



Our Yarra: Healthy, Protected and Loved

25 September 2020

**Submission by the Yarra Riverkeeper Association:  
Draft Yarra River – Bulleen Precinct Land Use Framework Plan.**

## 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 River Protection (Willip-gin Birrarung murrong) Act (Yarra/Birrarung 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. We also regularly patrol the river in our boat, on foot and on a bike, which gives us a deep intuitive understanding of the river and its role in the life of Melbourne. In addition, we run restoration projects, river clean-ups and conduct innovative research into the impact, sources and solutions of litter on the river.

## Submission

The Yarra Riverkeeper Association is supportive of the recommendations of the Draft Land Use Planning Framework. However, we believe the Framework needs to be pushed further in its vision for the precinct. If this is to be a world-class cultural location that attracts tourists nationally and internationally, the planning needs to be bold, innovative and go beyond the usual. If the precinct is to be at the forefront of embracing and championing places rich in bicultural identity, the Framework needs to have a Wurundjeri presence at its heart. There needs to be a direct investment in the sites' indigenous history and continual presence of Traditional Owners and Wurundjeri Culture. That is what will attract visitors internationally – and nationally. That is what will give the precinct longevity.

The Framework needs to go further and capture Traditional Owner thinking around the connectivity of the river and its corridor, best captured in the phrase, 'The river needs its lands.' The river is more than the water flowing by. It is the bed and banks. It is the floodplain. It is the lenses of groundwater that slowly and steadily feed the river with its essential ingredient – water.

There needs to be a shift away from the one-dimensional viewpoint that 'open space' is primarily a functional place for people to 'do' things, as a place for sports fields and pavilions and lights on towers. That is not enabling rich culture; it is not reflective of the many facets of functions and culture the river engenders. Sporting fields require land, but they don't need a river or a flood plain. These sporting fields have come to dominate the landscape, the use of bulldozers and earthmovers to flatten the land and the conversion to monospecies grass violently replaces the subtle undulations and ecologies of the flood plain.

The ‘development’ of this precinct as a great parkland is an opportunity to learn to live ‘with’ the landscape rather than ‘on’ the landscape. This plan is a chance to take inspiration from other innovative and world-leading art precincts. It has the untapped potential to be like the Mona on the banks of the Yarra, a very different art precinct building, and on the strength of Heide but with the celebration of Wurundjeri and Traditional Owners and indigenous thinking at its heart.

## Wurundjeri Woi wurrung cultural centre and offices

The precinct would acquire a real and symbolic centre if land were returned to the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung for the Tribe Land Council to base themselves within the precinct.

## The Yarra River Community Vision and the Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Birrarung Water Policy (*Nhanbu narrun ba ngargunin twarn Birrarung – Ancient Spirit and Lore of the Yarra*)

The Yarra/Birrarung legislation required that a long-term community vision be developed to guide the Yarra Strategic plan. Entitled *Yarra River 50-year Community Vision*, this was launched in 2018 by the Ministers for Water, Planning and Environment. The Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Birrarung Water Policy (*Nhanbu narrun ba ngargunin twarn Birrarung -Ancient Spirit and Lore of the Yarra*) was launched on the same day. These documents are the vision of community and Traditional Owners to care for the River and its lands. These documents need to be centrally acknowledged by any plan for the river lands, and the concerns detailed in the documents be directly addressed.

## Stormwater

Stormwater is one of the most significant threats to the health of the lower Yarra and needs to be explicitly included in any precinct plan for the Yarra river lands.

## Net Gain

The Yarra River Protection (Willip-gin Birrarung murrn) Act has a core environmental principle of net gain. This principle is intended to reverse the steady degradation of the river corridor through development and efforts to mitigate impacts. This precinct is an opportunity to reverse this degradation of the corridor – but only if the planning is ambitious. That ambition can be reflected in the interpretation of net gain. Net gain needs to be flag shipped in this framework plan. There is the opportunity for funding a significant net gain for the precinct as North-east Link needs to address its impact on the river further downstream. This precinct has existing healthy trees that are the structural backbone of a functioning ecosystem. Net gain needs to be seen to be effective across all classes of species from the smallest of the macroinvertebrates that ensure healthy soil, to the largest of predators, the powerful owls and wedge-tailed eagles. To achieve net gain, there needs to be an avoidance of deterioration, including:

- The form of the floodplain needs to be maintained and should not be altered by earthworks. Instead, the floodplain is to regain its subtle natural gradations of elevation to maximize floodplain habitat and respect that the ‘river needs its lands’.
- Light penetration into the park be minimized to allow the return of insects that are the base of the food chain.

- Mountain bike riding and its concomitant disturbance of wildlife, spread of weeds, and erosion be excluded from the parklands to reduce the destruction of the lands the river needs.
- A restoration plan needs to be completed before there are further changes in the landscape. The plan should focus on the opportunities in the precinct and the opportunities to connect parkland across the precinct.
- There needs to be a recognition that there must be a distinction between areas that people use for recreation and areas that are primarily habitat for wildlife, which are mostly undisturbed. This thinking needs to be applied across the entire precinct. The idea the people and full suite of riparian wildlife can co-exist in every part of the precinct is Panglossian. We can't have our cake and eat it and need to make clear choices about where people are going to be encouraged and where it is best to create habitat for wildlife. One example is that while pedestrian and cycling paths need to be included in the plan (as they are), they cannot always be along river frontage and would preferably not be on both sides of the river. Birds and mammals need undisturbed areas to roost, nest and feed, and secluded connection spots to the river.

## Acquisition of land

The Riverkeepers support the recommendations that would see approximately 36 hectares of private land be acquired for parklands (comprised of the former Bulleen Drive-In, the Greenery Nursery, the Country Club, the Golf Driving Range and 199 and 211 Templestowe Road). The offer by the developers of the floodplain land of the Yarra Valley Country Club should be accepted and returned to public ownership either as crown land to be managed by Parks Victoria or as a reflective recreation managed by Manningham Council. There is a stage planned for acquisition of sites and redemption of leases between Templestowe Road and the river. We propose that this be done urgently to minimize the risk of further ecological damage before restoration work commencing.

## Great Birrarung Parklands

The precinct is an opportunity to flagship the Great Birrarung Parklands (as the Greater Yarra Urban Parklands is now called), which were part of the Yarra River Protection (Willipgin Birrarung murrn) Act. The Great Birrarung Parklands are an opportunity to connect the parklands along the river as a whole and reflect the core sentiment of the act of protecting the river as 'one living and integrated natural entity'.

## Recommendations

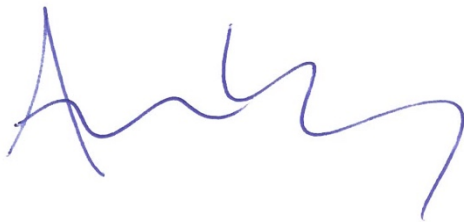
- The precinct should become a 'great' bicultural parkland that recognizes that the 'river needs its lands' and that the parkland should be managed for habitat, river corridor connectivity and reflective recreation.
- That title to land be given at a prominent location for a Wurundjeri Woi wurrung cultural centre and office complex.
- The site be managed as a world-class exercise in ecological restoration and the traditional owner management of lands which could include the appointment of Wurundjeri rangers.

- A decision needs to be made about where high activity locations for people such as walking and cycling paths are located, and more secluded areas for wildlife are maintained and enhanced
- Sporting fields should be located away from river floodplain land as sporting fields will unnecessarily overtake already scarce riverside parkland.
- The precinct needs to be considered in the context of the Great Birrarung Parklands and the Yarra River as one living and integrated natural entity both upstream and downstream of the precinct.

## Summary

This Framework Plan, while thoughtful and considered in many aspects, falls short in an ambition to deliver a world-leading, innovative, cultural and environmentally sustainable precinct. There is the opportunity to implement the intent of the Yarra River Protection (Willipgin Birrarung murrn) Act, including the net gain principle, the Great Birrarung Parklands, as well as the cultural principles of the act. It is the last great opportunity to create a single great parkland on the lower Yarra. It can be a precinct that is truly bicultural if it establishes a Wurundjeri Woi wurrung cultural and office presence as a central pin for the parklands.

Yours sincerely



Andrew Kelly  
Yarra Riverkeeper

on behalf of the Yarra Riverkeeper Association

## Appendix: Yarra River Community Vision

### Suburban Reach 50 Year Vision

Our Yarra River, Birrarung, provides a continuous network of protected parklands, providing inclusive access to all. A covenant of custodianship is adopted by private landowners along the reach, embedding a culture of respect and responsibility for river values. The river corridor provides a healthy natural environment, enabling swimming, relaxation and other recreational activities. Importantly, it also supports a flourishing natural ecosystem, including networks of billabongs and wetlands, for indigenous plants and animals to thrive. This is a valued place of connection to Wurundjeri culture and community, with a network of hubs of learning, play and celebration. It benefits from a united and integrated approach to governance and land management, guided by the wisdom and practices of Traditional Owners, keeping culture not just in the past but alive into the future.

### Unique character:

The river runs through a landscape which comprises bushland, farms, urban environments and more formal open spaces. The river's character is varied and includes steep gorges, expansive floodplains and networks of billabongs. A near-continuous network of accessible parklands, public and private golf courses and conservation areas support the natural character of the river corridor, while protecting local populations from flood. The river is a vital refuge from the city with recreation trails providing links to inner-city Melbourne. Bolin Bolin Billabong and the confluence of the Merri Creek and Yarra River are amongst numerous sites of cultural significance for the Wurundjeri people.

### Priorities and values:

Expand the river's local parklands and trails to improve continuous access, increase biodiversity and enhance river health. Celebrate our spiritual connection to the river and its surrounds. Establish new habitat for endangered birds, fish and wildlife. Employ collaborative planning processes for development to ensure changes are for the benefit of the river and the advantage of all in the community, not just the few. Collaborate to provide innovative immersive experiences with nature by expanding natural river tracks and creating environmental playgrounds along the corridor. Explore opportunities for community education and connection to Wurundjeri knowledge and cultural practice and significant sites.