Big Hill and Mandurang Valley Landscape Summary

Glossary

Significant Landscape Overlay (SLO) - A planning scheme tool for the protection and management of significant landscapes.

Planning Scheme Amendment - The process undertaken to make changes to a Planning Scheme, such as applying an overlay.

Planning Panel - A independent panel that assesses planning proposals by considering submissions and conducting hearings.

Landscape Management Framework - A tool designed to manage and protect landscapes.

Landscape Character Area - Areas of similar patterns of elements in the landscape such as landform, vegetation, waterbodies and land use as well as individual features.

Viewing Corridor - Designated spaces such as a roads that provide unobstructed views of specific points of interest.

Viewshed - The surface area or terrain visible from a given viewpoint, based on topography only. This does not consider buildings, vegetation or other potential obstructions.

Project Background

The project evolved out of the *Greater Bendigo Rural Areas Strategy 2009* that recommended the need for further strategic work to identify and protect significant landscapes around Big Hill and Mandurang Valley. The original landscape assessment in 2013 examined the landscape character and landscape values to establish a long-term vision and guidance for the area. The 2013 report and recommendations proposed two Significant Landscape Overlays (SLO) across Big Hill and Mandurang Valley areas as shown below in figure 1.

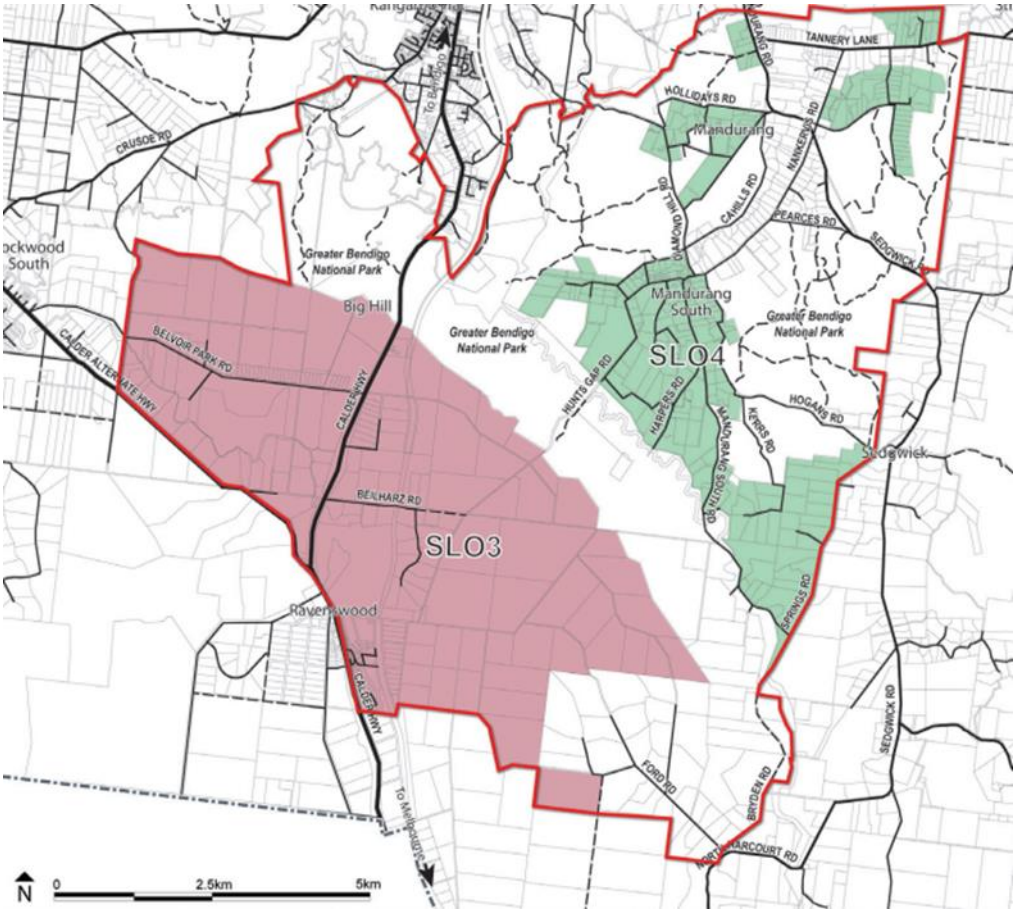


Figure 1. Proposed Significant Landscape Overlays (SLO3 and SLO4) in 2013

To introduce the proposed SLOs, a planning scheme amendment was prepared (Amendment C217). The Amendment was unsuccessful for reasons outlined in the panel report. These reasons included the following:

- To re-examine the areas covered by the SLO. The areas should be more carefully and logically defined so that land is not unnecessarily included.
- Use landscape/natural features to determine the overlay curtilage and not cadastral boundaries.
- The application of SLO, Schedule 3 (which was proposed to be applied to the Big Hill area) should be reviewed with consideration of all landscape visibility and use of natural features to determine boundaries and a reduction in area.
- The SLO should include the ridgeline and escarpment at Big Hill.
- Consideration of the area to the south east of the exhibited area of Big Hill for the SLO.

- SLO, Schedule 4 should only be applied to the forest interface to protect the landscape values of Mandurang.
- It would be beneficial to have a greater understanding of comparative significance of the landscape assessed, to help understand the relative importance of protection and appropriate tools to achieve this.
- The methodology used to assess landscapes deviated from best practice where significant landscapes warranted for protection under the SLO should be based primarily on the visual values and visibility of natural landscape features.

The *Council Plan of 2021-2025, Mir Wimbul* included an action to '*Scope a Gateway Study for Big Hill and Mandurang Valley landscape preservation'*. The current landscape assessment project works towards this Council Plan action.

2024 Big Hill and Mandurang Valley Landscape Study

The City appointed consultants (Hansen Partnership) in 2022 to undertake a revised landscape study and assessment and new Landscape Management Framework (LMF). A full draft report and LMF has now been prepared for review.

The 2024 revised landscape study builds on the previous work and addresses key gaps and recommendations outlined by the Planning Panel. Detailed visual analysis and fieldwork was completed to understand the visual exposure of significant landscape features and to determine the areas suitable for application of the SLO. The new landscape management framework includes revised recommendations for the application of the SLO.

Landscape Assessment

Although the study is often referred to more broadly as a 'landscape assessment', Part 2 of the study titled 'Landscape Assessment' specifically provides a detailed understanding of the existing conditions across the study area through various themes. This process helps in the initial stage to identify and understand the different landscape types with common characteristics. Given the previous study was undertaken over 10 years ago, it was important to revise this information to understand the current conditions across the study area.

Key insights include that there has been a modest level of development within the study area in recent years. Development has mostly included modifications to existing structures, sheds and two lot subdivisions. Where there are more intensive subdivisions of three or more lots these have led to an expanded road network and the more obvious

visual presence of dwellings in the landscape in some instances. The Ravenswood Highway Interchange is the largest change in the landscape since the previous study. This is shown through major road infrastructure development and associated native vegetation removal.

Visual Analysis

The visual analysis and accompanying fieldwork fills a critical gap in understanding the scenic and visual realm of the study area. The visual analysis and fieldwork was undertaken to understand the visibility of key landscape features and how they are experienced from viewing corridors and viewpoints. The viewshed analysis was a desktop-based assessment to understand visible terrain from key viewing corridors and given viewpoints. Where further assessment of these viewpoints was required, this was assessed through site visits and photography.

The viewshed mapping focuses on several viewing corridors including the Calder Highway, Calder Alternative Highway and Railway Corridor that have high viewing frequency. It is important to note that the focus of the viewpoint analysis narrows to the Big Hill and Granitic Uplands areas as the key areas for further assessment and investigation. This excludes the Mandurang area north of the Big Hill ridgeline given findings of lower visibility of landscape features and the more localised setting with lesser frequented local roads.

Insights from the viewshed mapping identified 25 potential viewpoints around the Big Hill and Granitic Uplands registering high visibility. These were then investigated for further on-ground visual analysis selected along publicly accessible and highly frequented areas, typically along roads and at intersections. This was intended to ‘paint a picture’ of the typical visual experience of Big Hill and Granitic Uplands that would be experienced on the ground at those points. The visibility analysis and fieldwork confirmed that the Big Hill ridgeline and upper slopes and the Granitic Upland areas were most visually exposed and had prominent views along the key viewing corridors of the Calder Highway, Calder Alternative Highway and Melbourne-Bendigo Railway Corridor.

Landscape Character Types & Areas

Classifying landscape character types provides a basis for understanding combinations of landscape features, vegetation, land use, views and topography distinct to an area.

Discussion around levels of sensitivity to change and anticipated landscape change are included to better understand the kinds of threats to character areas.

The previous Bendigo landscape assessment of 2013 identified and defined six distinctive landscape character areas grouped by common characteristics. Some of those character areas also formed the basis for the boundaries of proposed SLO areas before. The 2024 Study refines these earlier character types, overlaying the findings of the landscape assessment and visual analysis. This resulted in seven landscape character types and a distinction made between the Big Hill ridgeline and its escarpments from the rural landscapes of the foreground.

Two of the revised character areas, the Big Hill Ridgeline & Upper Slopes (Character Area 1) and Big Hill Granitic Uplands (Character Area 3) were advanced to further landscape assessment given the visual and scenic values identified and the regional viewshed they cast at the southern gateway to Bendigo from highly frequented viewing corridors. These two areas become the primary focus of Part 5 of the report and the areas further assessed for landscape significance.

The character area analysis of the Mandurang Valley areas highlights the more enclosed landscape pattern and lower to medium levels of sensitivity to change in contrast to Big Hill ridgeline and Granitic Uplands. It is not contested that the Box-Ironbark Forest areas and surrounds to the north of the Big Hill ridgeline are significant on the grounds of environmental, cultural and ecological, but the analysis determines that those areas are of much lower visual significance and exposure due to the localised setting experienced primarily from local roads and from private properties. The report recommends that the Mandurang Valley area be investigated in the future for alternative controls such as the Environmental Significance Overlay or Vegetation Protection Overlays as a more appropriate means of protection.

Landscape & Visual Values

The findings of the 2024 study are consistent with the two previous landscape assessments (2013 Bendigo Landscape Assessment and Claire Scott's peer review) in attributing high landscape significance levels to the Big Hill ridgeline area and Granitic Uplands. A key finding and departure from the previous studies is that in the current study the Big Hill Ridgeline and Granitic Uplands are more prominent and highly visible along key viewing corridors. This includes the viewing of the transition in the landscape features and

scenery through the southern gateway into Bendigo. This is in contrast to the other land within the study area. This elevates those two areas for protection under the SLO given their high visual values and exposure.

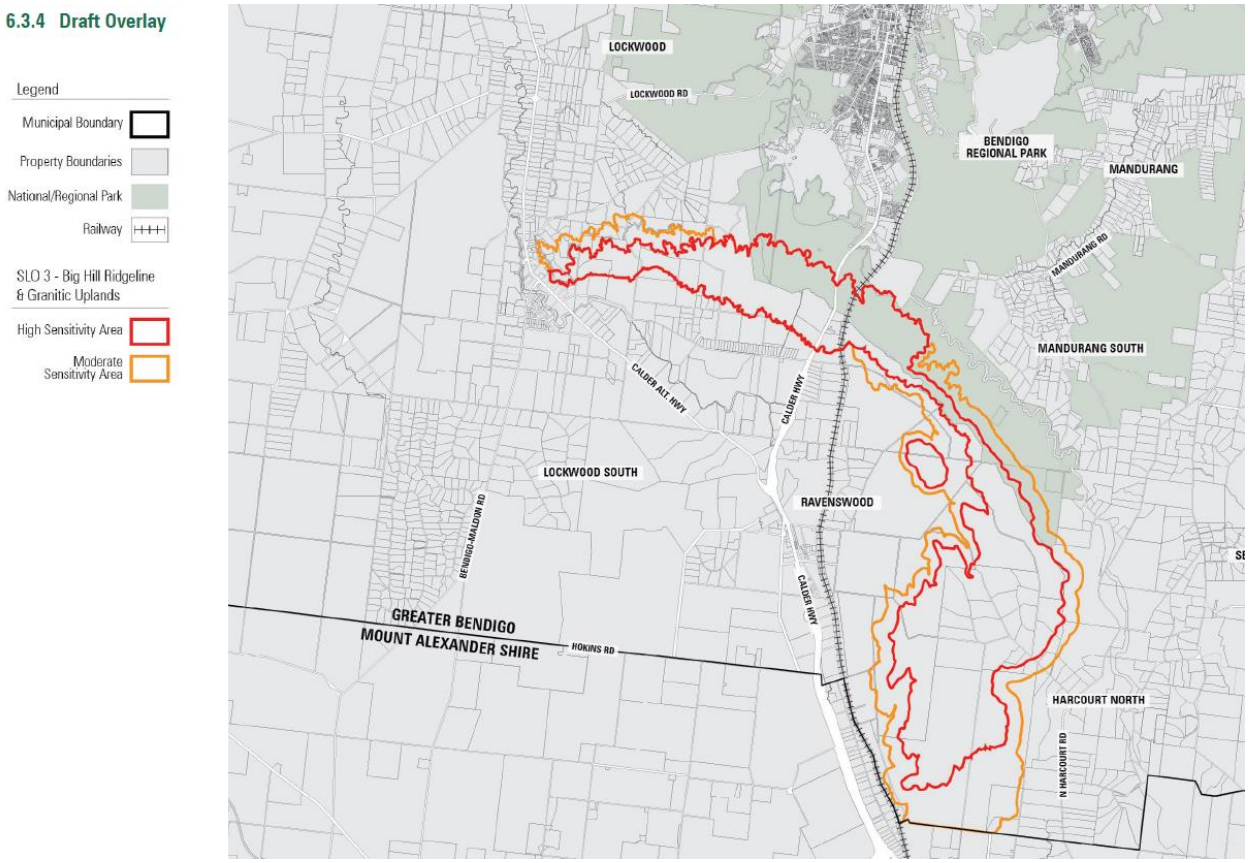


Figure 2. Proposed Significant Landscape Overlay in 2024

A key part of the method the consultant used to determine landscape significance is the weighting of visual values above all other values. This approach is consistent with many other recent landscape studies in Victoria and is supported by the Victorian Planning Provisions. The earlier Bendigo Landscape Assessment of 2013 took a more holistic approach in its method to determine areas appropriate for protection under the SLO. This was not considered robust enough or in-line with best practice landscape assessment according to both the planning panel's recommendations and later, the Planning Minister's determination to refuse Amendment C217.

The landscape and visual values assessment of the Big Hill Ridgeline & Upper Slopes and the Big Hill Granitic Uplands details a deeper assessment of specific landscape components. This is demonstrated through analysing Landscape Features, Aesthetic

Variety and Composition to determine significance level ratings. The method applies a scenic and visual lens to underpin the purpose of the SLO. The assessment concludes that the two landscapes were significant at a 'High' or 'Regional' level that is worthy of the application of the SLO.

The current project undertook a refresh of the 2013 community landscape values to understand whether new values had emerged. The City ran an online engagement survey in November-December 2023 with a series of the same questions. This sought to understand what the community most valued about these landscapes and any key concerns. Of over 60 responses received, many of the previous themes were reflected. This included scenic views and vistas of the area, the rich biodiversity and native vegetation and most notably the highly unique and valued landscape features experienced upon entering Bendigo via the Calder highway. The 2023 revised community values play an important role in providing a more informal and subjective assessment of landscape significance to help support the determination of the significance of key landscape features and how they are experienced.

Landscape Management Framework

The revised Landscape Management Framework outlines planning scheme recommendations towards providing protection of the identified significant landscapes and a future planning scheme amendment.

The proposed high and moderate sensitivity areas within the SLO area are translated into the draft planning permit triggers in the schedule. Planning controls for these two areas are differentiated by exempting permit requirements for buildings and works within a certain threshold within areas of moderate sensitivity. Broader permit exemptions for both high and moderate areas are already included for specific vegetation removal requirements under the schedule. It is also important to note the table of exemptions under the parent provision of the overlay provides a further list of permit exemptions. These are outlined under Clause 42.03 of the Greater Bendigo Planning Scheme.

The draft planning permit triggers under the proposed SLO schedule are as follows:

A permit is not required for:

- Additions or alterations to an existing dwelling or building used for agriculture where the additions or alterations are not more than 5 metres in height above natural ground level and not more than 50

square metres in additional floor area, in areas outside areas of high sensitivity.

- A building used for agriculture that is not more than 5 metres in height above natural ground level and not more than 100 square metres in floor area, in areas outside areas of high sensitivity.
- A building ancillary to a dwelling, up to 5 metres in height and 50 square metres in floor area, in areas outside areas of high sensitivity.
- Construction of a farm access track.
- Works undertaken by a public authority relating to watercourse management or environmental improvements.
- Construction of a timber post and wire or timber post and railing fence up to 1.8 metres in height, in areas outside areas of high sensitivity

A permit is not required for:

- Removal, destruction or lopping of dead vegetation; or
- Removal, destruction or lopping of the minimum extent of vegetation necessary for the maintenance of existing fences, to a combined maximum width of clearing for either side of the fence of 4 metres.

The proposed controls seek to better recognise the regional significance of the Big Hill ridgeline and Granitic Uplands landscapes as a key topographic gateway into the Southern entrance of Bendigo and the Greater Bendigo region. They aim to preserve the upper slopes of the Big Hill ridgeline and Granitic Uplands from inappropriate development and/or native vegetation removal that may otherwise threaten their unique and attractive visual aesthetic.

Design Guidelines

The accompanying proposed Design Guidelines provide clear guidance on how future development and works within the proposed overlay area should be sited and designed to minimise visual impacts.

Landscape elements identified as having a potential impact on significant landscapes are outlined with objectives, guidelines and what to avoid or discourage. Each of these are

accompanied by drawings that illustrate examples of good and in some cases bad design outcomes for reference.

The guidelines would also be used as the basis of decision guidelines to determine planning permit applications.