



Our Yarra: Healthy, Protected and Loved

10 December 2020

Banyule City Council

## Submission: Banyule Planning Scheme Amendment C107 - Treetop adventure park proposal in Yarra Flats Park

### The Proposal

The proposal is to build a tree-based adventure park in a section of the Yarra Flats Park, located in Ivanhoe East. This development will require an amendment to the Banyule Planning Scheme due to the proposed site being within a Public Conservation and Resource Zone and a specific controls overlay to be introduced to the Banyule Planning Scheme. The proposal does not plan for the removal of any trees but will require infrastructure to be secured to over 50 River Red Gums in the area and the construction of an administrative building.

### Who we are

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 murrn) Act, as well as for the Yarra Planning Controls. We have commissioned multiple reports on the Victorian Planning System and the importance of urban planning in protecting the Yarra Corridor. These include [\*Making the Yarra River Planning Controls Permanent\*](#), [\*Protecting Urban Waterways: A Guide to Victoria's Planning System\*](#) and [\*Protecting the Yarra: Punt Road Bridge to the Urban Growth Boundary\*](#). Through our research and time spent along the Yarra, we have built an informed and evidence-based community understanding of the river as a single and integrated ecosystem from source to the bay.

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## Summary

Urban green spaces in Melbourne are shrinking, and the ones remaining are under increased pressure from the demands of people, to connect with nature, to socialise with friends and family and to exercise. This human activity comes with a cost on the environment, it erodes trails, compacts soil, disturbs wildlife, fragments habitat, and increases the occurrence of litter and pollution.

We live in the Anthropocene and there are few places on earth where people are not penetrating. While we, as an association, want people to connect with nature, a balance needs to be struck between access for people and protection of habitat.

Yarra Flats Park is a rare large open space on the river in the city of Banyule - it's semi-rural character nestled amongst suburbs is an unusual occurrence in Melbourne. While there is merit in seeking new ways to enable the community to engage with the environment, and appreciate the beauty of the River and its banks, the proposal damages the environmental integrity of the area by its proximity to the River and its invasion of the canopy.

This proposal is a unique invasion into the upper canopy of the river corridor. That structural vegetation level and habitat has been left untouched because of its height. It is out-of-reach for most people, so it has been left to the birds, the insects and the possums to flourish. Now we have worked out a way to invade and interrupt the connectivity of the canopy. The Yarra corridor is not only Melbourne's great parkland extending from Princes Bridge to the Central Highlands, it is also a biodiversity sink and migratory corridor that allows species to respond to changes in the catchment including climate change. If this development was not in the river corridor but set away from the river inland where species could move around the site in a broader canopy, that would perhaps be appropriate to approve.

As commercial development on public land zoned to be protected as such, it needs careful consideration. Is the purpose for-profit or for enabling community connection with nature? If it is the latter, evaluation of alternatives for using the space, such as a nature reserve, need to be taken into consideration. If it is for both, how will these be balanced, and will they leave room for the needs of the environment? With these considerations in mind, the proposal requires further information, including:

- The intended outcomes of the proposal and how they align with the Yarra River Action Plan.
- How a net gain for the environment will be achieved.
- Protection of the River Red Gums, including the management of deadwood and fallen branches which are important to the ecology of the area.

## Yarra River Action Plan

The Yarra River Action Plan sets out the objective of the Great Yarra Parklands. This recognises the network of parklands along the Yarra as one integrated living whole natural asset. It aims for an increase in opportunities to enjoy the river parklands for all ages and abilities balanced with protection for habitat and biodiversity. The Treetop Adventure Park will limit accessibility to the area by imposing a cost for the activities and may not be suitable for those with disabilities or are over a certain age due to physical limitations.

With these barriers being placed on certain members of the community, the Treetop Adventure Park does not allow for people of all ages and abilities to enjoy the river parklands. Should fostering a connection with nature be a desired outcome, the proposal will need to be assessed alongside other activities that can also achieve this, such as retaining the area as a place of reflective recreational activities like walking.

## Yarra River Protection Act and Net Gain

The Yarra River Protection Act sets out Yarra “Protection Principles” of which Section 9(4) states *‘There should be a net gain for the environment in the area of Yarra River land arising from any individual action or policy that has an environmental impact on Yarra River land.’*

There is no net environmental gain in this project and no current proposal to deliver one. The project is about people not the environment.

## Planning Controls

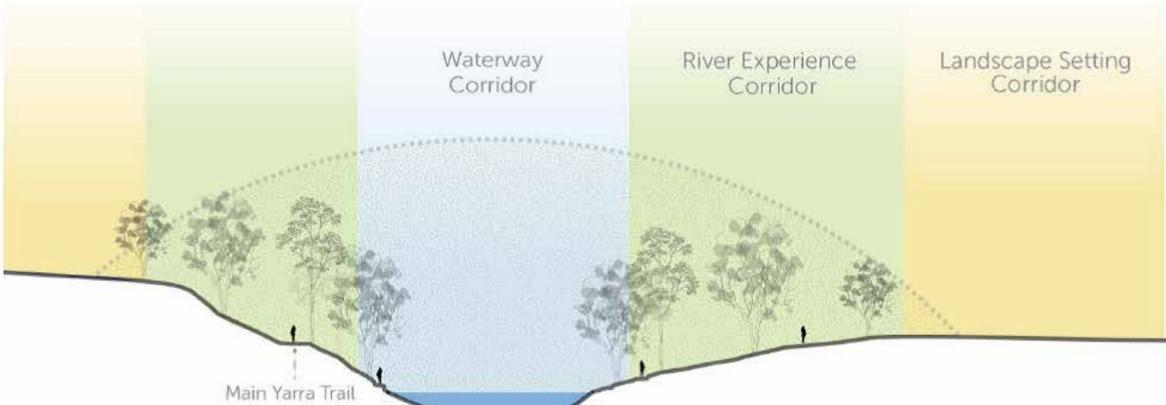
The GC48 Interim Planning Controls introduced the Significant Landscape Overlays (SLO), Yarra (Birrarung) River Corridor Environs which:

- Applies to both public and private land within the wider landscape setting of the Yarra River corridor. Within this area, a continuous corridor of vegetation and canopy trees are the dominant features of views of the corridor to and from public open space and the Yarra River itself.
- The purpose of the SLO is to identify significant landscapes and to conserve and enhance their character. It does this by managing the siting and design of buildings, removal of vegetation and earthworks within the broader Yarra River corridor setting.

The proposal is situated in the ‘River Experience Corridor’, which is the ‘foreground and middle ground landscape that is experienced from its banks, trails and public land.’ Even with limited vegetation removal, the infrastructure required to create the high rope courses and administration office will impact the amenity and character of the landscape.

It also requires the development to be reviewed as part of the river corridor, the current supporting documents do not assess the area as being part of a broader landscape. More information needs to be provided about how this development may impact the River and the surrounding banks ability to be a connecting habitat corridor for wildlife as well as other sites of ecological significance including the Banksia Billabong and Annulus Billabong.

Figure 1: River Corridor Areas



2 Planning Advisory Note 65: Yarra River Planning Controls

Figure 2: Land subject to amendment C107 outlined in blue



## Balancing connection to nature with environmental protection

Connection to nature is an important part of helping the community build empathy for the environment and is a way to help drive the uptake of environmental stewardship. The ability to use green spaces is known to be a 'green prescription', and provide multiple mental and physical benefits. Whilst these are outcomes that should be sought, more consideration needs to be taken of the strain that our recreational activities and use of the land places on nature.

The gradual erosion of our public places needs to be managed. It is not possible to maximise the quality of biodiversity with recreational opportunity. Commercial developments like the Treetops Adventure Park creates another layer of tension by adding profit to the equation. The increase of visitors to the area will weigh on the local environment. Heavier foot traffic will further compact the soil, more people will create more waste and litter. Without consistent monitoring of the environment, the degradation of the amenity of the environment will reduce a visitor's experience. With the land being leased to Ecoline, who will be responsible for protecting the biodiversity of the area? And, should that responsibility fall on Ecoline, can there be certainty that the company will sacrifice profit for the environment.

## River Red Gums

The area is home to River Red Gums. River Red Gums are woven into the tapestry of Melbourne, they are of significance to Traditional Owners, beloved by the community, and many councils and citizens alike have fought for the protection of those that remain.

Mature River Red Gums, like many other long-standing trees, are 'veterans of the landscape.' From life to death they provide unique ecosystem services that cannot be replicated by human technology. Although the development does not remove any 'living' trees it would require the removal of deadwood and any branches that fall. Even when 'dead', trees or parts of trees, are an integral part of the ecosystem. Deadwood and fallen branches provide habitat and food sources for wildlife, including possums, sugar-gliders and powerful owls. When they decompose, it enriches the soil with nutrients. The removal of even part of the River Red Gums would impact the ability for the area to support biodiversity.

Structurally, River Red Gums are inclined to drop branches and are therefore not appropriate for an aerial rope course.

## Conclusion

The ability to access and appreciate the Yarra is important for the wellbeing of the community, and fostering connection to nature is important, and while the proposal could enable this, there are other more inclusive and accessible options that would not incur a

financial burden or require a certain level of physical ability. The proposal insufficiently addresses the disturbance of the River Red Gums, including the impact that removing deadwood and branches will have on the trees role in providing ecosystem services. More information needs to be provided on how a net gain for the environment will be achieved and how the proposal will interact with the Yarra's ability to be a connecting habitat corridor. With the amendment allowing Parks Victoria to lease the land to Ecoline, it is unclear who will be responsible for protecting the environmental values of the area.

In summary, our recommendations are

- To relocate this project away from the river into a forested area where it will not interrupt habitat and disrupt the continuity of the Yarra Corridor as a migratory pathway for wildlife.
- Not to use mature river red gums on which to construct an aerial canopy.
- Not to establish the precedent of canopy intrusion in the Yarra River corridor on Yarra River Land.
- If a connection to nature is the desired outcome, evaluate other alternatives that are more accessible and inclusive to the general public.
- Clearly state how the proposal will establish a net gain for the environment.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Kelly  
Yarra Riverkeeper  
on behalf of the Yarra Riverkeeper Association