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Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning
Via email to yarra.river@delwp.vic.gov.au

PROTECTING THE YARRA RIVER (BIRRARUNG) DISCUSSION PAPER

Thank you for the opportunity to input to the development of policy and governance for the protection of the Yarra River (Birrarung).

Victoria Walks believes that the Yarra River corridor has a highly significant role in the future of Melbourne, as one of its most important recreational walking locations.

Victoria Walks supports many of the directions signalled by the discussion document to better protect the Yarra. There are two areas that we think need to be better addressed:

- Management of community uses to protect the passive recreational amenity of the Yarra environs
- Managing the tension between walkers and cyclists on the Yarra paths.

Background – Victoria Walks

Victoria Walks is a walking health promotion body, established by VicHealth in 2009, working to get more Victorians walking more every day. Our vision is for vibrant, supportive and strong neighbourhoods and communities where people can and do choose to walk wherever possible.

Our cities, towns, neighbourhoods and urban areas have become largely automobile dependent and less walkable. This has contributed to the emergence of more sedentary lifestyles in which Victorians do not engage in the recommended levels of physical activity. Physical inactivity is a significant factor in the dramatic rise in the levels of obesity and preventable diseases such as Type II diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Walking-friendly neighbourhoods and urban spaces are essential to encourage and enable people to walk. Walking is associated with positive health outcomes, improved fitness and better physical, social and mental health. Making towns, cities and suburbs more walkable has many health, environmental and economic benefits.

Recommendations

1. Consistent with the discussion document, future management of the Yarra should include:
 - a. Design controls that ensure development does not visually dominate the river environs
 - b. Extension of walking access along the river where it does not currently exist (excluding water supply catchments)
 - c. An overall strategy and/or legislation protecting the Yarra
 - d. Greater consideration of amenity values in the corridor.
2. Future management of the Yarra should include development of a framework for managing community uses in the the immediate environment of the River which:
 - a. Limits community facilities to those that facilitate passive recreational use; or have a demonstrated need for a riverside location
 - b. Ensures any new structures within view of the River paths are subject to rigorous design standards and architecturally designed
 - c. Avoids the creation of new or expanded car parks or accessways within the immediate river environs
 - d. Identifies and protects 'wild' stretches of the river with minimal infrastructure and high natural character, within the suburbs.
3. Future management of the Yarra should include development of a plan for walking and cycling paths in the corridor, including:
 - a. Planning for separated walking and cycling paths, or alternative provision for commuter cyclists outside the parklands, where numbers of pedestrians exceed 100 or cyclists exceed 50 per hour in the commuter peak.
 - b. A program of education and signage emphasising that cyclists are required to give way to pedestrians on shared paths; should not pass too closely; and may have to slow down to pass, as well as keeping to a reasonable speed more generally.
 - c. Management of cycling speed on shared paths, with 20 km/h as the maximum desired speed.
 - d. Extension of walking access along the river where it does not currently exist (excluding water supply catchments).
 - e. Completion of 'missing links' for cycling in the Yarra paths only in the context of developing a network that moves towards separating recreational walkers from high speed commuters.

The rationale behind these recommendations is explained in the remainder of this submission.

Importance of the Yarra corridor for walking

Paths along the Yarra River provide a rare opportunity to escape the city within the suburbs of metropolitan Melbourne. There is evidence suggesting that walking in a natural environment is even more beneficial to health, particularly mental health and wellbeing, than walking generally (Every Body Walk).

In Victoria, the number of people aged 65 and over is likely to almost triple from 2011 to 2051 as the population increases and the proportion of older people grows (Department of Transport, Planning and Local Infrastructure 2014). For those aged 75 and over, walking makes up 77% of their total physical activity (Garrard 2013). This combination of both a growing and ageing population will increase demand for high quality recreational walking space. Numbers of people with a disability including vision impairment will also increase dramatically as the population ages and it will be important to provide quality recreation space that meets their needs.

Intensification of development in the suburbs of Melbourne is also likely to further increase public appreciation of the natural and semi-natural spaces that remain.

It is critical therefore to maintain and enhance the natural character and pedestrian amenity of the Yarra River parklands.

Community facilities in the Yarra corridor

At times, the discussion paper seems to be promoting greater recreational or tourist use along the River. While clearly the Yarra is an important recreational space, recreational and community facilities need to be carefully managed and controlled, because they have the potential to compromise the natural character of the river. Buildings, structures, access roads and car parks will affect the landscape character of the corridor, irrespective of whether their purpose is commercial, residential or community use.

Facilities within the immediate environment of the Yarra should either:

- Be designed to facilitate and enhance passive recreational use of the parklands (eg paths, signage, drinking fountains, appropriately located rubbish bins, toilets and picnic facilities); or
- Have a demonstrated need for a riverside location (eg boating facilities). Parklands within view of the riverside paths should not be used for community facilities that do not need a riverside location and exclude the wandering public, such as libraries, bowling greens and squash, tennis or basketball courts.

Where new structures are proposed within view of the River paths, they should be subject to rigorous design standards and architecturally designed.

Car parks, even for appropriate community facilities, should be kept out of the immediate river environs. Any new facilities requiring vehicle access should be co-located with existing facilities with vehicle access and car parking. Existing car parking areas should not be expanded. Where there is high demand for car parking, this demand should be managed through time restrictions and/or a requirement to pay for parking.

In the suburban stretch of the corridor 'wild' spaces, with minimal infrastructure and high natural character should be identified. These areas should be formally designated and afforded a higher level of protection from both public infrastructure and private development.

Issues with shared paths

Shared paths along the Yarra are amongst the busiest commuter cycling routes in Victoria. The discussion paper recognises that the paths have significant commuter use. Oddly however, it does not acknowledge that the Yarra paths were not designed as commuter cycling routes, or that there is a tension between commuter cycling and recreational walking on a narrow shared path.

As noted by the last Victorian Cycling Strategy, almost three-quarters of recreational paths on the Metropolitan Trail Network, originally intended for leisure and low levels of transport use, now have high levels of transport use (State of Victoria 2012). A study in Melbourne (SKM 2008) noted:

“Some shared paths, such as the Main Yarra Trail, were designed primarily for recreational use but are increasingly used by commuters.”

Victoria Walks has recently undertaken substantial research on shared paths outlined in *Shared Paths – the issues* available at http://www.victoriawalks.org.au/position_statements/. To develop this paper, Victoria Walks prepared a literature review based primarily on Australian information. Consultation was then undertaken with select stakeholders, subject experts, VicRoads and councils. The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) facilitated initial consultation and a total of eighteen councils provided comment.

Generally, slow moving recreational cyclists may be able to share paths with walkers. However walkers may not mix well with commuter or sports cyclists in particular, who typically travel at higher speed.

Where observational studies have been compared with surveys and/or focus groups of users, the observational studies usually find minimal levels of conflict, but the user experience is quite different. For example in one Sydney survey 8% of pedestrians reported being knocked over by a cyclist and 33% reported being frightened by a cyclist travelling too fast (Robinson 2011).

People who are elderly or vision impaired are particularly vulnerable and uncomfortable sharing with cyclists. In a survey of 1,128 Victorians aged 60 or over, better cyclist behaviour on shared paths and reduced cycling speed on shared paths were the top two responses for action that would make walking feel safer (Garrard 2013).

In a survey of 607 Victorians with vision impairment, 8% had been involved in a collision and 20% were in a near collision as a pedestrian over the previous 5 years – 24% of these incidents were with bicycles (Oxley et al 2012).

It seems that the requirement for cyclists to give way to pedestrians on shared paths is comparatively poorly understood. Initial findings from the VicRoads Cycling Road Rules Survey indicate that this is one of three rules that many people “are unaware of or unclear about,” compared to other rules (Minister for Roads 2014).

Many seniors and visually impaired people are likely to avoid walking on busy shared paths because of their concerns about cyclist speed and collision risk. This may be extended to walkers generally when faced with shared paths that have high volumes of commuter cyclists, such as the Yarra Trail. It is important to provide for commuter cycling, but not to the exclusion of recreational users of the Yarra.

It should be noted also that shared paths are not as safe for cyclists as they may appear. A study of crash and injury rates for more than 2,000 adult cyclists in NSW estimated the injury

crash rate for cyclists on shared paths at 3.6 per 1,000 cycling hours, compared to 2.2 for bike paths, 1.7 for bike lanes and 2.8 on the road. (Poulus et al 2012). A study of cycling injury in the ACT (De Rome et al 2014) found more than a third of crashes occurred on shared paths. It estimated that the crash involvement risk per 1000 cyclists using shared paths was 11.8, compared to 5.8 for on-road cycle lanes.

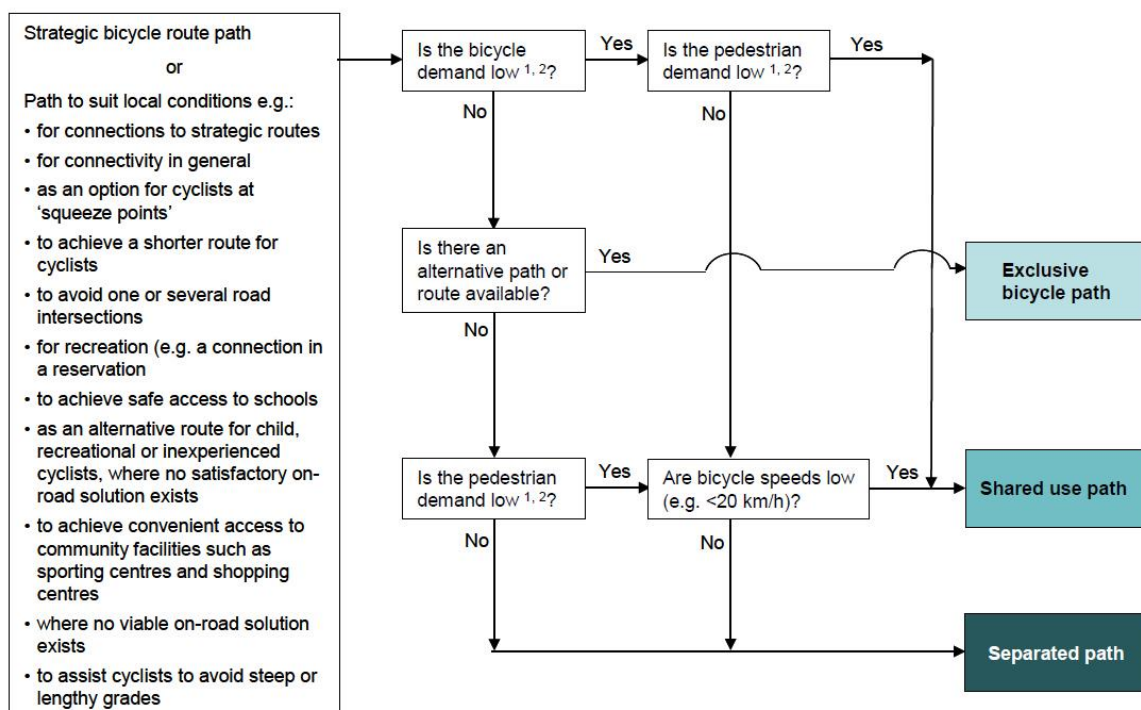
Our research did not reveal any reliable Australian data on the proportion of cyclist-pedestrian crashes or injuries to pedestrians that occur on shared paths.

Appropriate cycling infrastructure

Australian guidance on transport infrastructure is led by Austroads. The primary guidance is the *Guide to Road Design Part 6A: Pedestrian and Cyclist Paths* (Austroads 2009). This sets out a vision for shared paths as recreational or local access routes:

“Shared paths can be used for a variety of purposes including recreation, local access and providing links between higher speed on-road paths or bicycle paths.”

The decision making framework for determining what type of path to build is summarised in **Figure 1**. Points to note are that shared paths are only recommended when pedestrian and cyclist volumes are low (each less than 10 per hour), or when either the pedestrian or the cyclist volume is low and cyclist speeds are below 20 km/h.



- 1 The level of demand can be assessed generally on the basis of the peak periods of a typical day as follows:
 - a. Low demand: Infrequent use of path (say less than 10 users per hour)
 - b. High demand: Regular use in both directions of travel (say more than 50 users per hour).
- 2 These path volumes are suggested in order to limit the incidence of conflict between users, and are significantly lower than the capacity of the principal path types.

Figure 1: Austroads guidance on choosing path type (Austroads 2009 and 2014)

Average cycling speed on shared paths typically range between 20 and 30 km/h – well above the cycling speeds envisaged by Austroads for shared paths (Victoria Walks 2015).

Shared paths on major cycling routes such as the Main Yarra Trail typically also have more users than anticipated in this guidance.

Austrroads guidelines would therefore suggest that separated walking and cycling paths should be provided along the Yarra.

The suggestion that primary cycling routes should be separated or at least segregated paths is consistent with cyclists' preferences. Research for VicRoads involved an online survey of 602 respondents (CDM Research 2012a). This illustrated that cyclists are generally more positive than negative about shared paths, but also that they strongly prefer segregated paths to shared paths, with 66% saying they 'really like' riding on segregated paths compared to between 3% and 8% for shared paths, depending on the context.

Solutions for the Yarra corridor

There are various options for appropriately catering for commuter cycling including:

- Separated bike paths in parklands (perhaps a duplication of existing shared paths).
- Protected on-road cycle lanes
- Dedicated (separated) off-road cycle paths in road corridors with suitable space.
- Traffic calmed local streets managed for bicycle priority.

Victoria Walks proposes that shared paths need to be replaced by separated paths or other alternatives, where there are more than 50 cyclists or 100 pedestrians per hour in the commuter peak. The rationale for that threshold and qualifying factors is set out in *Shared Paths – the issues*.

Determining appropriate infrastructure responses requires a comprehensive site specific assessment of the corridor. Any action to complete 'missing links' in the cycling network also needs to be undertaken in the context of developing a network that moves towards separating recreational walkers from high speed commuters. Addressing missing links otherwise risks facilitating one user group only by displacing another.

Until alternatives can be provided, efforts need to be made to establish a broadly accepted culture of sharing by shared path users, consistent with applicable road rules. Points that should be emphasised are the need for cyclists to give way to walkers on shared paths and to provide a reasonable separation distance when passing.

It must be similarly accepted that shared paths should be low speed. Shared paths were envisaged as low speed environments, but it is not clear that this has been effectively communicated to cyclists. A range of measures to control cycling speed on shared paths should be trialled, including speed limits. The Yarra River corridor may be a suitable location for some trials. A range of possibilities was identified in a report for Hobart City Council (CDM Research 2012).

To discuss any aspect of this submission, please contact Duane Burttt, Senior Advisor on 9662 3975 or dburttt@victoriawalks.org.au.

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