



17 December 2015

On behalf of the Yarra Riverkeeper Association I am pleased to make the following submission for Plan Melbourne Refresh.

Introduction

Plan Melbourne and the *Plan Melbourne Refresh Discussion Paper* do acknowledge the critical importance of the Yarra and the Maribyrnong and the waterways of the catchments in Melbourne.

These initiatives need to be strengthened.

We believe that the importance of waterways to the future of Melbourne, and Melbourne's famed liveability, needs to be put front and centre. The waterways, in particular the Yarra as Melbourne's central and largest river, are the keys to:

- Green open space, especially green open space connected by linear paths for pedestrians and cyclists.
- Environmental resilience, especially for biodiversity as waterways are connected corridors.

The Yarra, the Maribyrnong and the Werribee must be explicitly referred to in any plan for Melbourne. In the context of development and the increased densification of the city, the crucial role of the waterways, in particular the Yarra, needs to be protected and sustained – over the long term, as the pressures increase. The Yarra and waterways of Melbourne are being squeezed by overdevelopment, and the values of the corridor significantly reduced. Mandatory setback and height limits are crucial for all our waterways in urban settings.

It is also important that planning for any additional future crossings of the Yarra includes the importance of waterways as migration corridors for fish, animals, insects and reptiles as well the role of waterways in supporting the distribution of healthy plant communities across the catchment. The bridges need to be designed to minimize interruption of the corridor and allow continuity of canopy and understory along the corridor.

The unique nature of Australian rivers and wetlands needs to be acknowledged. Australian rivers are often smaller in scale, and more strongly connected to wetlands than we understand rivers to be from a European or North American background. Flows are highly



variable and the ecology is dependent on the variability of these flows. The Yarra and its tributaries have been cut off from the wetlands with which they fruitfully interconnected before flows were reduced and over-managed. As flows are highly variable, Australian waterways are almost as much rivers of vegetation as they are of water and the particular importance of vegetation needs to be acknowledged. We cannot simply look to planning in other cities in the world for models for planning for our waterways but must create a planning framework that works for our unique Australian environment.

We specifically request that there is an initiative to prevent construction on the floodplain
And an initiative to protect, improve and re-connect wetlands.

The importance of waterways and the green corridor they provide in cooling Melbourne needs also to be explicitly acknowledged.

The waterways and especially the Yarra as the primary river of Melbourne are the key to sustaining parklands, building resilience both for people and for biodiversity.

Who we are

This year the Yarra Riverkeeper Association is celebrating 10 years of advocating for and educating about the Yarra River. We are an independent community of citizen-advocates that works solely in the interest of the river. The spokesperson of the Association is the Yarra Riverkeeper, and the Riverkeeper boat is permanently moored in the Yarra at Burnley and patrols the River regularly. This gives us an informed and unique understanding of the river landscape and the changes that happen there.

We are part of an alliance of more than 150 waterkeepers worldwide. On our river patrols, we take key decision-makers on tour so they can better appreciate the river and what it contributes to the life of Melbourne. Over the past ten years we have built a detailed understanding of the Yarra and its corridor, and the importance of the river to Melbourne.

The original riverkeeper organization grew out of a group of fishers fighting pollution on the Hudson River in New York. As well as an environmental organization, we are a humanist organization. We advocate for a healthy river and river corridor ecology that will benefit the people living in and visiting the catchment. We successfully advocated for environmental water flows for the Yarra, they first began flowing in 2010. These flows are helping to restore ecological values to the river.

Yarra River Protection Act and Trust

As the river has long suffered from fragmented responsibilities and management, from inconsistencies in planning from one council-planning scheme to another, and from a lack of continuity in implementing the recommendations of planning reports commissioned for the Yarra, we have long advocated for stronger management of the River.



In response, the current government made an election commitment to the Yarra River Protection Act and Trust. The government is now working on a framework for the Act and, as a preliminary to resolving planning inconsistencies and a lack of implementation along the river, has called together a ministerial round table of councils bordering the Yarra along with key agencies, and established a Ministerial Advisory Committee and a reference group.

In any plan for Melbourne the Yarra needs to be explicitly recognized and in planning for any city and its waterways need to be recognized. This has been followed in every plan for Melbourne since 1929 and the need now is more urgent as development in the catchment and over-development in the river corridor squeeze the visual landscape, radically reduces the sense of a natural environment which is distinct from the built environment that is so valued by so many, shrinks connecting habitats on the river and breaks migration links. This is particularly important under any climate change scenarios

The Yarra

The Yarra River is Melbourne finest natural asset and the very reason the city exists where it does today. It is essential to Melbourne's identity and to many people the river and the city are synonymous. We are incredibly fortunate to have parkland that extends to the central city and there is virtually a continuous link from the mountains to the bay. The headwaters of the river is in the closed catchment which protects some of the finest natural forest in Australia, as it has been left untouched for over 100 years. The sometimes extensive riverine parklands are unusual among major urban river systems, and the connectivity of an urban river from the forests to the sea is rare, and the potential for a connected linear parkland with bike/pedestrian paths is even rarer. Melbourne is even luckier in having extensive parklands along tributaries, which have been improved and extended by the hard work of community. As the Yarra does, these waterways offer many linear recreational opportunities., and extend the network of paths from the Yarra. Yet the River is under pressure. The very amenity that is so enjoyed by many is being destroyed for the benefit of a few, and long-term values are being unnecessarily sacrificed for short-term profits.

Plan Melbourne Refresh discussion paper

The discussion paper of October 2015 "Plan Melbourne Refresh" notes that among 'What is changing' that the refresh 'provides opportunity to update Plan Melbourne 2014:

Reflect progress in implementation of Plan Melbourne 2014 related policy reviews, such as the Yarra River Strategy

Though Plan Melbourne contained significant references to protecting key Melbourne waterways there was no explicit Yarra River Strategy – one is needed.



The MAC August 2013 recommended:

Initiative 7.5.3: Manage the interface between development and the waterways

7.5.3-1: In consultation with local government, investigate potential planning protection for key waterway corridors such as the Yarra River between Heidelberg and Warrandyte and the Maribyrnong River, as well as major parks and other places of high environmental value.

7.5.3-2: Where warranted, seek to amend the relevant local planning schemes to provide adequate protection for these natural and physical assets.

And the plan delivered:

Initiative 4.2.4 Protect Waterways From Inappropriate Development

Port Phillip Bay, Yarra River, Maribyrnong River and other significant rivers and streams are important assets to the state and are highly valued by the community in a number of ways.

There is a need to balance the tourism, recreational and cultural values of Melbourne's foreshore and waterways with development opportunities. It is also important that we protect our waterways from inappropriate development. The government has recently brought forward new, mandatory controls to protect the banks of the Yarra and Maribyrnong rivers, our city's two iconic waterways. These controls should be offered to local governments and waterway authorities to protect other iconic waterways and coasts across Melbourne, including Port Phillip Bay.

In the short term

- In partnership with local governments, stakeholders and water authorities prepare and implement planning provisions for height controls for medium- and high-density development (or inappropriate uses and development) in sensitive locations around Port Phillip Bay.
- In partnership with local governments, stakeholders and water authorities, work toward the protection of Melbourne's waterways from inappropriate development through the use of mandatory controls similar to those in place for the Yarra and Maribyrnong rivers.

Up to the time of the publication of the *Plan Melbourne Refresh Discussion Paper* the mandatory controls were limited to height limits and vegetation requirements along the Boroondara Corridor, which had initially been 'interim' but had been made permanent by Boroondara Council. Mandatory controls are important on the river as once the landscape is destroyed it can never be recovered. Two key points to be made are that the small scale of the Yarra means that a development that is modest compared to developments elsewhere in the city can utterly destroy the magic of the visual landscape, and the river is seen by many as they drive alongside the river or cross the river by bridge as a river of green and the Yarra needs to be protected as a vegetation-dominated corridor.

Shortly after the publication of Plan Melbourne in May 2014 the respected *Middle Yarra Corridor Study Recommendations*, was published in draft. This with the 2005 *Review of Policies and Controls for the Yarra River Corridor: Punt Road to Burke Road Final Consultant's Report* needs to be incorporated into Plan Melbourne Refresh initiatives. The second of these two reports cites the following key issues as important in the Yarra Corridor:



- relate the siting, scale, bulk and massing of new development adjacent to the width and scale of the waterway and the river banks;
- protect and enhance the landscape qualities of the Yarra River as a vegetation dominated corridor;
- tailor the siting, scale, bulk and massing to the distinctive landscape character of each section of the Yarra River corridor;
- consider the impact of building massing and siting on long-range views of the river corridor, including from the opposite bank;
- minimise overshadowing of the river ... at all times of the year.

These points also can be applied to the other waterways of Melbourne.

Plan Melbourne Refresh needs to extend the commitments made in *Plan Melbourne*, in the light of the strengthening community appreciation of the vital role of the Yarra and other waterways in the catchment play in open spaces in Melbourne, especially as densification proceeds.

The Yarra and the waterways of Melbourne need to be protect from development encroaching into the open space of the waterways with strong mandatory commitments to setbacks, height limits, a vegetated corridor, and avoidance of any overshadowing. As the densification of Melbourne proceeds the fine open spaces offered by the waterways will be destroyed unless they are actively defended, yet these are the very open spaces needed by the people living in the new high rises. This is a particular risk for brownfield sites on the river corridor, where many old industrial sites and warehouses have been located.

Plan Melbourne Refresh needs to make an explicit commitment to the importance of our waterways in coping with climate change and building resilience. The rivers and the riverine environments play a vital role in cooling our city and by providing connected system of ecosystems, which is healthier than isolated patches. The waterways allow communities of plants and of wildlife to connect increasing genetic diversity and therefore resilience. The crucial value of our waterways in dealing with climate change and in promoting biodiversity especially as corridors connecting parklands and bush needs to be explicitly recognized, studied and co-ordinated across the catchment.

An emerging trend in favour of the River and its corridor

It needs to be kept firmly in mind that protecting the river is increasingly important to Melbournians and those involved in planning for Melbourne. Two factors clearly demonstrate this trend.

First, for 40 years every planning report on Melbourne or the river has highlighted the importance of protecting the River and its corridor, and the uniqueness of the Yarra as an Australian waterway has emerged from these reports. These reports are summarised in



removed

current State government was elected with a policy to enact legislation to protect the River with a specific Act and Trust. The government has followed this up with a number of commitments and has established a reference group for the proposed legislation as well as reviewed the inconsistencies of the Planning Schemes of councils along the River. These initiatives have bi-partisan support and are supported by councils on the Yarra. The overarching vision of this policy and the values that underpin it needs also to be reflected in Plan Melbourne Refresh.

Any plan for Melbourne needs to invest in the Yarra and the waterways of the city.

Yours sincerely,

removed