

Community Workshop Outcomes Report - Donkey Steps Options

Wolgan Road Reconstruction Project

14 May 2025



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1 Workshop summary

1.1 Wolgan Road Reconstruction Project

On 9 November 2022, torrential rain falling on land stripped of vegetation following the 2019-2020 Black Summer bushfires, caused landslides on sections of Wolgan Road at Wolgan Gap. Continued instability of the slopes led to a decision by Lithgow City Council (Council) to close the road two days later, limiting access to local businesses and residents. In June 2024, Council submitted an Essential Public Asset Reconstruction (EPAR) submission to the NSW Reconstruction Authority for disaster recovery funding to design and construct a new access road. The submission was made under the NSW Disaster Assistance Guidelines (DAG) and is supported by the Australian Government under the Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangements (DRFA).

While awaiting funding decision outcome, Council is progressing the design and environmental assessment of a permanent access road for the Wolgan Valley. Following an open tender process, WSP have been engaged to develop a concept design and undertake the environmental assessment for the project.

1.2 Community Consultative Group

On Wednesday 9 April 2025, Council held a community information evening to present and get feedback on a preferred alignment for a new road access to the Wolgan Valley. The option was met with some concern, and a clear desire for the project team to keep the donkey steps and existing Wolgan Road in consideration. The feedback also highlighted the value of involving community members more closely in the design process and having transparent conversations on project challenges and opportunities.

As a result, Council has formed a Community Consultative Group (CCG) through an Expression of Interest (EOI) process to work closely with Council on key aspects of the project.

The first CCG workshop was held on Wednesday 14 May 2025 and focused on the Donkey Steps alignment options. Future workshops to be held in the coming months. All meetings will be held in person to facilitate deeper discussions and breakout activities.

1.3 Details

Workshop name: Community Consultative Group - Donkey Steps Workshop

Date: Wednesday 14 May 2025, 5 – 7:30pm

Location: 176 Mort Street, Lithgow

Facilitated by: Rachel Fox, bd infrastructure

1.4 Attendees

- Jonathon Edgecombe (LCC - Director, Infrastructure and Economy)
- Christopher Wassef (Wassabi Group)
- Michael Dunn (Wassabi Group)
- Rachel Fox (bd infrastructure)
- Bronte Rivers (bd infrastructure)
- Beatrice Hobson (bd infrastructure)
- John Kearney (Wolgan Valley Eco Tours)
- Kristie Kearney (Wolgan Valley Eco Tours)
- Ben Fletcher (Emirates)
- Malcolm Sleet (potentially impacted landowner)
- Andrew Chalk
- Peter Beeh
- Skye Zorz
- Justin Zorz
- Dawn Bower
- Thomas Ebersoll (Newnes Hotel Cabins)
- Martin Krogh
- Jamie Giokaris
- Trevor Mansfield (potentially impacted landowner)
- Brian Mansfield (potentially impacted landowner)
- Paul Youman (GHD)
- Ben Johnson
- Aunty Helen Riley (Mingaan Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation)

1.5 Workshop purpose and content

The purpose of the workshop was to involve the community to review the assumptions, opportunities and challenges in reconstructing the Donkey Steps as a permanent access road. The project team presented early technical design work on potential options for reusing the Donkey Steps on the assumption that an updated Slope Risk Assessment finds that the existing Wolgan Road could be made operable during the construction phase. The sessions brought together residents, a representative from Mingaan Wiradjuri Aboriginal Corporation, local council, technical experts, and a representative from Emirates.

1.5.1 Information presented at the workshop

The following information was presented at the workshop.

1.5.1.1 Minimum road design and funding requirements

The following design criteria are required, at a minimum, to meet Australian road design standards.

| Design Basis/ Asset | Minimum Design Requirement/ Project Criteria |
|--------------------------------|--|
| • Design Vehicle | • 12.5m Single Unit Truck |
| • Check Vehicle | • 19.0m Prime Mover and Semi-Trailer |
| • Lane Width | • 3.0m |
| • Shoulder Width | • 0.5m |
| • Verge | • 1.5m |
| • Max vertical alignment grade | • 15% |
| • Min horizontal radius | • 14m |

Table 1-1: Minimum Design Criteria

The road is being designed to meet the pre-disaster function of Wolgan Road to allow 12.5m trucks to pass each other, while allowing 19m semi-trailers to access the Valley as a “check vehicle”. The “check vehicle” is typically selected to reflect the largest or most critical vehicle expected to use a particular road under normal operating conditions.

The Independent Technical Review of Council’s funding application under the *Disaster Recovery Funding Arrangement 2018 (DRFA)* agreed that the design criteria in Table 1-1 was appropriate for the project.

1.5.1.2 Reducing the vertical grade of the Donkey Steps

To allow trucks, all roads need to have a maximum vertical alignment grade of 15%. At its steepest point, the Donkey Steps has grades up to 38.7%. To reduce the vertical grade, the Donkey Steps will either need to be lengthened significantly, which requires vegetation clearing and rock cutting, or the road will need to be lowered or raised around 50 metres, which is not possible (see diagram below).

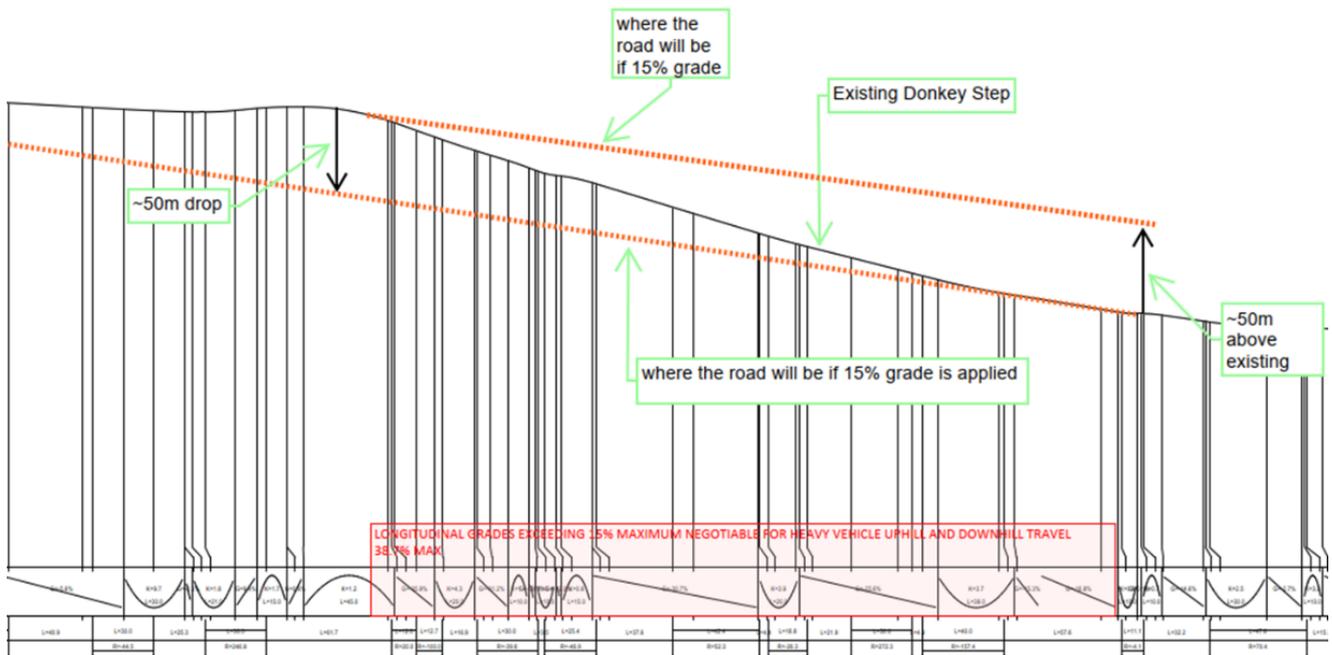
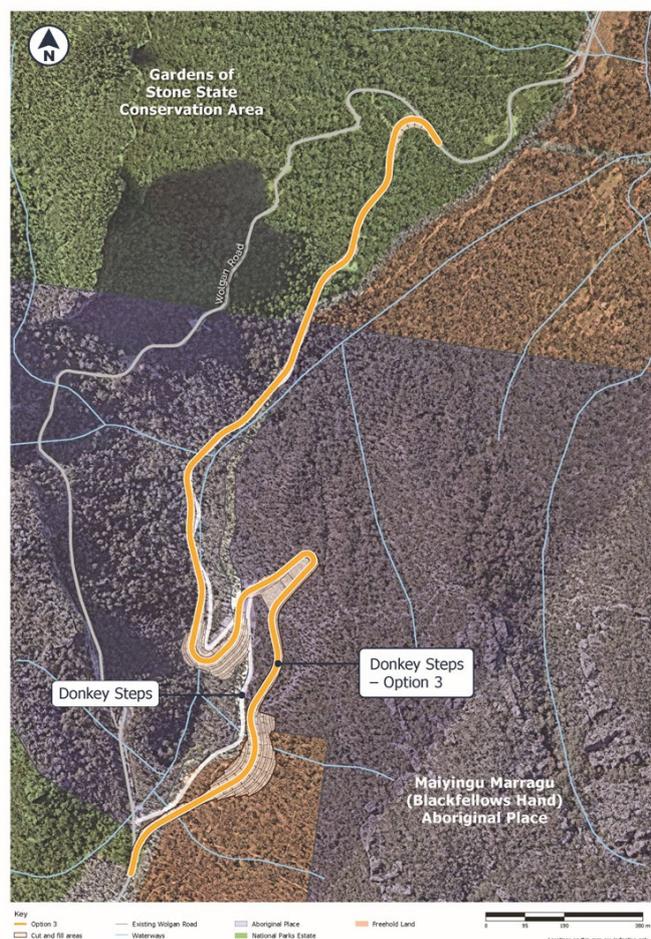


Figure 1-1: Vertical grade of the Donkey Steps

1.5.1.3 Donkey Steps Option 3

The project team presented an early design schematic, known as Donkey Steps Option 3 (see Figure 1-1), which realigned the road along the top of the escarpment to minimize the grade, rock cutting and vegetation clearing. The road uses a similar southern alignment to Option 1D, ties into the Donkey Steps at the first hairpin turn and broadly follows it to connect into the existing Wolgan Road in the north. The environmental assessment and concept design of Donkey Steps Option 3 will be explored together with Option 1D to ensure both options are able to be taken to submission of an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), pending the outcome of the updated slope risk assessment. Construction of the Donkey Steps section within the Gardens of Stone State Conservation Area may be delayed due to the complexities of the property acquisition process. However, work on the remainder of the road can proceed concurrently while the acquisition is underway.



1.5.2 Workshop activities

To facilitate community discussion, two activities were conducted during the workshop.

1.5.2.1 Activity 1 – community design criteria

The first activity involved getting the community to review a set of “community design criteria” in response to a presentation on the project’s design criteria. The aim was to be able to compare where the community had different design expectations/aspirations. However, following the presentation it became clear that the community agreed with the project’s design criteria and that the only feedback was to continue to minimise the project footprint as much as safely possible. Therefore, this activity was completed quickly, with one table identifying 24/7 unfettered access as a critical design criteria.

1.5.2.2 Activity 2 – Marking up maps

The second activity allowed community members to review large road schematics of Donkey Steps Option 3 and Option 1D. Using sticky notes, community members plotted any questions, suggestions or local knowledge they had. This activity was well received, and the raw outputs are contained in Section 4.1 of this report.

2 Key themes and outcomes

The following themes and outcomes have been captured by synthesising notes taken throughout the session by Bronte and Beatrice (bd infrastructure) as well as the workshop outputs contained in Section 4 (including feedback from the map activity and emails received post-event).

2.1 Community Priorities

- Safe, two-lane, resilient road access is the top priority.
- Residents expressed a need for urgency to deliver the project, especially regarding giving them back access to deliveries requiring trucks.
- Ensuring ongoing safe access to the Valley for residents during construction.
- Minimise impact on Aboriginal Place, biodiversity, and impacted landowners.

2.2 Concerns Over Process and Design

- Residents felt frustrated with the slow development of cost-effective options.
- More information needed on why Wolgan Road can't be used (see Figure 4-2) including information on risk.
- There were repeated concerns that early technical reviews and risk assessments were delayed or inadequately scoped.
- There was concern that the timeline of the updated Slope Risk Assessment would delay the delivery of the road as investigations into restoring Wolgan Road could not be undertaken until the Assessment is complete.
- Residents criticised the lack of clarity and communication around the funding scope, project objectives, and decision-making processes.
- Using the "paper road corridor" (i.e. the gazetted road corridor that doesn't follow the existing road) could speed up construction time by reducing acquisition delays.

2.3 Technical and Environmental Concerns

- Residents highlighted the need for comprehensive geotechnical risk assessments before committing to any alignment (see Figure 4-3).
- Residents agreed that the road should be designed to provide access to 19m trucks, however they would need to use both sides of the road at the hairpin turns.
- There was discussion around whether the road needs to be designed for 12.5m trucks to be able to pass each other. Majority of residents agreed that the road should be designed to allow 12.5m trucks to pass.
- Where possible, residents have asked for the width of the road to be minimised, while still allowing for 19 metre and 12.5m trucks.

- There were calls for greater transparency around LiDAR and other technical studies already completed, and what they show regarding the risk of using each option.
- Residents want more information on the biodiversity studies conducted to date and the type of likely impacts on local flora and fauna (see Figure 4-3).
- Concerns were raised about proceeding to an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) stage without a fully informed risk analysis.

2.4 Cultural, Environmental and Property Impacts

- Modifications to the Donkey Steps route could result in significant impacts to Aboriginal land, local biodiversity, and private properties.
- Any realignment that reduces property size below minimum block thresholds (40 hectares) could jeopardise landowners' ability to build or develop. Concessions would need to be made for landowners affected by property acquisition that may fall under the 40-hectare threshold (see Figure 4-1).
- The group expressed concern that Aboriginal Place impacts are not being adequately considered. There is potentially a "scar tree" which will need to be considered.
- Concerns around impact of site compounds on residents due to noise and dust (particularly outside 866 Wolgan Road).

2.5 Design and Funding Questions

- There is confusion and frustration about the project's funding mechanisms and whether Transport for NSW and NSW Reconstruction Authority (RA) will approve partial or alternative designs. The ongoing delay is concerning to residents and that it may risk funding approval.
- Several participants questioned why cheaper alternatives were not developed earlier to the same level as costlier ones.
- The need for a clear and shared risk assessment scope document was emphasised. Actions were taken to share the scope with the Community Consultative Group (CCG).

2.6 Risk and Resilience

- Participants noted that future landslips are highly likely, so redundancy and resilience should be central to any design.
- Concerns were raised about using the existing Wolgan Road while the Donkey Steps Option 3 was constructed as the Donkey Steps could be closed during construction of the new alignment. Residents are concerned that another rainfall event could occur leading to further landslips on Wolgan Road and being locked out of the Valley for several years during construction.
- Suggestions included operating Wolgan Road for heavy vehicles and restricting Donkey Steps to light vehicles, supported by a traffic control system.
- Residents suggested there should always be at least two options available to access the Valley to improve resilience.

3 Actions and Recommendations

- Updated Slope Risk Assessment scope will be shared with the CCG following the meeting.
- The awarded Slope Risk Assessment consultant to be invited to the next session to address specific community questions around the assessment and share information on past experiences.
- Future risk assessments, including the updated slope stability and long-term maintenance, are to be made publicly available.
- Community engagement will continue in tandem with project planning, especially as options are refined and presented for formal review.
- Establish monthly in person hybrid community update sessions based in Lithgow.
- Continue parallel planning of multiple options (Wolgan Road and Donkey Steps) until funding clarity is achieved.
- Conduct and share results from biodiversity investigations.
- Prepare for a follow-up workshop focused on the progress of the independent Slope Risk Assessment and constructability.

This report reflects the community's feedback and will inform further planning and decision-making. Stakeholder engagement remains a cornerstone of the project development process.

4 Raw outputs

4.1 Maps

Table 1

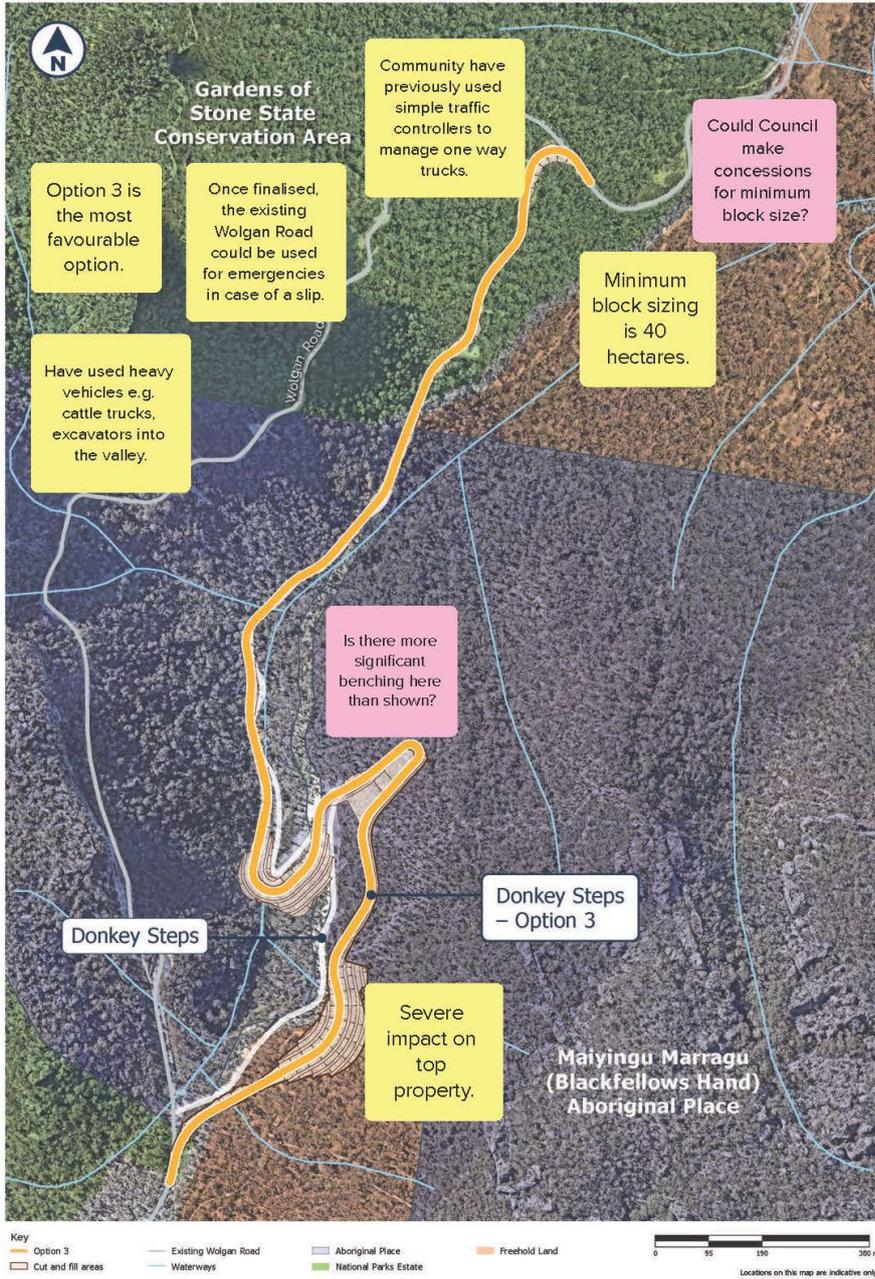


Figure -1: Group 1 map - Donkey Steps Option 3

Table 2

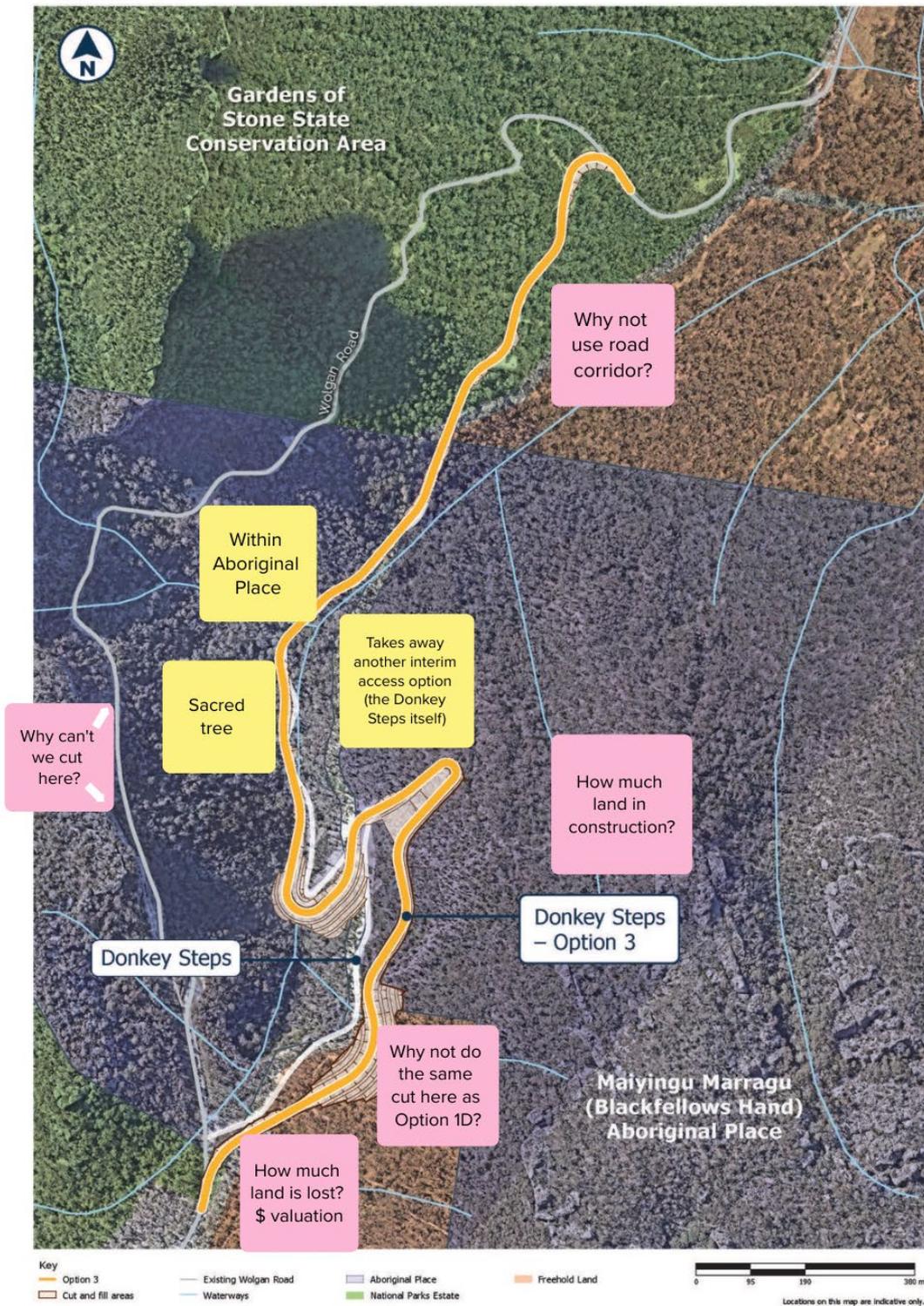


Figure -2: Group 2 map - Donkey Steps Option 3

*NOTE: during group discussion it was clarified that "sacred tree" should have been written as "scarred tree".

Table 3

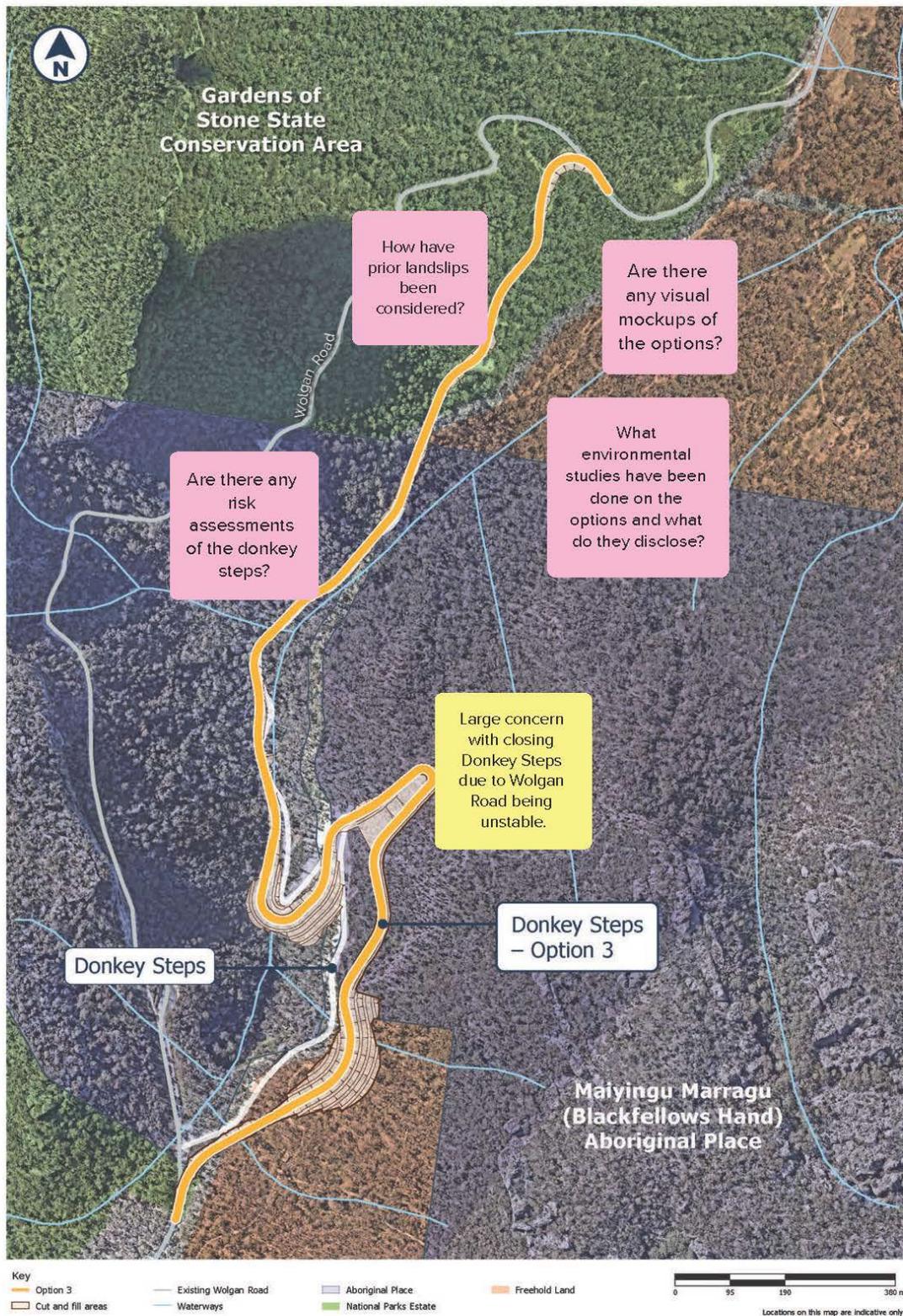


Figure -3: Group 3 map Donkey Steps Option 3

Table 3

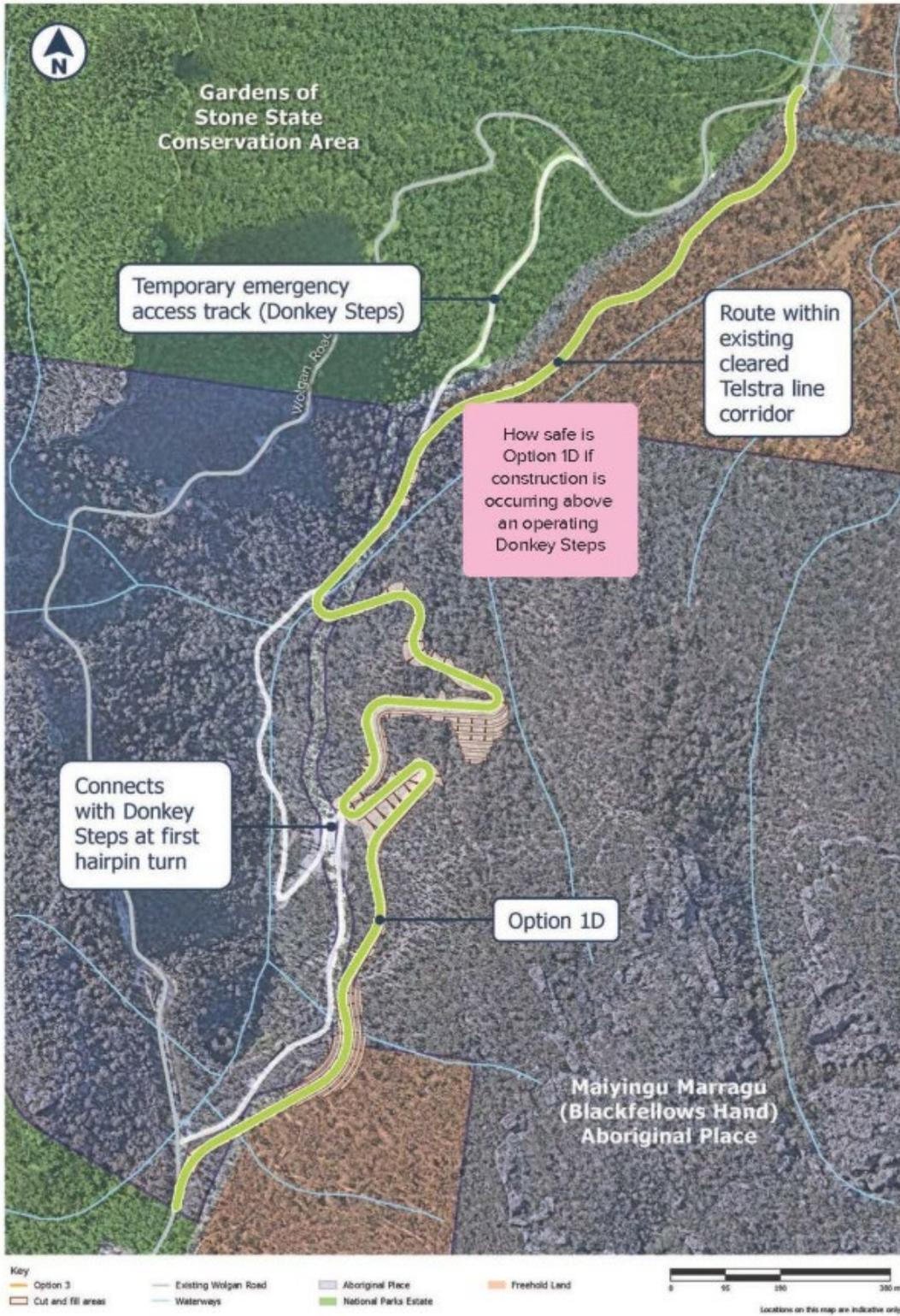


Figure -4: Group 3 map Option 1D

4.2 Feedback

Handwritten feedback received following the workshop.

W.V. Community Workshop: 14/05/25
Thank you, it was a great opportunity to get together and talk collaboratively.

Feedback form



Do you have any final thoughts, reflections or suggestions you'd like to share?

Compared to Option 1D, Donkey steps Option 3:

- would take away our primary interim access for ~4yrs.
- the Wolgan Rd (if operable) would need to last for ~4yrs during construction of D.S. Option 3.
- are there any 'early' access options?

For both Option 1D + D.S. Option 3:

- can the paper road corridor be used to avoid NPWS issues?
- and/or, could a land swap of the paper road with NPWS land assist resolving / speeding up?

Email feedback received following the workshop.

Subject: Wolgan Meeting Last Night

Thanks Jonathon, Christopher and your team for arranging the Wolgan workshop in the form you did last night. I felt it was well facilitated and allowed for constructive communication and expression by all - not just the loudest voices.