

McKenzie Road Fire Access Track

Responsible GM: Peter Benazic
Author: Mark Howard/Ben Wood

Recommendation(s)

That Council endorse the following approach:

- That the status of the fire access track section of McKenzie Road remains unchanged,
- That appropriate signage be erected at either end of the fire access track section
- That works be completed to improve the surface of the track without amending the alignment or width to avoid any environmental impact or loss of trees.

Attachments

1. Mc Kenzie Road Site Plan and Photographs [6.1.7.1 - 1 page]

Executive Summary

Following a Notice of Motion in response to negative public feedback to a proposal to install locked gates on the fire access track section of McKenzie Road in Upper Beaconsfield, Council's officers were requested to complete further exploration of alternate options.

A report was tabled in response to this in September 2020 but the recommendations in that report were not supported by Council, and the following resolutions passed:

1. The installation of the Fire Access Gates at McKenzie Road and Tower Road does not proceed.
2. That the road remains as a road accessible for vehicles.
3. The road be maintained to the minimum standard permissible to allow vehicular access to continue.

An upgrade of the track to a public road, with the normally desired formation width would entail loss of significant trees and with high overall cost for an asset that provides minimal public benefit and is not the recommended approach.

While the Metropolitan Fire Access Track Standards Guide and the consistent position sought by our Emergency Management team is to gate and close all the fire access tracks managed by Council, in this instance on balance the recommendation is to retain this section as a fire access track albeit with some minor work and signage.

This location is not a destination, nor a location that would be attractive for four-wheel driving or other uses that could impact the track condition, and we would expect to have very minimal traffic. Pragmatically the issues and liability profile of retaining this classification while leaving it open are minimal, and this approach eliminates the need for significant expense that adds little value, while addressing the Council resolutions.

Background

A part of McKenzie Road, Upper Beaconsfield contains a 380m section of road classified as a 4E Fire Access Track. Situated at either end of this fire access track providing access to Split Rock and Tower Roads, are sections of 4C Local Access Roads. The entire length of McKenzie Road is an unsealed road.

In 2020, Council's emergency management team proposed lock gates be installed at either end of the fire access track section of McKenzie Road in Upper Beaconsfield, consistent with other locations around the Shire, the best practice in the Metropolitan Fire Access Track Standards Guide and with the endorsement of the Municipal Fire Management Planning Committee.

This proposal was met with significant negative feedback from adjoining landowners, which culminated with Cr Brett Owen raising a Notice of Motion in August 2020. An initial report was then tabled in the September 2020 Council meeting recommending the installation of the gates proceed. This recommendation was not supported by Council, and the request made to further explore alternate options.

The fire access track section of McKenzie Road is narrow, between 2.5m to 3m wide, undulating and meanders its way between well-established native vegetation.

The two sections of 4C Local Access Roads are 340m and 102m in length respectively and, are listed on Councils Register of Public Roads and therefore inspected and maintained in accordance with Councils Road Management Plan (RMP). The 4E Fire Access Track is not listed on this register and there is no requirement for Council to inspect as per its RMP, however it is inspected annually by the Emergency Management team in advance of the fire season. This inspection cycle is consistent with the lowest classification of 4D managed under Council's RMP.

Options considered

Option 1: The construction of this section of road to match the 4C sections of McKenzie Road, was estimated to cost approximately \$46,000, which does not include the vegetation offset, which has now been estimated to cost potentially upwards of \$250,000 although no detailed assessment has been completed. It is not recommended to consider further entertaining this option, as the construction of this section of road serves no purpose to the greater community, as well as impacting the local environment, with a very significant unbudgeted financial impact.

Option 2: Change the road classification from a 4E Fire Access Track to a 4D Limited Access Road. This road classification is suitable in a rural environment where there are very low traffic volumes and where the road only services a handful of properties and has very little impact on surrounding network. The advantage of this option is the road would be included on Councils Register of Public Road and therefore inspected and maintained in accordance with Councils RMP. The disadvantage is the road should be upgraded in a way not dissimilar to what has been suggested in Option 1 to be consistent with what Council strives for, however for 4D there is no proscribed standard so while not ideal there is more flexibility to compromise in relation to formation width. Even with a slightly reduced formation width the costs are expected to be broadly similar to option 1.

Option 3: Not changing the status of this road and it remains classified as a 4E Fire Access Track and ungated. Appropriate signage can be worded to inform general road users that this is not a public road. Completion of minor works expected to cost under \$10,000 to enhance the surface within the existing track alignment, are expected to substantially mitigate issues with vehicles using the track for occasional access.

As 4E Fire Access Tracks are not included in Council RMP, there is no obligation to inspect or maintain. However, currently all Shire fire access tracks are maintained prior to the fire danger period as part of the Open Space contract. Emergency Management has indicated they will monitor and maintain the track surface and signage. This recommendation is in line with the DRAFT Metropolitan Fire Access Track Standards Guide, which recommends fire access tracks are inspected annually to inspect the track surface and vegetation clearance. This inspection

timeframe aligns with the current inspection timeframe of a 4D Limited Access Road. It is recommended any maintenance to the track surface and signage, including reactive inspections received from the public are undertaken by Operations.

Preferred option

Option 3 provides the most logical and effective way in managing this fire access track, by addressing the concerns raised by the community and any potential risks to Council while also meeting Council's resolutions. This option can be implemented quickly with minimal budgetary impact and no change in budget allocation.

Policy Implications

Cardinia Shire Council Road Management Plan 2018

Relevance to Council Plan

2.1 We support the creation of liveable spaces and places

2.1.2 Plan and maintain safe, inclusive and connected open spaces, places and active travel routes.

2.1.5 Upgrade Council's road network to improve safety and connectivity while considering traffic demand and freight transport needs.

3.1 We value our natural assets and support our biodiversity to thrive

3.1.5 Facilitate community stewardship to build preparedness for natural threats.

Climate Emergency Consideration

Construction of the fire access track section of McKenzie Road to a 4C standard, or desired standard for a 4D road would have a significant impact to the local flora and fauna, with many established native vegetation needing to be removed to accommodate the construction of this road to the standard required.

Consultation/Communication

Consultation with various business units, which included Governance, Risk, Traffic Engineering, Regulatory Services, Emergency Management, Environment and Heritage and Infrastructure Services, all provided valuable input and advice into the content of this report.

Consultation and advice were also obtained by the MAV and Councils insurer.

Financial and Resource Implications

If option 1 was to be considered, the construction costs have been estimated at \$46,000.00 to construct this 380m section of road. These costs do not include the vegetation offset, which is estimated could exceed \$250,000.

The preferred option to not change the status of this road from a 4E Fire Access Track would only incur minor costs to install signage at either end of the fire access track and upgrade works that can be completed within the existing unsealed road and signage budgets of the operations business unit. Maintenance of the vegetation is already being undertaken under the Open Space contract. Any ongoing maintenance to the tracks surface can be absorbed into Operations unsealed road budget with minimal impact.

Conclusion

That Council support the pragmatic compromise recommended that the status of the fire access track section of McKenzie Road remains unchanged, with appropriate signage be erected at either end of the fire access track section and that works be completed to improve the surface of the track without amending the alignment or width to avoid any environmental impact or loss of trees.

