

Statement from Abbotsford Convent Foundation

Proposed new building on the Goat's Paddock at the Abbotsford Convent

16 February 2011

The Sophia Mundi School is an original tenant of the Abbotsford Convent Foundation (ACF) and an anchor tenant for the 'learning' stream of the Convent's activities. The School's support for an arts, education and cultural centre on the site was a factor in saving the site from residential development. The School's emphasis on the arts further enhances its good fit with the Convent vision.

Sophia Mundi is a good tenant and some of its facilities are available for use by the wider community. It remains the stated intention of Sophia Mundi to make these facilities available to the wider community after school hours.

The Sophia Mundi Senior School was based in Nicholson Street, Abbotsford until last year when the building was put on the market by their landlord and subsequently sold in October 2010. This left the Senior School with no place to go. The space the school has at the Abbotsford Convent is not large enough to house the combined school and meet the curriculum requirements.

Over the last 18 months, the School has examined many other sites within the City of Yarra but has been unable to secure anything appropriate to their needs, including Nicholson St, Collingwood Football Club Social Club rooms, other ex-industrial land and buildings in the area.

The City of Yarra and the former state government actively encouraged the ACF to assist the School by finding an appropriate solution located on site at the Abbotsford Convent.

After much consideration, the ACF determined the unfinished buildings were not suitable to provide the extra space required. Factors we reviewed carefully included; single tenant domination of footprint, diversity of tenant mix, vision for unfinished buildings, cost and time horizon for future building works and the safe conduct of students and their overall impact whilst on site.

The option of constructing a new classroom block on part of the Goats' Paddock was arrived at after long consultations to find a workable solution. The Goats' Paddock is on ACF land which is part of the entire title granted by the State Government in 2001.

The ACF has no intention of further development (including landscaping) on the Goats' Paddock in the foreseeable future. Our key funding/financing priorities over the next five years are; the essential infrastructure maintenance of occupied buildings and site (roof repairs, painting, electrical, plumbing, universal access, sustainability, communications etc) and then the restoration of the remaining buildings to enable occupation and advancement of our Vision.

The ACF Board has given in-principle agreement to the concept of a 460 square metre building to be constructed behind the existing St Mary's building (partly on existing Sophia Mundi leased land), using approximately 10% of the Goats' Paddock area. This agreement was granted on the basis that the necessary planning approvals and permits were obtained by Sophia Mundi from the relevant authorities.

The school leases its buildings from the ACF and as with all of the existing buildings on site, the new buildings will belong to the ACF, not to Sophia Mundi. Construction costs will be borne by Sophia Mundi.

In providing the in-principle agreement the ACF further insisted that the well respected architect, Gregory Burgess, be engaged to design a building that is sympathetic to the historical and heritage context of the site and to the local landscape. Sophia Mundi has also appointed a Heritage Adviser, to provide expert advice and oversight to all heritage aspects of their proposal in close consultation with the architect.

The ACF and the Collingwood Children's Farm have a long standing understanding to allow the Farm's animals to graze on ACF land. It is the stated intention of the ACF to continue in this long standing practice. The location of the proposed building is such that it will have as minimal an impact as possible on the openness of the Goats' Paddock.

The ACF developed a Communications Strategy to engage with all relevant stakeholders about the proposal. Having discussed it with the State Government and City of Yarra, the next step was to consult with the broader community; including the Collingwood Children's Farm, the Early Learning Centre, the Good Shepherd Aged Care facility and the local residents. Unfortunately, this process was upset by a local Councillor choosing to speak to the media after being briefed. This led to a number of misunderstandings and mistruths about the nature of the proposal and how it came about.

The ACF will continue to work closely with our tenant community to help them grow, enhance and prosper in their activities – as long as those activities are compatible with our Vision, Master Plan and the best interests of the community as a whole.

The ACF has helped Sophia Mundi develop a possible solution to an increasingly difficult problem. It is now up to the school to seek planning approval from the appropriate authorities who will consider a range of views before accepting or rejecting the proposal.