

# BATTLE FOR THE WOODLAND

by Tim Bracher

The good folk of Mt Eliza are not known for community activism or even for raising voices to disrupt the status quo.

Life has always been fairly comfortable on the Mt Eliza hill.... that is, until something disturbs the very thing that attracted them there in the first place.



A two day Independent Panel Hearing in Mornington during late May was the culmination of a three year battle by many residents to keep subdividers and developers out of what has become known as the Mt Eliza Woodland.

As the yellow planning notices advertising a subdivision proposal have been increasingly popping up around the quiet hillside, the membership of the Mt Eliza Woodland Association has been swelling to repel the commercial invaders.

The Woodland area spans about a quarter of Melbourne's most southern suburb. It's bounded by Canadian Bay Road, Humphries Road, Nepean Highway and Moorooduc Highway. The 1600 homes on mostly 2/3 acre blocks sit unobtrusively within natural vegetation. The streets are quiet, bird life abounds and the main recreation is talking to neighbours and walking the dog.

The area escaped the normal suburbanisation process because the soil is so poor and impervious that sewerage was not possible. Council set a minimum 2/3rd acre size to allow for the dispersal of household waste. It also avoided the ravages of farming because it was too nutrient-deficient to grow good grass.

The Mt Eliza Woodland is said to be the remnants of a native grassy woodland and is home to manna gums, narrow leaf peppermint, black wattles, blackwoods, sheoaks and even snow gums

**The Woodland warriors claim that subdivision of the large blocks will lead to greater clearing of indigenous vegetation, greater stormwater run-off, higher traffic levels and will create a more suburban atmosphere.**

The advocates for subdivision and, by default, high density development, cite the State Government planning directive 'Melbourne 2030' and its encouragement of higher density living close to designated activity centres. They also claim that clearance of blocks and then replanting with select vegetation according to a landscaping plan will improve the amenity and natural values of the area.

Planning consultants point to only a small number of subdivision applications during the past five years

in order to refute the Association's claim that there is a flood of people wishing to chop-up the blocks. However, Woodland Association President Deborah Haydon says that she only has to look

at the hearing dates for the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal (VCAT) in her diary to see that the push to subdivide is on the rise.

Deborah Haydon says a loophole discovered about seven years ago in the planning regulations has made subdivision possible in an area previously considered to be well protected.

"We think it might have happened at the time of municipal amalgamation, when the council in good faith tried to introduce some clarifications, but, in fact, it made the matter worse" she said

A December 2005 survey of Woodland residents by the Association revealed that 98% of respondents rejected subdivision. A Neighbourhood Character study commissioned by Council from planning firm, Planisphere, concluded that "the area has been identified by Council and the community as an area of distinctive character with a unique landscape quality". The study and resident pressure prompted the Council to propose an amendment to the Shire's planning scheme to close the loophole and to definitively protect the area from subdivision.

A recommendation from the Independent Panel is expected by Mornington Peninsula Shire Council by early July. Council can choose to accept all or some of the recommendation.

Meanwhile, some owners wishing to carve up their Woodland blocks for income or to downsize await the outcome with bated breath.

Others, like long-time residents Ann and John Scholes (pictured) fear the loss of a very special environment that brought them to the area to raise their family.

For thirty years the Scholes have nurtured their property on the Keraboite Creek gully and which is one of six 'Land for Wildlife' areas in the suburb. They are involved with a revegetation project in the Tangenong Creek Reserve in Frankston South and on the Williams Road foreshore in Mt Eliza.

**Ann Scholes says it was the space and the reserves of the area that attracted them from Armadale in 1976**

**"It was the ability of our family to experience something of a country life in an urban area. We were given a guarantee that all blocks would not be smaller than 2/3rds of an acre and it wasn't till about three years ago that there was even a hint that there could be further subdivision.**

**"We already have problems with weeds creeping into our reserves and creeks, so more subdivision will bring it to a crisis point. We'll totally lose our gully and grassy woodlands.**

**"You cannot grow a lot of the plants that are in the grassy woodland; you can never restore the natural complexities of that environment. It's nonsense to suggest that clearing the land, then planting back species that are not indigenous to this area is a case of net gain for the Woodland environment."**