

Rex Smeal Park Ficus – Council response

Douglas Shire Council recognises the significant community, environmental and landscape value of the mature Ficus at Rex Smeal Park, including the shade and amenity it provides. Council also has a responsibility to manage public safety risks associated with structurally compromised trees in heavily used public spaces.

The decision to remove the tree follows more than two years of active maintenance, specialist assessments and consideration of options to retain it. Importantly, arborists who previously supported retention subsequently agreed that removal was the only viable option.

History of management and arborist's assessments

July 2024 – Proactive vegetation maintenance

Council identified the Ficus over the playground for canopy lifting, pruning from neighbouring trees, reducing weight on lateral limbs and deadwood removal, in accordance with AS 4373. Vegetation maintenance was undertaken at Rex Smeal Park during 2024.

March–April 2025 – Aerial inspection and structural concerns

A contractor removed significant deadwood and undertook an aerial inspection, identifying decay, cracking, movement and limb delamination. Isolation beneath affected sections of the crown was recommended while further controls were considered. Crown-reduction works were undertaken during March and April to reduce loading and stabilise affected areas.

28 April 2025 – Independent tree health assessment

A formal assessment identified cracking, decay associated with previous pruning wounds and basal decay pockets. Despite these defects, the arborist assessed the tree as being in reasonable condition, with high amenity value and potential for retention through high-priority pruning, further resistance drilling and six-monthly reassessment.

The arborist stated: *“Several defects in upper crown have been detected that can be easily rectified and managed by remedial pruning”*.

18 May 2025 – Advanced diagnostic testing

A further independent arborist undertook resistance drilling at nine locations. While fungal infestation and internal decay were identified, the assessment also found substantial healthy timber and a significant structural aerial root system. The report concluded that *“the tree is still viable for retention”*, subject to substantial formative pruning and close monitoring.

July 2025–September 2026 – Continued management

Council arranged further canopy reduction works in July 2025 and active management continued, including deadwood removal in April 2026 and further maintenance involving the Ficus in September 2026.

21 September 2026 – Aerial assessment and deterioration

A further aerial inspection identified materially progressed deterioration: fungal decay, extensive longitudinal and transverse cracking, limb delamination and loss of structural integrity in major load-bearing limbs. Some affected limbs supported adjoining branches representing up to approximately 50% of the crown, raising the potential for consequential failure of adjacent sections.

The advice provided was that *“fungal decay has severely compromised the structural integrity of several load-bearing limbs.”*

The arborist concluded that previous crown-reduction works had not prevented further deterioration. Removing compromised limbs would require extensive removal of the upper crown and adjoining branches. The advice provided was that *“complete removal of the tree is likely to be the most appropriate option.”*

24 September 2026 – Multiple arborist site inspections

Council’s arborist and three independent consulting arborists who had previously assessed the tree undertook separate site inspections. They reviewed the findings of the 21 September aerial assessment and considered whether further remedial pruning could safely retain a viable tree.

All three independent consulting arborists agreed that further pruning was no longer a viable option and that complete removal was the only practical solution. This included consultants who had previously recommended retention with pruning and monitoring. Their revised advice reflected the progression of structural deterioration and the extent of crown removal that would be necessary to address the compromised limbs.

Council’s arborist explained: *“Crown reduction can reduce lever arms, wind loading and the consequences of branch failures. It cannot restore structural capacity already lost to decay, cracking or delamination, nor can it slow or stop progressive fungal decay.”*

This collective assessment was the decisive change in professional advice and formed the basis for Council’s decision. Fungal material has also been submitted to James Cook University for identification and testing; however, that does not change the structural defects identified.

Council's arborist acknowledged that the tree's scale, shade contribution and significance to Rex Smeal Park cannot be replaced in the foreseeable future; however, the assessment emphasised that these values must be weighed against the documented structural defects, the high level of public use and the potentially severe consequences of structural failure.

Alternative management options

Further pruning was considered, but the extent of deterioration in major supporting limbs meant that the pruning needed to address the defects would remove substantial portions of the crown without restoring the structural integrity already lost.

Relocating the playground was also considered; however, the tree overhangs pathways, seating, public open space and event areas, so relocation would not address potential exposure elsewhere in the park. Retention would require a permanent exclusion zone extending at least 1.5 times the tree’s height under the proposed risk-management approach. This would significantly restrict public access and the usability of Rex Smeal Park, without addressing the underlying deterioration.

Ecological and wildlife considerations

Council has engaged a highly experienced ecologist to advise on wildlife and habitat considerations associated with removal, separate from the arborist assessment of structural condition. A Chief Drone Pilot will use thermal-imaging technology to assist in identifying wildlife in the tree. These findings and specialist ecological advice will inform wildlife management measures before and during removal works.

Arbortist reports and confidentiality

The arborist reports are not publicly available. However, community members who would like further information can submit an RTI application through Council's [website](#).

Council's position

Council pursued retention while professional advice supported it. By September 2026, significant structural deterioration had progressed despite pruning and ongoing maintenance. Following the 21 September aerial assessment and separate site inspections on 24 September, all three independent consulting arborists agreed that removal was the only viable management option.

Council acknowledges that removing this prominent tree will result in the loss of established shade, landscape character and amenity. Nevertheless, given the documented deterioration, the consistent recommendations of the three independent consulting arborists and the limitations of alternative risk controls, Council considers removal necessary to manage public safety while maintaining Rex Smeal Park as an accessible community space.