



PARLIAMENT OF TASMANIA

PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS

**ROYAL TASMANIAN
BOTANICAL GARDENS**

VISITOR AND INTERPRETATION CENTRE

Brought up by Mr Cox and Ordered by the House of Assembly to be printed.

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By Authority: Government Printer, Tasmania

1. INTRODUCTION

The Committee has the honour to report to the House of Assembly in accordance with the provisions of the *Public Works Committee Act 1914* on the proposal for a Visitor and Interpretation Centre at the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens.

The Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens are the second oldest botanical gardens in Australia established in 1818, just 15 years after British settlement. The oldest trees in the Gardens date back to 1828 when the fashion was to recreate the English countryside. Examples of architecture from that era such as the Arthur Wall and the Superintendent's Cottage, commenced in 1829, still remain.

The Gardens extends over 13.5 hectares and has over 6500 taxa of plants on display. Entrance is free and the Gardens are open every day of the year. It is regarded as the best cool climate botanical garden in Australia, with the largest collection of conifers of any botanical gardens in the southern hemisphere. Visitor numbers are the highest of any public site in Tasmania with an established visitation of over 346 000 visits last year. It is clearly a botanical gardens of world significance.

Despite its high visitation, the Gardens does not at present have adequate facilities to cater for visitors, which severely limits the ability to provide information, introduce visitors to the Gardens and the Tasmanian environment or provide indoor facilities for inclement weather. The lack of facilities also severely limits the Gardens ability to raise revenue.

Infrastructure needs to be put in place so that the Gardens can properly fulfil its mission. With this in mind The RTBG proposes to construct a Visitor and Interpretation Centre that will contain a number of modern facilities for use by both visitors and staff.

2. PROPOSAL

The overall requirement is for a development that is sympathetic to the botanical and heritage values of the Gardens, and also resolves a number of issues that detract from these values.

At the same time, a facility must be provided that will serve to enhance the commercial viability of the RTBG operation in a thoroughly economic and sensible manner.

It is important that the site chosen minimises the impact of the development on the Gardens and integrates facilities in both a visual and a functional sense.

The project funding for the visitor centre development as a whole is strictly limited and certain priorities have been identified. These are:

- The establishment of improved visitor information, and botanical and horticultural interpretation facilities.
- To enhance the income potential of the Botanical Gardens.
- The provision of appropriate education and resource facilities.
- The integration of visitor facilities in the one precinct.

The Visitor Centre development is intended to achieve the following objectives:

- To act as an introduction and interpretation centre for the Royal Tasmanian Botanical Gardens and for the Tasmanian flora by providing information and multimedia stimulation for visitors to the RTBG.
- To provide improved visitor and retail facilities in an all-weather venue.
- Link with or replace/improve restaurant and kiosk facilities to RTBG.
- To act as an education centre to facilitate and expand existing environmental education programs. The proposed interactive multimedia facilities will greatly enhance the impact and effectiveness of those programs.
- To promote the beauty, values and benefits of Tasmania's superb natural environment to visitors.
- To provide improved resource facilities such as space for technical and scientific functions of the RTBG.
- To more than pay its way and achieve best value for money.

The objectives for the Interpretive Works are:

- to provide information and interpretation to visitors in an interesting, entertaining, educational and interactive manner so as to develop an understanding in visitors that:
- all life on earth depends on plants and that therefore plants and the environment must be conserved and appropriately managed for sustainability;
- that the Tasmanian flora is unique, rich, diverse and worth visiting, and;
- that the RTBG is a part of a national and international network of organisations whose core role is bringing people and plants together for a sustainable future.
- To raise funds (by means of an entry fee) to cover the operational and maintenance costs of the Centre.

The following specific design guidelines are being applied to the development of the interpretive gallery:

- An exciting, inviting series of displays with generous use of colour.
- Three dimensional, rather than two dimensional displays.
- Clear messages, with easily read and understood captions and headings.
- Text arranged in a hierarchy of complexity.
- Generous use of interactive computer technology with World Wide Web internet/intranet approach.
- All displays user friendly and simple to operate.

3. COSTING.

A detailed cost plan is being maintained for the development to ensure that the building and exhibition works costs at completion are contained within the capital development allocation.

The budget cost allocations are:

	\$
Visitor Centre.....	900 000
Interpretive Works	300 000
Furniture and Equipment	100 000
Professional Fees	150 000
Other Site Costs and Contingencies.....	130 000
Total	1 580 000

The above estimates of cost exclude any allowance for escalation costs due to increases in the Building Cost Index (which are expected to be minimal).

4. PROGRAM OF WORKS

Visitor Centre Building—	
Tenders advertised	early April 1998
Construction start	mid May
Access for fitout	early October
Completion	mid November 1998
Interpretive Works—	
Tendering starting	late May 1998
Off site construction.....	August September
On site construction	October November
Completion	Late November 1998
Retail Area—	
Tender and Licence.....	May/June 1998
Fitout	October November
Commercial Operation.....	December 1998

5. EVIDENCE

The Committee commenced its inquiry on Tuesday, 24 February 1998. The Committee visited the Gardens and inspected the site, accompanied by the Director of the Gardens, the Chair of the Board of Trustees and the architects. This was followed by a public hearing at Parliament House. The Following witnesses gave evidence at the hearing:

Dr David Bedford, Director, Royal Tasmania Botanical Gardens;
 Mr Rod Moore, Chairman, Board of Trustees, Royal Tasmania Botanical Gardens;
 Mr Roy Cordiner, Project Manager;
 Mr Paul Gilby, Project Architect, and
 Mr Andrew Shurman, Project Architect.

Dr Bedford was invited by the Committee to summarise the proposal. He submitted:

"...my summary of the submission is that the proposed building houses visitor and interpretation facilities and also essential botanic gardens scientific and technical resource functions. It has been long understood in Tasmania that a visitor and interpretation centre will be a great advantage to the gardens. I hope you will have appreciated from your visit this morning to the current facilities for scientific and technical resources. They are in truly nineteenth century conditions.

The program so far has been very carefully thought out where we have thoroughly evaluated the garden site. We have found what we believe is the optimum position for the visitor and interpretation centre. At the same time we have been very thorough in our background work with reports and value-management studies all clearly showing that the centre is a worthwhile addition and will be a viable centre for the gardens."

Mr Moore added:

"I do not think any of us ever had any doubt that there was a need for an education interpretation business centre within the gardens to satisfy the fact that it is a true botanical gardens ... we are very, very encouraged by the work that has been done. We look forward to it being approved and built."

The Committee questioned the witnesses regarding the level of consultation which had taken place during the planning for this project. Mr Cordiner outlined to the Committee as follows:

"The staff, apart from the normal management processes in the gardens, have been briefed progressively as the project developed, starting with the brief and the site planning study information. Following that we had a briefing session on the design—that is all the staff at the gardens.

Because we were aware the Tasmanian Heritage Council were in the planning stream and because of the issues on the site, we first of all briefed the chairman and his office manager directly at the gardens. Following that they invited us to brief the full Heritage Council at their regular meeting, which we then did. We gave them as much information as we had about the project at that time, which included the details of the site planning study and our architectural concepts, almost to the degree you see them here.

We have had ongoing dialogue with the current licensee of the restaurant. It is very important to make sure that we maintain close contact with them because of the likely disruption to their business during the major part of the construction period, and in order to make sure that this is an integrated success rather than one success on its own.

We have had a full briefing session with Friends of the Gardens where we made a presentation to them down at the gardens. We gave them all the information we had. At that time we included those people we could find in the Friends of the Domain at the time—it was during the holiday period so it was a bit hard—and the Citizens of Hobart. It is not a very active group at the moment; it tends to wax and wane. But we did find some people who used to be on that. That included the Tasmanian Conservation Trust. We had Mike Lynch come down to that meeting as well. We have found in the past he has been very useful in providing a new view to things. They want to be involved further in some of the matters; they expressed an interest to be. The National Trust, we had a representative—or two at the time, I think—from the National Trust Buildings Committee, or the people who are interested in this sort of thing.

We have briefed the Tasmanian Aboriginal Land Council; we have been down to see them a couple of times, firstly to talk about the process for exploring the issues on the site that are of interest to them and making sure that they are being taken care of. We have given them sets of drawings and then Dr Bedford and I have been down subsequently to give them the full plans that we had, and also to describe again what we had encountered on the site in relation to any relics. We had not found anything on that particular site.

We have done media releases both to the Press and through the ABC, WIN Television and Southern Cross. We have put up displays of plans of the restaurant and the shop. Our next stage of this I think will be to put up more promotional material on the site before construction commences. We are having a model built which we hope will be fairly soon so that once we start real work on the site they will have some point of reference to say, 'That's what we're building. It looks a bit of a shambles at the moment but that's where we're going'. We think that is fairly important. At any opportunity we do have to explain ourselves to any group that we feel has an interest, or if we have any comments, we follow up on them immediately."

Dr Bedford added that "the response has been very positive, and even more outstanding is that we have had no negative comments at all."

The Committee raised with the witnesses the matter of ongoing funding for the Interpretation Centre. It had been submitted to the Committee that the Gardens records visitor attendance by means of electronic gate counters on each of the major gates. In 1996-97 there were 346 000 visits recorded by this means and from counts of visitors entering by bus or other methods. The counters provide a reasonably accurate estimate of the number of visits made to the Gardens.

In 1993 Tourism Tasmania's Tasmanian Visitor Survey indicated that almost 100 000 tourists visited the Gardens. The Gardens is also consistently in the top ten most visited sites for tourists, with about 22% of tourists to the state visiting the Gardens.

It is clear that the majority of visits to the Gardens each year are by Tasmanians, continuing a tradition over 180 years old. In many cases each person may visit the Gardens many times during the year, to enjoy the changing seasons and displays.

The high percentage of local and repeat visits to the Gardens is a significant factor in the nature of the interpretation display planned, as it will clearly be important to ensure the display is regularly updated and changed often to ensure repeat visits from this local clientele.

Taking these figures into account, together with the desire for entry to the Gardens to be free, but to enhance the visit for those who wish to view the Interpretation Centre, Mr Bedford stated "The operation of the visitor centre will be funded from the entry charge to the Interpretation Gallery and from profit to the shop. There is also likely to be some increased funds earned by the education service. So we have a business model that has been developed where we are looking at likely visitor numbers. We have all our outgoing costs programmed into that and at the moment we are working on an average entry charge of about \$5."

It was explained to the Committee that the estimated revenue from the new facility would, with a conservative estimate of the number of "paying visitors", cover the costs of the Centre with a small margin of profit.

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION.

The evidence presented to the Committee demonstrated that there was a need for the types of facilities proposed. It would improve the standard of existing facilities and provide a much needed Interpretation Centre to enhance the quality of the visit for both Tasmanians and tourists alike and help to retain the pre-eminent position of the Royal Botanical Gardens.

Accordingly, the Committee recommends the proposal, in accordance with the plans and specifications submitted at an estimated total cost of \$1 580 000.