

6.2.13 Notice of Motion 1071 - Open Space Maintenance

Responsible GM: Peter Benazic
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Recommendation(s)

That Council note this report. ext

Attachments

Nil

Executive Summary

This spring season has been particularly challenging in relation to management of our urban parks, roadside vegetation, and other open spaces. The result of this has been grass far longer than would ever normally occur in some locations. While wet conditions and extremely aggressive grass growth have been the most significant issues, there are a range of factors that have contributed to this occurring. These conditions are widespread, impacting most local government areas as well as other authorities who manage land within the Shire such as the Department of Transport and Melbourne Water.

This report has been prepared to address the resolution passed by Council at the November Council Meeting “That the Chief Executive Officer provide a report regarding open space maintenance particularly considering the current wet conditions that has affected the current maintenance standard of open space areas.”

Council along with our key partners, have put in place a number of measures to assist with the situation and poorer than normal outcomes in many locations including:

- Mobilising additional resources wherever possible
- Changes to work practices and processes
- Trialling implementation of different technology
- Temporary change requirements to set minimum service levels for impacted sites

Improving conditions at the time of drafting this report along with the changes put in place in conjunction with our partners has resulted in a significant improvement in most locations, and we will continue to address the remaining locations as quickly as we can.

Going forward any sites significantly impacted will have temporary signage erected and a minimum service around pathways, playgrounds and similar areas of higher usage.

Background

Cardinia Shire has had significantly above average rainfall (up more than 40%) over the last few months, which combined with below average evaporation rates (down more than 18%),

has resulted in many more areas than are typical being saturated and soft.

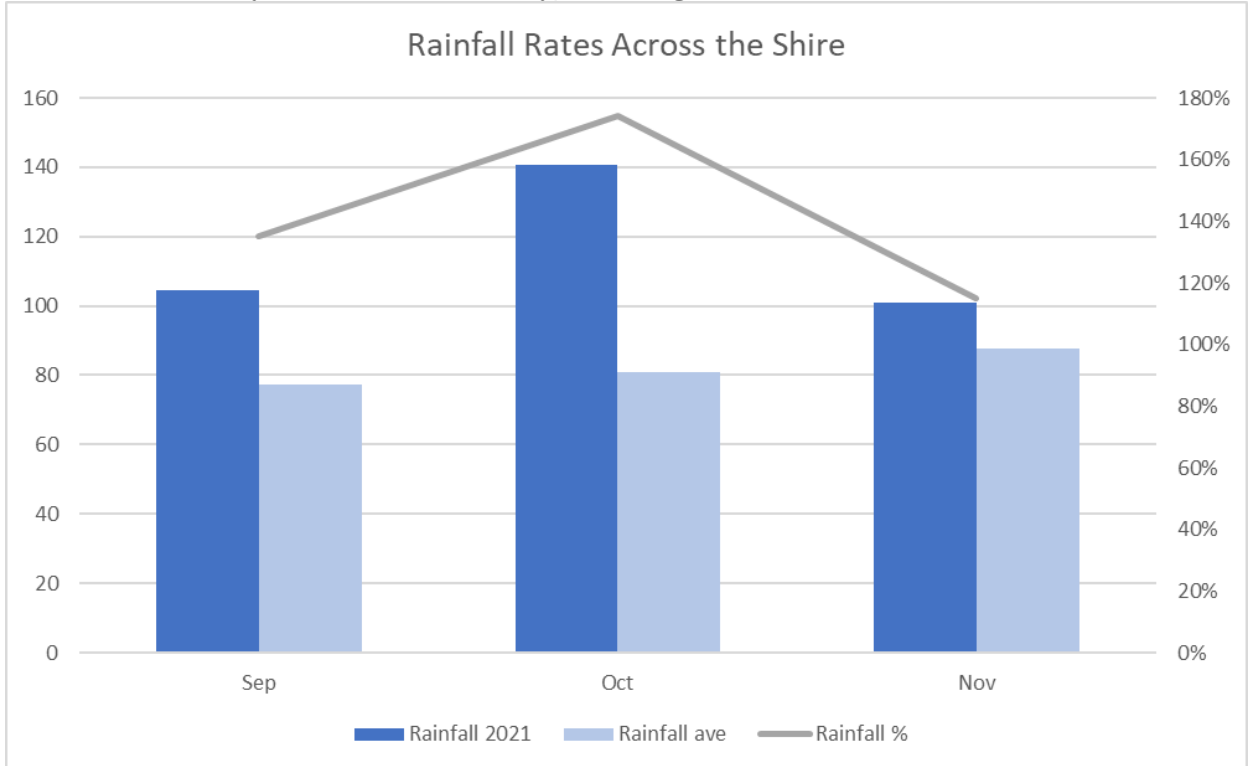


Figure 1: Rainfall rates for the last 3 months compared to the 10 year average – data is the average from 6 locations around the Shire – source Melbourne Water rainfall data

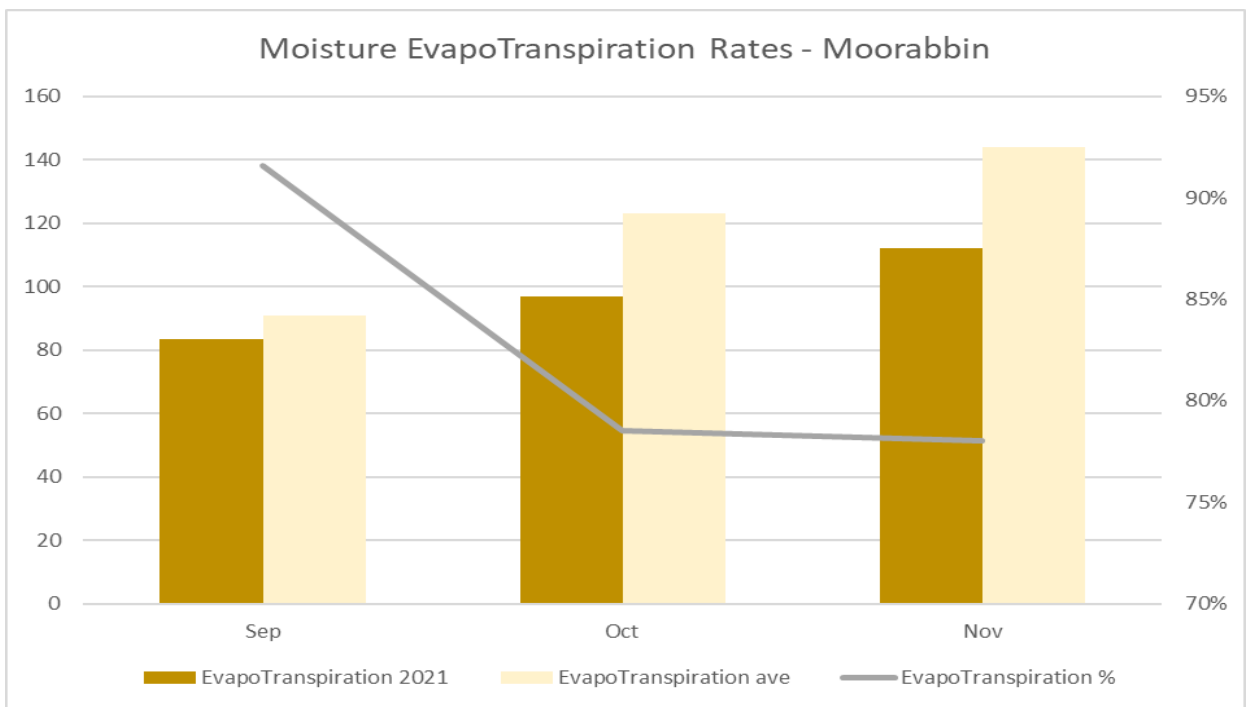


Figure 2: Evapotranspiration Rates indicates the movement of moisture into the air - data from BoM for Moorabbin Airport (there are no collection sites within the Shire for this data)

Our open space maintenance program relies on the use of large and heavy machinery that provides significant value through covering a large area each day to assist in managing the higher growth rates and requirements through spring and early summer. These machines cannot be utilised when the ground is saturated or too soft. This significantly impacts production rates and the ability to service sites in the normal way.

It is not unusual to defer service on a site because of conditions over spring for a brief period, however the conditions have meant many sites have not been able to be serviced in the normal way for an extended period, which is highly unusual. This combined with the most aggressive grass growth we have seen in many years has hampered our ability to maintain our open spaces in the way we would like to and present them the way our communities expect, and that we normally take great pride in achieving. This has been reflected in our CRMS data with requests for mowing, which for the proceeding two months has been up on last year by almost 25%.

These conditions have been exacerbated by several other factors which have limited some of the normal flexibility we would have in responding to the situation. These include:

- Extremely challenging labour market making it hard to recruit temporary staff, and slow to fill permanent vacancies
- No spare capacity in broad scale open space maintenance industry – sub-contractors engaged to provide additional support had to withdrawal that support to focus on the same issues experienced with their own core clients
- Limited ability to redirect labour (in fact we had to do the opposite, with several mowing crews assisting with rapid response to remove/or movement of debris from the October Storm event, as this was a higher risk to public safety).
- Previously, any exposure to a tier one site would result in loss of staff for up to two weeks while they isolate.
- A couple of critical plant failures and extended lead time on replacement plant or parts

Our team and partners are very aware how important our open spaces are to the community, and we have been working hard to improve the situation for all of our communities – not just those who happen to have open spaces that do not hold water and we have been able to service normally.

Several resources with aligned skill sets have been deployed to assist with the back log and processes enhanced between Council and partner resources to ensure we capitalise on opportunities to get sites fully serviced once conditions allow. Not all public land or roadside within the Shire are managed by Council, and other authorities have also been experiencing the same conditions. Where a location has shared responsibility, we have been trying wherever possible to coordinate with the other authorities or their contractors to achieve site wide outcomes.

A trial of a remote-control mower has commenced, this can achieve better production than brush cutting in soft areas with much lower ground pressure than the traditional ride on mowers.

While the principle focus of effort has been in addressing the challenging conditions and improving visible service outcomes around the whole of the Shire, Council and our key partner Citywide have also agreed that we need to address the value proposition that has been received by the community, either through reduction in cost or the provision of additional services to help enhance our open spaces. We have increased the coordination in relation to performance including a range of system and process improvements and instituted additional regular reviews of this with senior staff from both organisations.

Council will also investigate the opportunity to improve drainage in particularly challenging locations to assist with more rapid recovery of sites that are continually saturated.

Policy Implications

Nil

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.

5.1 We practise responsible leadership

5.1.4 Maximise value for our community through efficient service delivery, innovation, strategic partnerships and advocacy.

Climate Emergency Consideration

Nil

Consultation/Communication

We have increased information on our website and on social media in relation to both the situation and Council's responses to the conditions. New temporary signage has been prepared and will be utilised on sites with any ongoing barriers to completing a normal service, providing information to users of that site. Councillors have also actively provided community feedback to officers relaying the concerns of residents and park users.

Financial and Resource Implications

Some savings either through net cost reduction, or no charge for additional service beyond contract scope will be realised as appropriate to the situation.

Conclusion

That the longer grass and challenges experienced in many open space sites around the Shire are largely a result of the challenging conditions, and not the service standard. Outcomes have substantially improved in most locations over the two weeks prior to the finalisation of this report, with drier conditions and several changes and additional resource application.

Communication has been increased, and longer-term measures to help correct particularly impacted locations will be investigated and where appropriate, actioned over time.