

The Pocket History of the Gold Coast Regional Botanic Gardens.



20 YEARS ON...

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Twenty years on

Following is an overview of the development of the Gold Coast Botanic Gardens at Rosser Park over the past twenty years. This project has been something of a stop and start affair until relatively recent times.

1986 – First Master Plan

Twenty years ago on 7th February 1986 the Gold Coast City Council resolved that Botanic Gardens should be created on the site of today's fledgling Botanic Gardens at Benowa which include 2.75ha (6.8 acres) donated by John and Essie Rosser in 1969 and declared an Environmental Park in 1974.

The site comprised Rosser Park and associated areas including a dip yard, a pound area, a roadway and water reserve totalling 3.43 hectares. Developer contributions made up the remainder. The site replaced Musgrave Park, Southport which was reclassified as a Reserve. Despite its poor soil profile Musgrave Park had been designated a botanic gardens in the early 1970's after being ceded to the Council by the State Government in 1972 specifically for that purpose.

The early contribution of the Gold Coast Garden Club in beautifying Rosser Park should not to be overlooked. On 1 August 1986 the Club planted 40 trees and erected a plaque to record its part in helping to develop and maintain Rosser Park. For a decade or so following a 1976 suggestion by foundation member Norma Nesbitt, the Club had devoted Arbor Day in August each year to planting trees in

Rosser Park. Council assisted by digging holes, providing trees and cutting grass in preparation for the 40-50 trees planted annually. During this time John Rosser, who celebrated his 87th birthday in 1979, helped Club members to water, weed and mulch the new trees between the annual plantings.

On 13th June 1986 Council adopted a Master Plan for development of the newly-designated Rosser Park Botanic Gardens and appointed Mr Robert Prestipino as the Project Co-ordinator. The plan for the Botanic Gardens was developed in conjunction with the National Parks and Dr Denis Priest, a Botanical Consultant who had wide experience with the Brisbane gardens. In addition to the construction of a Conservatory, the plan included an environmental centre and public amenities to be built at a cost of \$100,000. On 30th May 1986 Council approved the appointment of Dr Priest as a Botanical Consultant for a further period of three years.

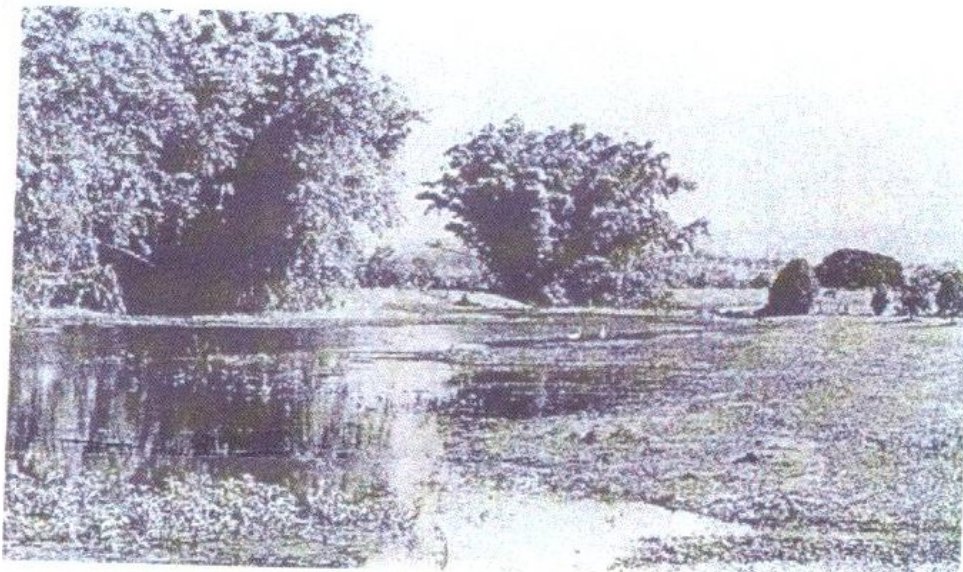
In July 1986 Council sought and obtained, albeit with some provisos, the written approval of John Rosser for that part of the Master Plan which would impact on the Environmental Park area donated by his family. Among Mr Rosser's expressed concerns were the location and width of the proposed road. Stage 1 of the bo-

botanic gardens project was to cost \$495,000 of a total of \$1 million dollars to be outlaid over three to four years. A Peace Grove was to be planted to commemorate 1986 as the International Year of Peace and a three kilometre ring road was to be named Peace Drive.

A year later in July 1987 funds for the proposed botanical gardens had been pruned as a result of State and Federal spending cuts made in the minibudget and at Premiers' conference. Nevertheless, work had begun on detailed design and compiling of plant species lists. Earthworks were underway with part-dredging of a lagoon and construction of an island. Stage 1 was to be opened to the public in June 1988.

lagoon excavation and land forming works had all been completed. Stage 1 was declared open. It had become part of a ten year plan to transform the site into botanic gardens which would be a showpiece for the city. The ten year plan included a pedestrian path system, an environmental centre, three major public activity and gathering places along with a \$550,000 planting programme over 10 years.

Towards the end of 1991 all major engineering infrastructure in the gardens was declared to have been completed and beautification works were scheduled to begin. The planned environmental centre and conservatory had not eventuated, nor had the Peace Grove been planted. However a Peace



Early photo of stands of bamboo along south-western side of Rosser Park. Source Gold Coast City Council Local Studies Library.

1990 – Introduction of 10 Year Plan

By July 1990 a one-way ring road through Rosser Park as well as the

Pole had been installed in 1987 by The Society of Prayer for World Peace and the Gold Coast City Council. The pole was later relocated to make way for a road.

1992 – Second Master Plan

The original 1986 project was to be implemented over three to four years at a total cost of \$1 million but had subsequently evolved into a ten-year plan. At the close of 1992 it was set to be totally superseded by yet another proposal. Council was considering a brand new \$14 million project to be spread over the following nine years. By early December 1992 the consultants Landplan Studio had submitted an impressive 9 year scheme to develop Rosser Park. The submission drew from the best features of botanical gardens all around the world.

Subject to a number of conditions, the Council adopted the new Master Plan at its meeting on Friday 11th December 1992. The conditions included a public presentation of the Master Plan on 21 January 1993 to take on changes arising from the community feedback. By this time the preliminary cost estimate to establish the gardens was calculated at \$17 million. The sum of \$587,000 was set aside during the 1992-93 financial year for Stage 1 of the new 9-year programme. Rosser Park Botanic Gardens were henceforth to be a Regional Botanic Gardens and would in time have a Visitors Centre.

During the latter half of 1993 the Council threatened to appropriate a section of Rosser Park to widen Ashmore Road. This move was forestalled by a combination of public outcry, strong lobbying from the Gold Coast Historical Society and a timely reminder from the Rosser family that the original Deed of Agreement in 1969 precluded any of the land donated by the family being used for road widening.

In February 1994, as part of the implementation of the new 9-year project, \$860,000 was earmarked by the Council's Maintenance and Construction Committee for the creation of walking and viewing paths around the lake, an elevated timber walkway, extra seating and bird hides as well as deepening the lake with the intention of improving Rosser Park's waterbird habitat.

Council announced its intention to abandon the 9-year plan just four months later at its budget discussion meeting on 30 June 1994. Only eighteen months had elapsed since the plan was adopted. \$1.5 million of the estimated \$17 million had already been spent and a further \$670,000 would-be outlaid to finish partly-completed works, \$140,000 of which was to be deferred to the 1995/96 budget.

The Botanic Gardens had to compete for funds with foreshore park development and drainage works.

Had the Botanic Gardens project continued, an estimated \$3 million budget allocation would have been required to undertake proposed earthworks and civil works in the 1994-95 financial year. This amount included provision for an aerated lagoon and \$1.1 million for tree planting. In fact construction of the water feature to aerate the lagoon did go ahead at a cost of \$518,208 and was completed in 1988. Its purpose was both decorative as a water plume and functional in helping to achieve optimum quality irrigation water in the long-term. The long-awaited Botanic Gardens again reverted to park status.

1999 – Resurgence of Interest

In February 1999 following a resurgence of interest from various community groups in the development of botanic gardens on the Gold Coast, Mayor Gary Baidon confirmed that Council supported the proposal for botanic gardens in principle but the massive costs involved in their establishment and maintenance meant they were unlikely to be developed in the short term. Instead, Council was considering a number of alternative options to a major botanic gardens. One was to allow volunteers to tend its existing parks in a bid to establish greater community interaction. Another was to create a series of themed mini botanic

In June 1998 Council rejected a proposal that it consider buying the Olsen Bird Gardens in Currumbin Valley. The decision was due in part to the site's perceived isolation and to the prohibitive cost of acquiring the privately-owned land, the money for which was thought to be better employed in developing the actual gardens on council-owned land.

Over an 18 month period the Friends of the Gold Coast Botanic Gardens had undertaken their own research and in a presentation to Council on 7 May 1999 pointed out that the results revealed very strong community support for botanic gardens. More than 2000 letters of support had been re-



gardens across the city along the lines of the scented garden already established at Palm Beach. By this time smaller local governments such as Hervey Bay, Gladstone and Coffs Harbour had already established botanic gardens.

ceived. As a consequence, Council's Coordination Committee recommended that suitable sites be investigated by Councillors and Friends. The 52 hectare Schuster Park was the top contender in the list compiled for Council by the Friends group. It could boast a large accessible water front-

age, significant palm and mangrove colonies, paperbark wetlands and some rare tree species. The park also had road and pedestrian access and was large enough to allow planting and development over many years. Another of the sites under consideration was the Nerang River Park.

On 14 May 1999 council appeared to be wavering over its February decision "not to proceed with the development of a botanic gardens in the short term" when it called for the formulation of a master planning process. Cr Sue Robbins, then Chair of the Gold Coast Planning (South) Committee, saw great merit in having the Friends of the Gold Coast Botanic Gardens (along with the Gold Coast Branch of the Wildlife Protection Society) involved in the master planning process and in allocating the Friends group funds to oversee the project. She also supported the involvement of the FGCBG to the extent of suggesting that they coordinate the project with the help of the corporate sector.

The proactive efforts of the Friends played a crucial role in encouraging Council to revive the Botanic Gardens project. In June 1999 Rosser Park appeared to have a chance of being in the running once again when Brian and Sue Birch, who in 1998 had won the title of grand champions in the Gold Coast Garden Competition, urged Council to reconsider establishing botanic gardens at Rosser Park for community cultivation. By August 1999 the topic of major botanic gardens for the Gold Coast was back on the agenda only six months after Council had abandoned the idea.

Although Council approved \$80,038 to develop a master planning process, the location of the gardens was still undecided. On 20 August 1999 a scope of works was commissioned to reflect Council's vision for a botanic gardens on the Gold Coast. The vision was based on "What is a Botanic Gardens – functions and benefits", an extract from *Guidelines for the Planning and Establishment of a Regional Botanic Garden* prepared for the Australian Flora Foundation by Landplan Studio Landscape Architects. Council arranged for the services of Lawrence Smith, Director of Landplan Studio, to facilitate the development of the scope of works. Mayor Gary Baildon proposed that access be sought to master plans from botanic gardens throughout Queensland as a basis for developing its own plan. He believed that botanic gardens for the Gold Coast could be developed at a reasonable price. Throughout this period the Friends of the Gold Coast Botanic Gardens under the leadership of Kate Heffernan-Green was growing in membership and support, while interest in a botanic gardens for the Gold Coast continued to flourish.

At its meeting on 10 December 1999 Council invited Mr Smith of Landplan Studio to make a presentation to the Coordination committee in which he outlined the economic, cultural, scientific and educational benefits of having a botanic gardens on the Gold Coast. He asked Council to consider a botanic gardens as a future investment for the Gold Coast rather than a short-term project given that average-sized botanic gardens could take up to ten years to establish. Although Mr Smith described to Council a range of botanic

gardens from high profile through to moderate scale and smaller ones, he suggested that the ideal location for a botanic gardens was a well-drained site of some 100 hectares, highly visible from a main traffic artery. At the same meeting Council requested a report which would identify possible sites, to be prepared in consultation with Divisional Councillors. The report would also outline a scope of works for the establishment of a Gold Coast Botanic Gardens.

On 26 May 2000 Council was presented with a *Site Evaluation Report* prepared with the participation of the Friends of the Gold Coast Botanic Gardens. The selection parameters originated from the above Guidelines. The fifteen parameters were Ownership, Tenure, Zoning, Location and Access, Area, Shape and Form Configuration, Security, Services Adequacy, Topography, Hydrology, Soils and Geology, Vegetation, Fauna, Climate and Microclimate, Structures and Artefacts, Visual Context.

Ten sites were considered. They are ranked below with their respective site attribute scores totalled from the points allocated to each of the site selection parameters:

- Rosser Park, Ashmore (90)
- Albert Park, Broadbeach Waters (82)
- Musgrave Park, Southport (79)
- Settlement Land, Springbrook (76)
- Cascade Gardens, Broadbeach Waters (74)
- Nerang Riverside Parklands, Nerang (73)
- Schusters Park, Andrews (73)
- 138 Piggabeen Road, Currumbin Valley (72)
- Robina Parkway, Clear Island Waters (67)
- Russ Hinze Park, Oxenford (56)

Landplan Studio considered that Rosser Park had “a distinct advantage over other sites, which would generally need to commence from a relatively undeveloped state or modify planning to suit existing on-site facilities” (Landplan, 2000). The FGCBG supported both the evaluation process and its conclusion. Council acknowledged the participation of the FGCBG in the site evaluation process as well as the contribution of land made by the Rosser family to the area forming Rosser Park. The parcel donated for “park purposes” by the late John and Essie Rosser in an Agreement dated 14 May 1969 comprised approximately 9% of the total area of 31.25ha which now made up Rosser Park.

Although the Master Plan prepared by Landplan Studio for Rosser Park in 1992 still existed, it was suggested at the May 2000 Community Services Meeting that “a comprehensive review be undertaken in regard to its conceptual design and implementation”. A significant portion of the \$17million required to implement the earlier plan was attributed to the capital outlay required for the substantial structures involved. A new Master Plan would have a greater focus on garden development in lieu of structures and be implemented over a longer time-scale.

A “longer term” approach to implementation was seen to better favour Council’s capacity to provide the necessary resources. Given that the Royal Botanic Gardens in Sydney were established in 1816 and that the Australian National Botanic Gardens, though begun in 1948, first opened to the public in 1967, a term of 50 years was thought to be a reasonable timeframe

to see the entire development at Rosser Park brought to fruition.

Once again Rosser Park was the designated site for a Regional Botanic Gardens and a new Master Plan would be prepared after a review of the previous one.

Group". They stated that they represented dog owners who currently utilized Rosser Park. Their objection was not to botanic gardens for the city, but to the possibility that dogs might be prohibited from Rosser Park if the proposed botanic gardens there went ahead. Their concerns proved to be



Not everyone was happy at the prospect of botanic gardens at Rosser Park. Some years prior, in 1997, Council had approved a number of dog exercise areas across the city including Rosser Park. Dogs were prohibited from the vicinity of the ponds and permitted on the western area only. They were to be kept on leashes along access roads to the exercise area. On 4 July 2000 Council officers met with a small group of residents who had adopted the name "Rosser Park Action

unfounded once it was seen that the new Master Plan allowed for a dog exercise area in the lower western part closest to the river.

Council conducted a community consultative process to enable residents to have their say on all aspects of the proposed future Botanic Gardens at Rosser Park. Part of this process was an information Forum held on 6 July 2000 at the Albert Waterways Community Centre. During the evening residents would learn more about the func-

tions and benefits of botanic gardens. Lawrie Smith, Director of Landplan Studio chose the topic "What is a Botanic Garden?" while Kate Heffernan-Green, President of the FGCBG Inc. explained the role of the Friends group. Residents were provided with an opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns during the question and answer session that followed.

2002 – Third Master Plan

On 15 February 2002 Mr Lawrie Smith and Mr Neville Connell of Landplan Studio accompanied by Mr Ross McKinnon, Curator of the Brisbane Botanic Gardens made a presentation on the draft Master Plan to Council's Coordination Committee meeting. The



draft Master Plan had been developed after detailed investigation and with extensive levels of community consultation over an 18-month period. This included community consultation regarding site selection (2000), the formation and input of a Gardens Ref-

erence Group (GRG) (2001), a visitor and resident survey (2001), public meetings (2000 & 2001, an "Options" presentation to key staff and the GRG (2001) as well as liaison with a range of GCCC staff, state government agencies, and community organisations (2001).

As anticipated, the focus of the draft Plan was on long-term implementation (20 years +) and greater emphasis was placed on horticultural development in preference to building infrastructure. The site would henceforth be known as "Gold Coast Regional Botanic Garden: Rosser Park". It was considered important to develop and maintain avenues of communication and consultation between the GCCC and the wider

community, including establishing and maintaining advisory committees for community input. For these purposes a Botanic Gardens Reference Group was to be established. The deadline set for community consultation and comment on the draft master plan was set for a period of one month from February 2002, although it actually ended on 18 April 2002. A copy was displayed in a feature of the Saturday edition of the *Gold Coast Bulletin*. It included a tear-out questionnaire for the purpose of inviting public comment. Copies of the news feature were also available upon

request from Council. In addition, Council's web site featured the draft master plan inviting interested persons to submit comments.

On 28 June 2002 Council adopted the Master Plan and Master Plan Report. It was recommended that signage be prepared and installed onsite at Rosser Park displaying the Master Plan. Mr Ross Greenwood, Parks Gold Coast Superintendent and all involved within Community Services were congratulated for a great public consultation process. Preliminary estimates placed total investment in the botanic garden at more than \$11 million. Council set aside \$385,000 in the 2002/03 budget to begin detailed design and implementation of Stage One of the plan. This budget allocation represented \$2 from the \$29 Open Space Preservation Levy paid by every ratepayer. The official logo for the Botanic Gardens would be a stylised *Banksia aemula* (Wallum Banksia), the official floral emblem of the Gold Coast, in blue, yellow and green, to represent the many communities of the region.

At a Special Budget Committee Meeting on 28 May 2003 Council approved the use of loans to a value of \$4 million (2004/05) to be serviced by the Open Space Preservation Levy contribution, to enable construction of the Botanic Gardens to proceed. This amount was to fund a staged delivery of the Botanic Gardens project over the four years of the Capital Works Program from 2004/5 to 2007/8. Council's 2004/05 adopted budget for the Botanic Gardens included \$401,300 from the Open Space Preservation Levy.

The 27th July 2003 marked National

Tree Day and also the Inaugural Community Tree Planting organised by the Friends of the Gold Coast Botanic Gardens to celebrate the launch of the Gold Coast Botanic Gardens. The Mayor, Cr Gary Baildon attended the Official Opening Ceremony. Over 2000 plants were put in on the day. This would be the first of many future community planting days organized by Kate Heffernan-Green, the FGCRBG Planting Day Co-ordinator during which many thousands of native plants would find new homes in the Mangroves to Mountains transect. In the latter half of 2003 Council announced the appointment of Mr Kit Smith to the full-time position of Project Manager/ Curator for a period of three years. Mr Smith had over twenty years' experience as a Landscape Architect, including his previous 10 years with the GCCC.

The Gardens project was given a boost in November 2003 when Council's Parks Superintendent, Ross Greenwood announced that before construction had even started, the Gardens had won a Parks & Leisure Australia national award for Parkland Design of the Year.

On 12 December 2003 Council resolved to proceed with an Expression of Interest (EOI) process for the Visitors Centre. The EOI document was prepared, reviewed, amended and discussed with the relevant Council Committees. The outcome was that Council resolved on 15 October 2004 not to proceed with the Visitors Centre in Stage 1 of the project. It would be replaced by alternative projects identified from the Master Plan within the value of the current approved budget. In-

stead, temporary relocatable Visitor Facilities were to be provided during Stage One.

By July 2004 two proposals had been received by organisations keen to be involved with developing the Gardens. Rotary International proposed a sensory garden for the disabled involving 55 clubs within District 9640. This was realized in early February 2006 with the Official Opening taking place in June. The Gold Coast Rose Society proposed the development of a rose

commemoration of their 30th Anniversary. The planting took place on 3 April with over 100 bushwalkers participating.

On 15 September 2005 a \$2 million earthworks program started as part of the first stage of the redevelopment of Rosser Park into the Gold Coast Regional Botanic Gardens. Completion was expected to be in early 2006 when a further \$1.2 million would see a combination of paths and decks built to provide a pedestrian route around the

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President Nick Bloor and Rotarians help plant the Rotary Sensory Garden in February 2006.
Photo: Alan O'Connell

garden showcasing varieties that would do well on the Gold Coast. The first stage of the rose garden was officially opened in October 2005 following the planting of 400 roses. In early 2005 a further proposal was received. The Gold Coast Bushwalking Club wished to plant a butterfly garden in

namental lake. Currently the official opening of Stage 1 of the Botanic Gardens is eagerly anticipated. It is expected to take place in December 2006, having been postponed from 23rd February due to unavoidable delays in construction.



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