

Frequently Asked Questions - Parkes Wetlands Project

How did the idea for the wetlands come about?

Since being constructed in the 1960s, the old Parkes Sewage Treatment Plant ponds (out of which the Parkes Wetlands have been constructed) supported a wide variety of bird life. The ponds effectively acted like wetlands for decades, providing a home for many of our native plants and animals, especially waterbirds.

These ponds were often visited by avid birdwatchers who knew the value of treatment ponds as perfect locations to view rare and migratory birds. Parkes' own local birdwatching group, the Lachlan Valley Branch of the National Parks Association of NSW, have been visiting the site for over 30 years, and were instrumental in the initial discussions regarding turning this site into community-accessible wetlands.

When the future of the treatment ponds came into question during the construction of the new Parkes Sewage Treatment Plant in 2016, the idea of formally creating the wetlands as a community space gained momentum.

Two primary objectives were forefront when it came to the future of the site: the environmental benefit of retaining the ecological features of the ponds, and the social and economic benefit of activating the space for residents and tourists.

With a passionate drive by key Council staff, and the full support of Councillors, the first steps to creating the Parkes Wetlands were taken.

Why are the wetlands being constructed?

When the new Parkes Sewage Treatment Plant was completed in 2017, the associated treatment ponds became redundant, leaving Council with an obligation to rehabilitate them. The NSW Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) enforced this obligation, and Council was presented with two options: allow the ponds to dry out and spend considerable capital on returning the land to an arable state for one neighbouring landholder to lease, or spend a similar amount of capital to transform the site into a naturalistic wetland for the entire community to enjoy.

Council chose the latter option as it stood to benefit the entire Parkes Shire community, would create numerous economic benefits for our Shire, and would provide vital habitat for native flora and fauna which is increasingly important in the face of a changing climate. Moreover, it would fill a much-needed gap in our community by creating a freely accessible 'blue space' close to town for residents to enjoy.

Council's requirement to rehabilitate this space was the initial catalyst for prioritising this project. Once the idea for the wetlands took shape and community support was gained, Councillors fully supported prioritising this project.



What community engagement has informed this project?

When the direction to rehabilitate the former treatment ponds was given to Council in 2017, the option to transform the site into a naturalistic wetland for the entire community to enjoy was preferred and fully supported by Councillors.

In 2021, Parkes Shire Council conducted comprehensive community engagement to assess the current priorities of residents. The resulting Parkes Shire Operational Plan and Budget 2022-23 utilised these identified priorities to determine capital projects for the Parkes Shire 2035+ Program.

The development of the Parkes Wetlands will address six of the community's top eleven priorities. These include cycleways and shared paths, public art, open spaces and reserves, community gardens, public amenities, and passive recreation. In the same document, wetland restoration was listed as one of the principal priorities related to open spaces and recreation.

Furthermore, the Parkes Shire Community Strategic Plan 2035+ outlines key themes based on 300 ideas suggested by the residents of the Shire during Council's most recent Community Satisfaction Survey (2023). Themes include sport and recreation, liveability, public spaces, destination marketing and visitor attraction - all of which will be addressed by the project.

In February 2021 a community engagement survey aimed at raising awareness of Council's numerous environmental initiatives outlined the proposed plans to undertake construction works to create the Parkes Wetlands. The survey asked respondents if the Parkes Wetlands would be a space they visited once complete, and over 97% of respondents answered 'yes.'

In December 2023, Council conducted a community engagement survey to raise awareness about the proposed plans to further activate the Parkes Wetlands for public use. The survey sought to gauge interest in Stage 3 of the wetlands project, and the results were overwhelmingly positive. Over 100 respondents participated, with 100% affirming support for Council's efforts to secure grant funding to continue the project. Additionally, 100% of responders expressed eagerness to utilise the site upon completion.

Council has partnered with Central West Lachlan Landcare to host community revegetation activities on site over several years, including numerous National Tree Day events. Community support for the project is evident at these events, being voiced amongst participants who praise Council efforts to create this natural space for our native flora and fauna, and for our residents to enjoy.

What benefits will the wetlands project bring to Parkes?

When complete, the Parkes Wetlands will be transformed into an attractive and accessible public space for residents and visitors to connect with nature. The expected positive outcomes are wide-ranging and include positive outcomes for global biodiversity, local and regional economy, public health, and social connection.

Environmental Benefits

This project will transform this area into a vital, thriving wetland that sustainably supports local biodiversity, including many identified threatened species. A range of native animals, birds, reptiles, mammals, and invertebrates will be afforded an important refuge, particularly during prolonged drought which the wetlands have been designed to withstand. These wetlands will be a haven for migratory birds, supporting national



commitments under the Bonn Convention, CAMBA, JAMBA, and ROKAMBA international agreements for migratory species. Notable species previously recorded at this site include the Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Curlew Sandpiper, Red-necked Stint, Latham's Snipe, Black-tailed Godwit, and many more. Of these migratory species, the Curlew Sandpiper is listed as "critically endangered" under the EPBC Act and "endangered" in NSW. The Black-tailed Godwit is listed as "vulnerable" in NSW and is currently under EPBC threatened listing assessment. Other species of conservation concern have been recorded at the site, including the Barking Owl, Freckled Duck, Little Eagle, Little Lorikeet, Spotted Harrier, and Superb Parrot. All records have been sourced from publicly available repositories of biodiversity data.

Economic Benefits

There are two main economic generators from this project: the improved liveability of the township of Parkes and the Shire, and; the new tourism opportunities the project offers for regional, national, and international visitation. The visitation experiences created by this project will benefit Parkes economically by stimulating the visitor economy and providing opportunities to connect with neighbouring nature-based attractions. Installing tourism infrastructure at Parkes Wetlands will diversify the Shire's tourism products and attract a new target market of visitors to the region. National data reveals that the scale of birdwatching as a domestic tourism activity in remote and regional Australia is significant. Day trips and overnight trips for birdwatching are estimated to contribute \$283 million to the Australian economy, with birdwatching tourists known to spend more than the average tourist. With dedicated marketing, the Parkes Wetlands can capitalise on this fast-growing niche market and will complement the birdwatching experiences available at nearby attractions including Gum Swamp in Forbes, Lake Cowal, and Lake Cargelligo. This will enhance regional tourism by providing a new destination on the birdwatching trail, enticing more birdwatchers to the central west.

Health Benefits

Parkes township lacks a river or major freshwater feature with residents required to travel at least 30km to enjoy water (or 'blue') spaces. The wetlands will be within easy walking distance from the town, easily accessible on foot, bike or car. Benefits from connecting with green and blue spaces is well documented and has long been recognised in government planning policy, based on a large body of academic research showing that accessible green/blue spaces lead to better health outcomes including increased fitness, reduced rates of depression, more space to enjoy active recreation, and more space enjoy a place of peace in nature. This project will also facilitate enhanced social connection, offering a new space for the whole community to participate in birding, reconnecting with nature, active learning, citizen science, active recreation (walking and cycling) and an opportunity to celebrate, understand and learn the significance of wetlands to our environment.

What funds are being used to construct these wetlands?

To date, \$440,000 worth of grant funding has been secured for this project through the following programs:

- **NSW Environmental Trust Restoration and Rehabilitation Program (NSW Govt.).** This program assists community and government organisations to contribute to the ongoing sustainable management and stewardship of significant environmental assets and services in NSW.
- **Local Roads and Community Infrastructure Program (Federal Govt.).** This program supports local councils to deliver priority community infrastructure and local road projects across the nation, supporting jobs and delivering benefits to local communities.



- **Local Small Commitments Allocation (NSW Govt.).** This program helps fund small local projects for the purpose of enhancing community wellbeing and providing benefits to communities in NSW.

Additional grant funding will continue to be sought to further activate the wetlands for community use.

To date, \$500,000 has been contributed to the project from Council's Sewer budget. This budget can only be used on projects related to Council's sewerage operations - the rehabilitation of the treatment ponds as historical sewerage infrastructure falls into this category.

Will funding this project mean less money is available for roads and other important infrastructure?

No, this project has not and will not direct funding away from other important infrastructure or Council services.

As mentioned above, the wetlands are historical sewerage infrastructure that Council had an obligation to rehabilitate. This project has been factored into Council's sewer budget for the past five years. Directing funding towards this project has not and will not impact on Council's ability to continue to provide a high standard of sewerage operations to the Parkes Shire.

Council's sewer budget is reserved solely for projects related to Council's sewerage operations.