Our Yarra: Healthy, Protected and Loved

27 September 2019

**Submission by the Yarra Riverkeeper Association to discussion paper 'Building Better Apartments in Neighbourhoods'**

Clearly, current apartment design is failing the community, both the community living in a particular apartment block or buying into recently constructed or under-construction apartment block, and the community in which the apartment development is located.

The cladding issue and other quality building issues are symptomatic of broader issues within apartment design, the approach of developers, construction and the need for stronger controls.

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association applauds the efforts to introduce better controls on apartments. The building of apartments (and townhouses) on various scales will do much to dictate the future form of the city and resilience in the face of changing weather patterns.

The Association's submission will address the five areas identified, and then address a sixth area and a seventh area, both of which the guidelines should address: overshadowing and water. Our comments reinforce many of the proposed changes and extend them in other places. The five areas identified by the report are list below

1 **Green space** in common areas of buildings, which preferably include trees to provide shade and urban cooling, and landscaping that softens the street.
2 **High-quality building facades** made from robust, durable and attractive materials that complement surrounding buildings and provide visual interest.
3 **Protection from wind impacts** on surrounding streets and open space, so the spaces are comfortable to use and likely to be used more often.
4 **Attractive, engaging streets** that enhance the amenity, safety and walkability of the neighbourhood.
5 **Better managed construction impacts** of building work on existing neighbourhoods.

**1 Green space**
Green space is critical for the health of people and the health of the community and for biodiversity.

Sustainable indigenous planting that creates habitat is the key. Green space is not just about trees it is about habitat. People like active environments that included birds and insects. These green spaces will contribute to the connectivity of green spaces across the city. This should be planned to connect to other green spaces and create a networked habitat across the city. Planting should be indigenous and create habitat. The design should begin with a site analysis and a landscape plan and the building be designed around landscaping that will create long-term sustainable vegetation and habitat. The planting plan should be implemented

sequentially during construction to maximize the scale of the green space on completion and the ability of the planting to survive and to allow sequential planting of appropriate layers over time. Planting during construction will minimize sediment run-off from the site and build high quality soil and leaf litter. The planting should be planned in such a way that it is self-generating.

Canopy trees while important are not the only structural layer to be considered. The leaf litter is critical to the health of green spaces. Proper consideration of leaf litter and soil quality and the interaction between the two ensures healthy self-generating green open spaces. There is also appeal to the human eye to have a bush or undergrowth level in plantings. That will also maximize habitat values.

2 **High quality building facades**
Building facades need to be constructed in a way that minimises the reradiation of heat. Buildings need to be set back from the pavement's edge to allow planting between the street and the pavement. Buildings set directly on the street are heat banks that store that multiply the heat storage effect of pavement and wall. That is the most effective way to cool and protect the building, and to create and networked urban forest with continuous canopy and habitat for birds and insects to move around the city. The facades should include eaves and balconies and should be constructed of materials that both manage heat absorption and minimize reflectivity. Lighting should be controllable, directed, shielded and minimize the impact on surrounding insect life.

**3 Protection from wind impacts**
Wind is a major impact on liveability, and on habitat. The cumulative impact of projects needs to be considered not the impact of any single project as if it is isolated from its surrounds. Wind reports written before construction of recently constructed apartment building have consistently underestimated the impacts of wind and of tunnelling effects of wind. Established trees can help minimize wind impacts.

**4 Attractive, engaging streets**
Setting buildings back from the pavement and allowing habitat landscaping between building and sidewalk contributes to making streets attractive. Attractive trees with interconnecting canopy create places people want to be by protecting against sun and rain and creating cool shadowed opportunities to move through the city.

**5 Better managed construction impacts**
This is an issue across Melbourne leading to conflict between residents and developers and represents lost opportunity to build community. Construction across Melbourne inflicts a cost to the community unequally and damages and reduces green infrastructure while releasing sediment and toxicants into waterways.

**6 Overshadowing**
Overshadowing is a crucial issue and needs to be considered both within a development and the impact of the development on surrounding areas. Filtered shadow is valuable People are

not attracted to areas of solid shade – they also impossible places in which to create high-value landscaping as the palate of plants is either limited or empty. It is an issue on streetscapes as developments are robbing pedestrians of sunlight. People like sunny places and dislike heavily or permanently shaded places.

**7 Water**
Water management of any development is crucial in any apartment development and the perhaps the critical issues is the speed with which water flows off hard surfaces. Apartment design needs to maximize permeability and maximize the opportunities for the presence of water features which slow the release of water into creeks and waterways.

**In Summary**
We note that the probable changes in weather patterns make the need to create apartment buildings that are naturally cooled and protected by high quality established self-regenerating vegetation urgent.

We would propose that the developer of an apartment is responsible for the ongoing maintenance and 'health' of facades and green spaces and that developers are required to establish a fund in trust to ensure this work is adequately funded. That will help the developer take a long-term view of the 'quality' of the construct.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Kelly
Yarra Riverkeeper,
*On behalf of the board and membership of the Yarra Riverkeeper Association and the broader community that supports our vision and objectives.*