

Botanic gardens' heritage looks set to foil plans for new children's playground

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Support needed: Janet Macdonald, Pat Varley and Mandy King fear their moves to create a nature-



based play space for children will be scuttled. Picture: Anthony Brady

The future of a new \$195,000 children's playground at Warrnambool's Botanic Gardens is in doubt because of its heritage significance.

The idea won the State Government funding for the nature-based play space after a public vote under the Pick My Project initiative last year, but 10 months later it has hit a snag.

In a bid to try and save the project, the Friends of the Botanic Gardens group wants residents to rally behind the project to get Heritage Victoria to change its mind.

Group member Janet Macdonald said that while they haven't officially been told the play space can't go ahead, Heritage Victoria have led them to believe it was not happy with the idea for the gardens which was built in the 1870s.

"The hiccup is, because the gardens are heritage listed, we need Heritage Victoria's approval before we go ahead, and they are underwhelmed by our project to say the least," she said.

"Because the Pick My Projects have a sunset clause, this was all supposed to be done within 12 months but we're coming up to nine or 10 months and all we've got is a plan.

"It's basically the site that they don't like."

The plans, which include paths, water feature, tree logs, maze and an old stump, has been earmarked for an underused part of the gardens along the Botanic Road fence.

The the friends group said it believed the location was "ideal" and planning documents over the past two decades had identified the need for a children's play space within the gardens.

Ms Macdonald said Heritage Victoria had suggested other sites within the gardens, but admitted they weren't any better.

"I fully understand Heritage Victoria's need to protect heritage places, but honestly it does not impinge on the landscape or the views from any other part of the garden," Ms Macdonald said.

"It's not a camping ground, it's not a train, it's not plastic swings. It's going to be made out of natural materials in a spot that's very underused."

Group member Pat Varley said nature play spaces for children had become a very big movement, mainly because many don't have a back yard now.

"To have a space where you can play in a natural environment has become almost a necessity," Ms Varley said. "Areas where they can climb and take a bit of a risk."

She said the friends group had also contributed \$3500 of its own money to the project so it could secure top architects that had worked on both William Guilfoyle-designed gardens before as well as nature-based playgrounds.

Ms Varley said the last letter the group had received from Heritage Victoria was that it didn't believe a play space was appropriate for a botanic garden.

Another member Mandy King said other botanic gardens had included a children's garden.

The playground and swings in Warrnambool's garden pre-dates its heritage listing which happened in the early 1990s.

The friends group have been asked to put ads into The Standard to get public feedback about the project. The ads will run for two weeks from January 29.

"What seem ridiculous now is we've got all this support already. To me it doesn't seem necessary that we go back and get it again," Ms King said.

The project was successful in getting the funding initially because the idea received about 380 votes.

Ms Varley said that for at least 30 years the friends of the gardens group had existed to maintain the Guilfoyle garden.

"We wouldn't even contemplate anything we thought was against that concept," she said.

Ms King said that over the past 15 years all the garden beds had been regrown and the play space was "really just another garden bed" to be used by children.

To show your support, the friends group want people to write a letter to either contact@warrnambool.vic.gov.au or heritage.permits@DELWP.vic.gov.au.

Heritage Victoria said it would make a decision on whether to issue a permit in accordance with provisions in the Heritage Act.

It said the Warrnambool Botanic Gardens was of historic, scientific, aesthetic and social significance as one of the earliest provincial botanic gardens with an extensive botanic collection.

