groups and major land owners and users.

Organisational Impact

11. Membership involves attendance by City staff to bi-monthly steering committee meetings and quarterly action group meetings. Different City staff members, depending on the expertise required, may attend action group meetings. For example, during the current term, the City has provided input to the Capacity Building Action Group (Water Sensitive Urban Design) and the Communications Action Group. This is equivalent to approximately seven full days per annum including travel to attend meetings, plus additional time to action items as required.
12. Membership provides an effective platform for councillors and staff to work together on Cooks River catchment-wide issues. For example, the Alliance work on assessing member’s climate change risk assessment and adaptation plans will be useful for the City’s current development of such plans.
13. Membership also allows the City to exert positive influence upon, and increase the capacity of, important local government neighbours.

Risks

14. The key risk identified is the risk of not participating. This may be construed as being inconsistent with the City’s Sustainable Sydney 2030 Strategic Direction 2 - A leading environmental performer, which could attract media attention.

Social / Cultural / Community

15. The 2014-2017 period of the Alliance will be very active in direct engagement with communities at a household level. This will educate and inform residents on water-sensitive messages, and guide changes in personal behaviour. Australian Government grant funds provide for a new full-time Alliance staff member to deliver these outcomes.
16. Currently, the Alliance is entering into a partnership with the Ethnic Communities Council to develop resources and deliver programs in a range of community languages.

Environmental

17. Effective Natural Resource Management cannot be achieved through a piecemeal approach. With Alexandra Canal being a major tributary of the Cooks River, it is vital that the City continue membership of the Alliance. Regional bodies of councils are effective for lobbying and advocacy, and a continued Cooks River Alliance will be able to further expand attention to the Cooks River by the three spheres of government, non-government organisations and the private sector.

Economic

18. The Alliance is effective in gaining grant funding and the City's contribution and membership ensures a stable regional body, which will continue to be attractive to grant providers.

BUDGET IMPLICATIONS

19. Sufficient funds for membership of the Cooks River Alliance are included in the 2014/15 operating budget and future years' forward estimates:
 - (a) Year 4 - 2014/15 \$52,173;
 - (b) Year 5 – 2015/16 \$53,373; and
 - (c) Year 6 – 2016/17 \$54,601.

Investment Continuity

20. The 2011-2014 period was a start phase for the Alliance, involving establishment of strategic direction, staffing and external grant funding. As the compliment of 3.6 (full-time equivalent) staff was gained in late 2013, there are significant member funds (\$207,004) which will be rolled over into the second Alliance term from 2014 to 2017. This period will also see expenditure of \$2 million of Australian Government grant funds.
21. During the next term, projects related to improvements to the Alexandra Canal, in line with the City's stormwater quality improvement targets, will occur. Other examples to be investigated and further developed include community engagement and education projects in Green Square and Sydney Park, and other projects that may contribute to improved water quality in the Alexandra Canal and the Cooks River.

CRITICAL DATES / TIME FRAMES

22. The next term of the Cooks River Alliance will commence from 1 July 2014.

OPTIONS

23. The alternative option is to not continue support for the Cooks River Alliance. This would however create a risk to the City that it is not following through on its Sustainable Sydney 2030 vision, specifically Strategic Direction 2 – A leading environmental performer.

PUBLIC CONSULTATION

24. No consultation has been undertaken or planned.

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