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Chief Executive Officer  
Douglas Shire Council

Attention: Gaye Scott

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**RE: Proposed Playground Rex Smeal Park Port Douglas**

Douglas Shire Sustainability Group Inc. (DSSG) is an incorporated association active in the Douglas Shire since 2005, in support of sustainability in this region.

DSSG is a community-based environmental advocacy organisation whose objects are:

- To promote and encourage the adoption of the principals of ecologically sustainable development to all sectors of the community throughout the Douglas Shire;
- To the protection and conservation of the unique environment in the Douglas Shire and its surrounds, including the Great Barrier Reef, the Wet Tropics and World Heritage areas;
- To promote social, economic and environmental balance;
- To promote and support environmentally sustainable practices, education and great environmental awareness amongst visitors to and residents of the Douglas Shire; and
- To recognise and promote the sustainable practices of the traditional owners of the Douglas Shire.

We do not support, and make the following comments about, the proposed development at Rex Smeal Park.

Background

We agree with Council's description of Rex Smeal Park:

*Rex Smeal Park is best known for its large shady fig trees, grassy green lawns (in the wet season), coconut fringed foreshore and ocean views. It is a space enjoyed by various groups ranging from community events, weddings, fitness groups, as well as it is a place where locals and visitors relax and take in the natural beauty of the Shire<sup>1</sup>.*

Council proposes to develop an 'adventure playground' under the large fig trees at Rex Smeal Park. The proposal is designed to respond to observed deficiencies with the Rex Smeal park area:

- *The existing playground is in poor condition and offers limited play opportunities*

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<sup>1</sup> [Rex Smeal Park Fig Tree Playground Concept | Douglas Shire Council](#)

- *The existing playground does not visually complement the space*

There is tension between the two target markets for this development. Is it aimed at visitors or is it designed to satisfy the needs of the local residents? In our view, neither group is satisfied by this proposal.

#### Economic impact

The proposal is said to have “potential to be a landmark piece of tourism infrastructure to draw in more domestic travellers<sup>2</sup>.” DSSG cannot see how this proposal aligns with Douglas Shire tourism positioning as Australia’s leading sustainable tropical destination. In our view, the project’s connection with the natural environment is very shallow.

We are of the view that revenue currently gained from the use of the park as a function venue will likely be lost if this development proceeds. No one wants their wedding photos to include a plastic playground.

On the issue of costs to ratepayers, Council says:

*“Until concept plans are finalised the cost is unknown however Council is looking at this as a significant investment. Council has allocated funds in the 2021/22 budget to complete planning, consultation and preparation of final concept plans and technical specifications to have a shovel ready project by **31 December 2021**”<sup>3</sup>.*

We have several questions about cost:

- What is the total proposed spend?
- How much of this will be funded by grants?
- What if the community says it does not want this development?
- What amount of money has already been committed for the design?

#### Social considerations

Social media comments on the proposal indicate that majority of local residents do not support the development. Our members share these views.

1. Incorrect priority
  - Other areas need playground infrastructure more than Port Douglas e.g. Diwan, Daintree, Wonga, Miallo etc.
  - Other playgrounds in Port Douglas need maintenance and shade before we need a new playground.
  - A splash park is more desirable.
  - It is not suitable for older children and teenagers.
  - Why not just fix the existing playground?
2. Not complementary of the natural values and other uses of the area
  - Not the right location, will spoil the park and views.
  - The shade of the fig trees is valuable for other uses which will be excluded by this development.
  - The potential for increased traffic in an area which is already congested.

#### Environmental concerns

DSSG sees two main environmental concerns with this proposed development.

##### 1. Materials

The structure appears to be made of plastic – do we need more plastic in our environment? In addition, as it breaks down, soft fall foam is a major pollutant.

##### 2. Impact on fauna and flora

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<sup>2</sup> Media release [Green Ant adventure playground concept released for consultation - Douglas Shire Council](#)

<sup>3</sup> [Rex Smeal Park Fig Tree Playground Concept | Douglas Shire Council](#)

The large fig trees are iconic. There are concerns that the playground would cause damage to the trees. Birds, bats and other animals inhabit the fig trees – there is potential for them to be disturbed and displaced by this development. Birds and bats will drop excrement onto the playground equipment (and the children using it), and this will result in calls to cut back the trees. In addition, falling tree limbs will be seen as a high risk, prompting pruning or removal of the trees, in the long term.

In summary like other residents of the Shire, the majority of our members do not support this development. Those who do support the design, do not want it located at Rex Smeal Park.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Didge McDonald', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Yours sincerely  
Didge McDonald  
President