



Our Yarra: Healthy, Protected and Loved

15 July 2020

Submission by the Yarra Riverkeeper Association: Seafarers Rest Park Design

Who are we

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association is the community voice for the river. The Yarra Riverkeeper speaks for the river as the river cannot speak for itself. We are a key and informed stakeholder on the Yarra River. Our policy achievements include the initial advocacy for the Yarra Protection (Willip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act, as well as for the Yarra Planning Controls. We have built an informed and evidence-based community understanding of the river as a single and integrated ecosystem from source to the bay.

Summary of our submission

- Our principal concern is that the Seafarers Park design in draft does not yet properly address the ecological values of the adjacent river, nor respect the river as a ‘single living and integrated natural entity’. The Yarra Riverkeeper Association believes that it is essential to acknowledge the Yarra River and its environs as a continuous corridor of public green space, where possible, and unbroken wildlife habitat along the entire length of the river. We believe that the river provides critical natural infrastructure for the City of Melbourne and that this role should be enhanced at every opportunity.
- It is challenging to comment on the design as insufficient information has been provided on the participate website. The information provided is at the overview level only. The design documents are not provided to enable more precise commentary
- The design must explicitly acknowledge the essential pieces of strategic works and planning guides by the City of Melbourne, Melbourne Water and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. These are the Yarra Community Vision, the Yarra Strategic Plan, Yarra River-Birrarung Strategy, Urban Forest Strategy, the Healthy Waterways Strategy (HWS) and Planning for a Green-Blue City. The design is not consistent with the Yarra Community Vision.
- The ‘needs of the city’ are not adequately balanced with the ‘environmental health of the river’. See Yarra Community Vision Inner City Reach (below).
- There is excessive hard surfacing in the park and a concomitant lack of vegetation. For it to be truly a park rather than an extension of the built environment the ‘green and growing’ area, the true park area, needs to be maximised and the hard surfaces and through-routes need to be minimised and placed at the edge. Animals from birds to bats, from native bees to butterflies, are unlikely to gather and settle in an area subject to constant disturbance. The hard surfacing will limit the ability of the site to offering the ecological service of ‘green’ airconditioning.
- The design is too focused on the built environment. This park is forecourt rather than a park. This style of park design is an extension of the built environment rather than a park proper. It will let future residents down as the design, and the eventual park will not fulfil the unfolding desire of the generations of people living nearby. Structures and hard surfacing is promoted at the expense of a place where people can re-create spiritually and psychologically.
- The design does not acknowledge indigenous cultural values and what was here before there was a heavily constructed environment.
- The design is seeking to do too much. It has a little bit of everything and not enough of anything. The focus of the park should be on providing a green and vegetated space that connects with the river.
- The design does not reference the issues around wind and the resultant reduction in temperatures and the useability of the space. The design needs to use barrier planting in the wind direction and changes in elevation to protect against wind.
- A careful assessment of sunlight at the site needs to be made and how it changes across the day and across the year. If this has been done, it has not been provided in the material available at participate.melbourne.

Green corridor and hard surfacing

Seafarers Rest Park Design is an opportunity to connect with the river and its ecology. The park is surrounded by hard surfaces, by a built environment, yet the park itself extends this hard surfacing, instead of maximising. The park represents a chance to provide people with connecting with the rich biodiversity that can be found in the Yarra Catchment, including the significance of being on a biodiverse estuary, a crucial part of the Yarra's ecosystem. The proximity of the park to the river presents an opportunity to overcome the lack of accessibility to the water.

There is a lack of detail across ecological value and indigenous heritage. This lack of detail suggests there are limitations to the design in enabling biodiversity of fauna, flora and the connectivity of the Yarra as a vital green and blue corridor. Even though there is reference to 'habitat hollows' and an 'urban forest' there is little indication over how it will be managed as well as how it relates to important pieces of strategic works and planning guides by the City of Melbourne, Melbourne Water and the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning. These are the Yarra Community Vision, the Yarra Strategic Plan, Yarra River-Birrarung Strategy, Urban Forest Strategy, the Healthy Waterways Strategy (HWS) and Planning for a Green-Blue City.

The plan needs to address the park in the context of these plans and justify its design in terms of the vision, goals and targets in these documents.

The habitat hollows are in the current design too dissected to form adequate habitat.

Green-blue infrastructure

Although there is mention of 'green' infrastructure like vegetation (mainly trees) and 'blue' infrastructure of Water Sensitive Urban Design (WSUD), there is an inability to determine how these will be implemented and whether they might be incorporated as an integrated green-blue infrastructure. In the guide for planning for a green-blue city, the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP) has stated that incorporating natural systems that provide ecological amenity value associated with urban greening and stormwater management or 'green assets' when planned together with the 'blue' assets of Water Sensitive Urban Design (WSUD, drainage and flood storage) can provide more significant benefit. An example of this is the design of the River 'lawns' - which could present an excellent opportunity for riparian greening and stormwater management, as well as habitat. Such thinking would need to step away from the European notion of lawn and by planting native species of herbs and grasses both create habitat and acknowledge the indigenous heritage of the site.

Permeable ground surfaces are essential in the infiltration of rainwater into the soil. Proper vegetation like tree canopies and root systems help to reduce stormwater flows and nutrient loads from entering our waterways. The design of the Seafarers Rest Park appears to have a higher proportion of pathways and lawns that may contribute to increased pollutants and litter entering our waterways - especially in times of heavy rainfall. In addition, there is the mention of WSUD but little clarification over the specifics. It is therefore unclear if the design has considered water management strategies such as the HWS suggestion of using stormwater as an alternative water source that can maintain vegetation or how it will respond to flooding or reduce pollution from entering the river.

A critical question is how WSUD in the context of this park will deliver on increased biodiversity. This question needs answering,

As mentioned in the Yarra River-Birrarung Strategy, City of Melbourne already experiences little to no riparian habitat for fauna in the city reach of the river. In turn, these hard river edges reduce the ability for riparian land to act as a corridor for wildlife. These hard surfaces, such as concrete, also tend to trap and store heat from the sun. From the birds-eye view diagram of the design, it appears as though much of the tree cover is in the inner fringes of the park with the central area and rivers edge consisting of a significant amount of concrete and lawn. The design does not appear to satisfy objectives for riparian greening by the river. The Yarra River Birrarung Strategy says: “The ecology directions received the most enthusiastic support from survey respondents with aspirations for the river to be ‘more natural’ and healthy. There was also broad agreement that Aboriginal heritage be acknowledged via a visible presence in any changes to the river or its banks.’

Habitat Hollows

According to the Urban Forest Strategy, a healthy urban forest contributes to ‘biodiversity and habitat provision’ through supporting multiple species. The premise of providing habitat does align with the desire to increase habitat for native fauna. Although the trees and nesting boxes can provide habitat, it is unclear of the efficacy of the nesting boxes. For instance, the effectiveness of nesting boxes has been found to diminish over time and requires significant management and targeted conservation efforts. Without management, nesting boxes may not provide habitat for the desired species, and could instead become inhabited by invasive species such as the Indian Mynah.

Besides, the noise of nearby traffic (in particular its proximity to Wurundjeri Way), as well as the foot traffic, may also be a barrier for the desired wildlife to respond well to the nesting boxes. It would be beneficial for the design to include objectives on the desired wildlife that will be targeted, management of this program and how the community will be engaged to ensure that there is little resistance between the use of the park as an area of urban ecology and one of leisure and recreation.

The Urban Forest

The City of Melbourne has a vision to have an urban forest that is resilient, healthy and diverse and will contribute to the health and wellbeing of our community and to the creation of a liveable city (according to the Urban Forest in the City strategy). This vision is to be achieved through increased planting of trees and species richness of trees. The Seafarers Rest Park design does mention a desire to retain and plant trees - however, it is accredited for the need of amenity, shade and shelter. It does not provide further information on the intended species richness or diversity of the tree species. Given the hard surfaces of concrete which dominate the area of Docklands, if implemented effectively, the park could present a significant precedent in re-vegetation of the area. This precedent would provide further benefits, such as reducing the urban heat island effect. However, in order to reap the benefit of trees, there needs to be indication of proper planning, design and management. For instance, as mentioned in the Urban Forest strategy, the best method of reducing the current heat island effect is through trees with large canopies (of which it could take more than 20 years to come to fruition) as well as vegetation cover that consists of species which can survive and remain healthy under a hotter and drier climate. The current design of the

Seafarers Rest provides insufficient information on the types of trees and diversity of vegetation that will be planted.

Connectivity

The measures to connect with nearby plantings, including via street planting and habitat are not part of the current plan. The plan should include the mapping of nearby parks and current and future opportunities to connect to other parklands as well as the role of street trees in providing connected canopy habitat continuity.

Mitigating litter and pollution

Critical threats to the Yarra are litter, pollution and urban development. The inner city reach of the Yarra experiences the highest number of tourist visitation (State of the Yarra Report). When completed, the area is likely to experience increased foot traffic, and as such there must be sufficient avenues for proper disposal of waste. Not only is litter a threat to the amenity of our environment and wildlife, but it also costs local government's across Victoria over \$94 million a year to clean. No aspect of the concept plan mentions how the park will implement methods to ensure the public will be given access to properly dispose of waste and curb any behaviour that is damaging to the environment.

History and community engagement

The design celebrates and references the importance of the maritime history of the area. The educational engagement of the area appears to be skewed mainly to maritime heritage more so than the ecological significance of the site or indigenous value, or to the parks place in the continuity of the river corridor.

Connectivity

Situated next to the Yarra, Seafarers Rest Park provides an opportunity to contribute to efforts to enhance and connect the currently fragmented habitat corridor of the river and environs. Currently, the provision of habitat appears to be on the fringes of the design and, considering the location of the park - there are few existing nearby areas of urban parklands. Instead, the area mostly consists of nature strips and the occasional small pocket of greenery. As such, Seafarers Rest Park could set the tone for incorporating more diverse greenery in Docklands. Furthermore, as it is situated next to the Yarra, the design must take into account its contribution to the cumulative impacts that the river faces. According to the State of the Yarra Report, these threats include (but are not limited to) inappropriate land development along the riverbank, invasive pest plants and animals, litter, pollution, stormwater, climate change and population growth. From what has been discussed previously, there is little indication over how the design of the park is trying to mitigate these threats. Without addressing these concerns, the design loses the potential to undertake opportunities that can help improve and work towards a connected corridor. Instead, the development can further exacerbate issues of fragmentation, reducing the resilience of the river and disconnecting communities along the Yarra.

Recommendations

- More information needs to be provided for adequate comment to be made about the design. The website provides only minimal information and does not, therefore, permit detailed feedback.
- We note in particular there is little information about wind and sunlight. Both of which will have a dramatic impact on the useability of the site. Tree planting should be maximised as this will protect from the strong winds that regularly blow thorough this area and inhibit the use of the park by people.
- Given the small size of the park, we would propose the minimisation of all hard surfaces within the park. Paths where necessary should be of the stepping-stone form.
- Foot and cycle traffic should be directed around the site, not through the site.
- All structural layers of vegetation for a healthy ecosystem need to be included including grass, undergrowth, mid-level canopy and upper canopy. These need to be connected across the site.
- Indigenous culture must be acknowledged.
- The canopy cover needs to be expanded to contribute to the urban forest strategy of the City of Melbourne.
- The park must acknowledge the river and its ecology.
- Currently, the river edge is made up of hard materials and surfaces reducing the ability of riparian land to act as a corridor for wildlife. Seafarers Park is an opportunity to take a step, if only symbolically, of breaking these hard edges down and reconnecting the river bank with the river.

Closing comment

This is a rare opportunity to create a green park on the Yarra that connects to the river and adds to the continuity of a vegetated river corridor.

Warm regards,

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on behalf of the Yarra Riverkeeper Association

Inner City Reach 50 Year Vision

Our Yarra River, Birrarung, is a thriving river for our thriving city.

It provides a unique place of transition, both spiritually and physically. Here the river and its treasured banks and backdrops are Melbourne's meeting place; an inclusive and iconic place for connection, celebration, recreation and learning.

Our love for its vast and expanding green spaces and clean waters provide a healthy habitat for all.

Unique character of the inner city reach:

- The river is seen as an iconic symbol of central Melbourne for locals and visitors - a place where people of all backgrounds have come together for generations.
- It is the site of the first location of European settlement in Melbourne, its course and surrounding landscape significantly changed and modified since.
- A modern and growing cityscape surrounds sites of Aboriginal significance and examples of our more recent industrial history on the edges of the river.
- It is surrounded by essential spaces for relaxation, recreation and events for our busy and growing city population.
- Its banks are lined with buildings, promenades and other social infrastructure.

Priorities and values of the inner city reach:

- Celebrate the river as the centrepiece of Melbourne, acknowledging its role in our history and how it drives the city's continued success.
- Position the river as a symbol of learning and respect for Aboriginal culture, deepening community understanding of the sacred role it plays for Traditional Owners.
- Foster innovative urban waterway and open space planning to ensure the needs of our growing city are balanced with the future environmental health of the river.
- Expand our connected network of treasured Yarra parklands, creating better access and more spaces for relaxation and recreation.
- Showcase the river as a place for sustainable and creative events, with a focus on culture, sport, ecology and education.
- Position the river as an environmental educator, helping communities better understand its role in keeping Victoria healthy in the past, present and into the future.

