

PLANNING TO PROTECT THE YARRA RIVER CORRIDOR

Submission by Yarra Riverkeeper Association Inc., 19 May 2011

The Yarra River is Melbourne's most important natural asset and all Melburnians are dependent on it. It provides most of our piped water supply. It is the centrepiece of many city cultural events and plays host to numerous sports and recreational activities.

The river corridor is renowned for its natural beauty. It is one of the region's prime wildlife habitats and provides city dwellers with first-class opportunities to connect with the natural world; connections which are vital to our physical and mental well-being.



Dights Falls, Collingwood - Kew



Deep Rock, Yarra Bend Park



"Eden" development site, Abbotsford



End of Clarke Street, Abbotsford



Yarra Bend Park

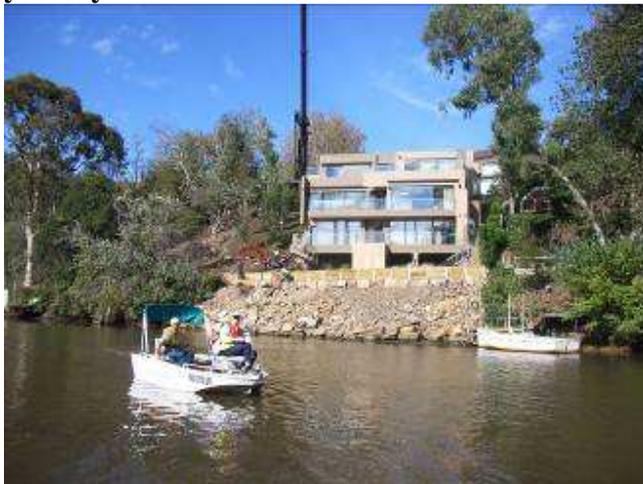
But our dependence on the Yarra is not matched by our care for it. The land abutting the river is being smothered under more and bigger buildings and hard surfaces. What little remain of the natural vegetated areas are being lost and the important social and environmental values of the river's environs continue to be degraded.

The authorities have written volumes about the need to protect the Yarra Corridor. But it is not being protected, and damaging “development” has reached crisis levels, with a long string of high-impact buildings being erected or proposed along and near the riverbank.

The government’s land-use planning system is failing abysmally.



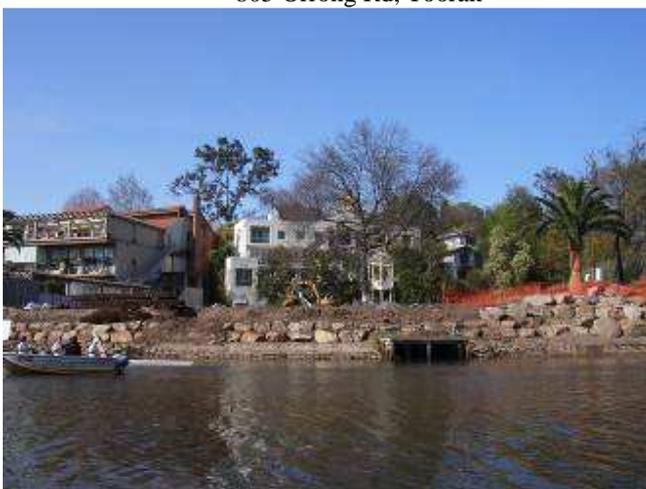
Yarradale Road, Toorak



805 Orrong Rd, Toorak



New building/boatshed, Melbourne Girls College, Richmond



Yarradale Rd, Toorak



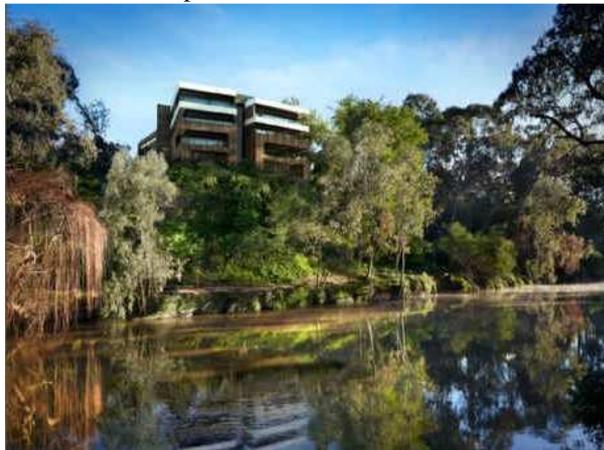
Yarradale Rd, Toorak



“Eden” development under construction, Abbotsford



Approved for Flockhart St, Abbotsford



Approved for 9-23 Rex Ave, Alphington

COMING SOON

AMCOR SITE, ALPHINGTON

VICTORIA GARDENS STAGE 3

CUB BREWERY SITE, ABBOTSFORD

AND MORE!

In the 2010 election the Coalition described¹ its planning vision for Melbourne, built upon “ensuring the social, economic and environmental well-being of the community is preserved and promoted through the planning system”, “protecting existing parks and open space from development”, and using “opportunities created through urban renewal to examine...adding...public parklands”. Mr Baillieu said², “A Coalition government would declare large parts of Melbourne off-limits to high-density living...set up a register of significant public land including open space along the banks of the Yarra.”

We acknowledge previous Coalition governments’ impressive leadership in seeking to protect the Yarra’s natural setting. Right now **there is a valuable opportunity for the new government**, with its members’ electorates covering most of the river corridor, not just to protect Melbourne’s most important natural asset from further irreparable damage, but also to exploit its potential to be a continuous bushland park of world-class standing.

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association has consulted widely with experts on the matter, and is keen to work with the government to implement this vision.

¹ The Victorian Liberal Nationals Coalition Plan for Planning, for 2010 State Election, page 9

² According to The Age, 25 October 2010, report on announcement of Coalition planning policy.

MORE DETAILS

THE YARRA CORRIDOR

There is close independence between the ecology of the river, its banks and the adjacent land influenced by the river's proximity. These interconnected elements along the full length of the river are referred to as the river corridor. It is rich habitat for native plants and animals; and for many species the continuity and vegetation of the corridor, which will vary in width along the river, are vital for their existence and wellbeing.

The natural landscape of the Yarra Corridor and that of its tributaries also has high social values. It provides some of the best "green" open space in the metropolitan area with beautiful places for walking, cycling, paddling, picnicking or simply appreciating the natural setting. This riverine landscape is especially valuable in the inner suburbs where it provides important natural places to balance living in high density housing.

KEY PLANNING DOCUMENTS

The state government and relevant authorities have long recognized the important values of the Yarra Corridor and written policies and plans intended to protect them.

Coalition Government State Planning Policy – River Yarra, 1971

In 1971, the first two objectives of the relevant state government policy³ were:

- "The River Yarra and its environs shall be identified through appropriate planning measures as one of the most significant physical features of the Melbourne metropolis.
- The River Yarra and its immediate environs shall be planned primarily as an open space system for nature conservation and recreation."

Yarra River Concept Plans, 1980s

In the 1980's the state government and the MMBW (forerunner of Melbourne Water) wrote "concept plans" for the lower and middle reaches of the Yarra. The Coalition Minister for Conservation said at the time⁴ "The Yarra River is potentially one of the State's, and certainly Melbourne's great assets." The primary objective⁵ of the concept plans was "to create a linear parkland along the river...to conserve and enhance the cultural and physical resources of the area...to create an attractive environment." A more specific objective was "to ensure that development in the Valley [would] complement and enhance the river environment"

³ "Statement of Planning Policy No 4 River Yarra" 1971

⁴ "Lower Yarra Concept Plan", October 1981 prepare by Kinhill – Centre for Environmental Studies

⁵ Ibid, page 9

Subsequent planning work

The last state government acknowledged the necessity and intention of these plans⁶, but failed to implement them. An important consultant's report⁷ on planning controls stated, "Open spaces associated with the Yarra River represent the largest and most important resource of parks and green spaces in inner Melbourne. The extent of the remnant bushland and leafy environment that provides habitat for wildlife and a secluded, peaceful haven for visitors makes it unique in inner Melbourne...The open spaces...are particularly valuable...where the density of development is such that available open space is scarce."

Unfortunately the state government all but ignored this report until just before the 2010 election, when it stated⁸ "The Yarra River corridor is one of Melbourne's best known and loved locations. [Its] parks and trails are accessed by a large number of residents from the surrounding suburbs and visitors alike.....It is important that significant open space, recreation, aesthetic, conservation and tourism assets are protected from development which would diminish their value." But little action was taken.

In summary, the authorities continue to write volumes of words about the important values of the Yarra Corridor and the need to protect it. But it is not being protected, and the damage from "over-development" continues apace. The situation has reached crisis levels, with a long string of large scale developments either built, under construction or proposed along and near the riverbank.

Unless corrective action is urgently taken to halt the degradation, what little remains of the environmental values of the Yarra River corridor, especially through the inner suburbs, will be lost forever.

UNDERLYING ISSUES

Why are the current planning controls not effective in protecting and enhancing the Yarra Corridor? Here are some underlying shortcomings.

1. The river is on the boundary of municipalities and its banks are overseen by numerous councils and governing bodies. Consequently planning decisions made by councils tend to have a narrow focus, considering impacts only in the immediate vicinity and with inadequate regard to effects on the opposite bank or up or down stream.
2. Where the aspirations for the Corridor have been identified in planning schemes they have only been in the form of overlays and guidelines, which are discretionary and thus provide uncertain and insecure protection of the Corridor.
3. The consequential uncertainty gives large scope for property owners to interpret the guidelines in their own favour and encourages them to propose "extravagant", maximum-scale, ambit-claim developments.

⁶ "Melbourne 2030" document issued October 2002. One key initiative (5.7.4) was to "strengthen current policies and review the adequacy of planning controls relating to the Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers to ensure the long-term protection of open space, conservation values – with the first priority being the Yarra River corridor between Punt Road and Burke Road."

⁷ "Review of Policies and Controls for the Yarra River Corridor: Punt Road to Burke Road" by Planisphere for the Department of Sustainability and Environment, June 2005. Refer page 16

⁸ Department of Planning and Community Development proposed schedule to Environmental Significance Overlay[s] for four local councils, Yarra, Stonnington, Banyule and Boroondara, mid 2010

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE

A key step is to develop a vision for the Yarra Corridor that will guide decisions about future land use changes and development proposals along it.

Our vision is that the Yarra Corridor be a valued, protected, viable, self-sustaining and continuous natural corridor along the entire length of the Yarra River.

Elements of this vision for the Corridor are that:

- it provides high quality habitat for the large numbers of indigenous plants and animals;
- its long cultural heritage with aboriginal people and role in white settlement are protected and celebrated;
- all existing public parks, wetlands, flood plains and open space (together with surrounding buffer areas) are permanently protected from development;
- its public spaces provide many opportunities for passive recreation and nature based activities;
- along its entire length
 - privately owned riverbank and significant riparian lands are returned to public ownership;
 - it is vegetated with indigenous plants;
 - the height and set-back of nearby buildings are such that the view from the crest of the river bank is predominately parkland or native bushland.

This vision may take some time to achieve but immediate action is required to protect what little remains of the open space and natural riverine environment. Only then will there be any chance of achieving the envisaged “linear parkland along the river”

To realise such a vision, the necessary corrections to the planning system would entail stronger rules using all available “tools” such as land-use zoning, environmental overlays, revised state planning policies and legislation.

One important consideration is that the Yarra Corridor’s value, ecology and well-being all relate to and are dependent on its entirety and not its separate parts; and that is how the Corridor must be viewed and managed. This whole-of-system perspective is reflected in how the river’s water is managed, but the land on the river’s bank is still managed piecemeal. It requires a boarder perspective than what may be applied by a local council. (NB Until it was abolished in the 1990s the Melbourne Metropolitan Board of Works provided this perspective as evident in its various concept plans for the Corridor)

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association has consulted widely with experts on the matter, and is keen to work with the government to develop a vision and protective planning system for the Yarra Corridor.