

28 September 2020

The Committee Manager
Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee
Parliament House
Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002
By e-submission

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Submission to Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this response, which has been prepared Parks and Leisure Australia (PLA). PLA is the peak industry association for professionals working in the parks and leisure sectors in Australia, representing over 2,500 members. Through a broad range of services PLA supports members to provide opportunities that strengthen communities through good use of space for the social, environmental, economic and physical wellbeing of all Australians. We believe we are ideally placed to provide a detailed submission to this inquiry, which has been prepared by the Victoria/ Tasmania Region Board.

PLA provides the following general comments on the Terms of Reference. We note that the Terms of Reference appears to be specific in relation to the provision of parks and open space, as components of environmental infrastructure. However, the briefing document accompanying the Terms of Reference creates some confusion by introducing other categories that are considered to be within the scope of environmental infrastructure. These includes forest and bushland, wildlife corridors, and waterways, which suggests that beneficiaries associated with environmental infrastructure may be wider and include biodiversity, flora and fauna.

We believe that the Terms of Reference should define intended benefits and beneficiaries of environmental infrastructure provision so as to appropriately target the resources of the Inquiry and provide a clearer definition of 'Environmental Infrastructure' to be considered by the Inquiry.

In terms of the Inquiry, we have split our response into two key areas:

1. Active and passive recreation (structured and unstructured)
2. Urban green infrastructure

We have provided specific feedback on each area, and a summary of what we believe to be the key considerations at the end of the submission.

Yours sincerely



Ashley Fleming
President

Submission to Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations

Prepared by PARKS AND LEISURE AUSTRALIA (Vic/Tas Region)

(28 September 2020)

The submission has been split into two key areas:

1. Active and passive recreation (structured and unstructured)
2. Urban green infrastructure

The submission concludes with a summary of what we believe to be the key considerations.

1. Active and Passive Recreation

Open Space and Parks (unstructured recreation) opportunities are experiencing exceptional demand and interest in 2020. In the short term this can be attributed directly to the COVID-19 pandemic and the community's need for these facilities, however there are a number of other factors that have been at play in recent times that have impacted on the importance of retaining, increasing and further developing open space and parks in Victoria. These factors include:

- An increased/ing community emphasis on health and wellbeing, particularly through walking and cycling and other activities that can be undertaken wherever and whenever people have the time or the opportunity;
- the diminishing size of backyards and private open space thus encouraging people to rely on public open space and facilities for exercise, socialising and engagement; and
- the increased awareness of the availability of diverse public open space offerings.

The COVID-19 pandemic has in the short term also highlighted the opportunities and benefits of public open space and parks and the positive impact of unstructured recreation. While the current public demand on these facilities may diminish, it is also likely many people will continue to undertake or evolve their use of these spaces post the pandemic – thus creating a surge in the short, medium and long term demand on public open space facilities and infrastructure used for unstructured recreation.

The use of walking trails, off-road cycling paths and rail trails have seen immense growth in the last decade. Not only from population growth but through increased awareness of the value of these activities. COVID-19 has further highlighted the value of this infrastructure but also demonstrated that in many areas tracks and trails are not meeting requirements, particularly where they are multi-discipline trails.

The development of other types of trails should also be considered when appropriate. An example is mountain bike trails such as [Forrest](#) in the Otways and [Harcourt](#). These provide both economic benefits for small regional towns and participation opportunities across all ages and genders and develops skills, fitness and an appreciation for nature and the environment.

Playspaces that are well considered, planned and appropriately situated have the ability to not only provide children with opportunities to develop their fine motor skills, balance and fitness but gives them license to take risks, have fun and to socialise and engage with other children and adults. Playgrounds also provide adults with social engagement opportunities and the opportunity to develop stronger relationships with their child and engage with the natural environment. Well designed and planned playgrounds should encourage children of all abilities, ages, genders and cultures to participate with equality but also provide appropriate levels of entertainment and risk.

Playgrounds can also be effective at improving the aesthetic and perceived security of parks and open space. There are many exemplar playgrounds in Victoria that meet these standards but they can be expensive and require skilled planning. Two such examples are the [Wombat Bend Playground](#) in Templestowe and [Marie Wallace Park](#) in Bayswater. There is an opportunity to co-locate playgrounds with other outdoor facilities such as skate parks and outdoor exercise equipment.

Skate parks often provide opportunities for participation in physical activity by young people who do not participate in more structured mainstream sports. While previously skate parks were seen as the panacea for catering to young people, a more modern approach is to create active spaces for a multitude of age groups. Co-locating skate parks with other facilities such as outdoor playgrounds is also a great way to increase supervision and limit anti-social behaviour.

Alongside the more traditional participation opportunities outlined above, a number of innovative new types of spaces are starting to appear. These include pump tracks (continuous circuit of banked turns interspaced by rollers and other features that can be ridden on a bike without pedalling) and urban mountain bike tracks like [Quarry Park](#) in Footscray and [The Hill](#) in Geelong. These facilities attract a diversity of visitors and have been overwhelmingly well received by the community. They particularly provide opportunities for younger children to participate in mountain biking without the need to travel and can often be built on sites that are not viable for other uses such as old quarries, reclaimed land or land that is too steep for other recreational uses.

Bouldering walls are another more innovative way to provide outdoor non structured recreational opportunities. These facilities are low and long as opposed to high with different skill levels to engage people socially and athletically. They can be easily lit and placed in urban or parkland environments. As with urban mountain bike tracks, they can often be placed in areas unsuitable for other uses. [McConchie Reserve](#) in Richmond and [Wilson Avenue](#) in Brunswick have popular and effective examples.

The Australian Veterinary Association states that in 2020 a higher proportion of Australians live in households with a dog and/or cat than with a child. As private open space diminishes and pet ownership grows, dog parks are becoming essential recreational opportunities for many more people, particularly in Metropolitan Melbourne. Dog parks not only allow people to provide safe off lead exercise and socialisation opportunities for their dogs but they promote physical exercise, social engagement opportunities for the owners.

Alongside an increasing demand and desire for unstructured recreation, most local government areas are experiencing an increasing demand and lack of ability to cater for structured sport. This is generally either due to a lack of space or a lack of funds to invest into spaces.

The City of Boroondara is a typical metropolitan local government area and provides good case studies of the pressures many local government areas are under in relation to structured recreation. The *City of Boroondara Sport and Recreation Strategy 2016* was developed to identify sport and recreation trends and challenges facing the municipality, and to provide a roadmap for the development of future sport and recreation opportunities to encourage participation. The Strategy found current sport and recreation facilities and services are unlikely to be adequate to meet future demand from population and participation growth.

An analysis of sport and recreation facilities identified the current capacity of existing highball, sports grounds and skate and BMX facilities to be insufficient to meet projected demand given the range of activities undertaken at these facilities. The sport and recreation activities identified as experiencing high growth in demand and requiring additional access to facilities in the future include:

- Basketball and Netball

- Australian rules football
- Soccer (football)
- Skate and BMX.

2. Urban Green Infrastructure

The value of urban green infrastructure in our communities and the important role it plays on human life is immeasurable.

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects best described the term ‘urban green infrastructure’ as

“the network of natural landscape assets which underpin the economic, socio-cultural and environmental functionality of our cities and towns, i.e. the green spaces and water systems which intersperse, connect and provide vital life support for humans and other species within our urban environments. Individual components of this environmental network are sometimes referred to as ‘green infrastructure assets’, and these occur across a range of landscape scales - from residential gardens to local parks and housing estates, streetscapes and highway verges, services and communications corridors, waterways and regional recreation areas etc”. (AILA, 2012 p4)

The growth in urban centres has seen significant negative impacts to biodiversity and decreased opportunity to re-establish ecosystems that are vital for the community.

Some components of urban green infrastructure that define our communities:

Environmental Areas	Large patches of native vegetation that provide wildlife and refuge areas
Connected Green Corridors	Linear linkages of creek lined, aquatic and terrestrial vegetation which supports wildlife habitat in urban areas. Value can be added to these spaces through passive recreational opportunities
Grassed Areas	Parklands, sports and recreation fields while catering for organised and passive recreation also allow animal movement and grazing.
Urban Forests	Trees planted in streets, open spaces and backyards, as well as other urban green infrastructure (garden beds, lawns etc) that are critical ecosystem services to people.
Wetlands	Natural or designed green spaces that assist to manage stormwater run-off and water quality. Fringe planting along the waterways offer habitat for wildlife

Often a secondary consideration in urban planning, the addition of urban green infrastructure adds an array of benefits to our communities, neighbourhoods and households:

- Improved physical health and mental wellbeing
- Increased social connectedness, resilience, and sense of place
- Economic benefits
- Improved Ecosystems (habitat, refuge, food)
- Improved amenity and liveability.

Environmental Factors

As our populations grow and develop and changing climates impact the liveability of our urban centres, the function of green infrastructure will become more important in our daily lives.

The importance of supporting a richness of biodiversity in our urban green infrastructure to help mitigate the challenges faced with climate changes into the future cannot be underestimated. A resilient landscape and a sustainable ecosystem will assist in ensuring that social and economic factors are not greatly impacted in an uncertain climate likely to be far more extreme than present.

Climatic changes will impact upon the health and wellbeing of our community. Into the future we are expecting an increase in the frequency and severity of extreme weather events such as drought, flooding and heatwaves. Instances and durations of heatwaves will continue to impact urban areas. Increased opportunities for well-planned urban green infrastructure will assist in the mitigation of urban heat island effect and reduce associated health risks of the most vulnerable in our communities.

A strong network of green corridors across our urban centres are essential, not only for wildlife movement through the built environment, but also provide a recreational aspect to support the health and wellbeing of our communities. The green infrastructure network should be well planned to ensure that changes in land use (densification, peri-urban sprawl) will not impact the balance and integrity of interconnected vegetation.

Population growth and expansion and densification of towns impacts flood mitigation and stormwater management. Impervious surfaces will capture more run-off and predicted increases in intense storm events will impact communities into the future. Appropriately designed, constructed and integrated water management projects can assist not only in beautifying an urban centre, but provide more effective stormwater management (<http://www.metrowater.com.au/post/tanderrum-way>).

Diverse urban green infrastructure which is resilient and sustainable creates liveable and thriving communities that support the natural environment and contributes to the health and wellbeing of all Victorians.

Social and Economic Factors

Access to the natural world is known to reduce stress and improve mental wellbeing in all ages, increase physical wellbeing and improve immune function (therefore reducing the risk of communicable diseases). In addition to creating healthy active lifestyles, access to urban green infrastructure has shown benefits in recovery and rehabilitation from illness and injury. Our indigenous community, the Traditional Owners of the land, hold significant cultural and spiritual connection to the biodiversity and there is great opportunity to leverage more of these values across the broader community into the future.

The liveability of our urban centres is greatly enhanced by the public realm including streetscapes, town entries, parks, gardens, waterways and wetlands. The green infrastructure softens the built form and creates spaces that are pleasant and attractive. Well established street trees and proximity and accessibility to open spaces adds economic prosperity to communities and increases property values. Attractive communities are places people want to visit, live, work and play in.

As an example, research undertaken in Perth found that urban green infrastructure, including trees, attractive street verges, parks, and reserves, increased median house prices by over \$16,000.¹

¹ Pandit, Ram & Polyakov, Maksym & Tapsuwan, Sorada & Moran, Timothy. (2013). The Effect of Street Trees on Property Value in Perth. Landscape and Urban Planning. 110. 134-142. 10.1016/j.landurbplan.2012.11.001.

3. Key Considerations and Conclusions

It is clear that there is considerable pressure on open space, with demand for structured and unstructured recreation as well as passive uses all increasing and all able to demonstrate significant community benefits. It is also clear that many local government areas do not have the capacity to meet this demand.

All of the above examples and key points indicate a number of key considerations that the Inquiry should look to address.

Implement planning policy/regulations to improve Victoria's liveability

Liveability is about creating and beautifying urban centres that are attractive for people, support economic factors, and improve the health and wellbeing of our community.

- Canopy cover targets mandated
- Protection and enhancement of significant vegetation
- Implement Urban Green Infrastructure manual to inform infrastructure projects (Local, State and Federal Government Projects), and also planning guidelines for the same to incorporated into private developments
- Enhanced integrated 'blue/green' infrastructure projects to mitigate the risk of flooding, re-use and treat stormwater run-off and enhance our waterways, rivers and coasts that support the tourism economy.
- Create connected green corridors that support our rich biodiversity, but also caters for active transport which removes the reliance away from motor vehicles.

Ensure as much open space as possible is made available to the public, while giving careful consideration to development planning. This includes funding acquisition of land to meet increasing population numbers or 'opening up' current land and facilities to use them more intensively (particularly in the case of established municipalities).

Some particular points and challenges in relation to this are:

- Improved guidance would be welcomed from the State Government on the zoning of open space.

As an example, when establishing suburbs in the City of Melton it is not uncommon for passive and active open space to be subject to the surrounding zone (e.g. General Residential Zone). This occurs as it is not until an area is subdivided and developed that the exact location and shape of open space is known. In addition, this affords Council with flexibility to repurpose the land in the future if it is no longer required for open space.

- When an area is developed, what is the State Government's position on the back zoning of land that is being used for passive or active open space? How often should back zoning occur? Can the State Government assist councils to fast track the back zoning of land?

As part of this a review of Clause 52.01 in the planning scheme should be undertaken. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the challenges of access to public open spaces, particularly in the growth areas where communities were identified as hotspots (Hume, Melton, Wyndham and Casey). A review of the public open space contribution (minimum currently 5%) needs to be undertaken to ensure that this is meeting the current needs and expectations of the community. This will result in a consistent

approach across the board, support for LGA's who battle developers, and larger parklands in our communities.

- Improved guidance is requested regarding what level of embellishment is expected for open space.

At one extreme there are developers who want to build award winning playgrounds in all of their local parks, which places a financial burden on councils when they are handed over.

At the other extreme there are developers who argue against the provision of basic embellishment of local parks to be handed over to councils (basic embellishment typically includes the levelling of the ground, removal of rocks, grassing of the land, and basic hard and soft landscaping).

- Improved guidance should also be given regarding the accepted level of embellishment of encumbered open space.

Councils also deal with a variety of different open space types that are encumbered (high voltage transmission line easements, high pressure gas pipeline easements, water / sewerage easements, waterways and drainage easements). These should not be considered part of the 5% POS contribution.

In contemporary PSPs, councils have been incorporating requirements and guidelines to deal with how encumbered open space is dealt with to address the absence of policy direction from the Victorian Government. This has led a variety of different outcomes, for example in the City of Melton's Kororoit / Plumpton / Mt Atkinson PSP, Council requires the developer to landscape the outer 10 metres of land in powerline easements (on both sides). The remainder of the land is to be levelled, de-rocked, and grassed. For high pressure gas pipelines, Council requires the developer to landscape the full width, and for powerline and high pressure gas pipeline easements, Council requires the developer to construct shared paths.

There should also be a focus on the opening up of other Victorian Government/ regulatory bodies land including school sites, club facilities, Melbourne Water land etc. There are many examples of how these type of spaces can be developed to allow public access for passive or active purposes without impacting on the primary purposes.

This is partly being addressed via projects such as Tennis Australia's 'Book-a-Court' scheme and the new process for Joint Use Agreements (JUAs) with public schools. Access into school (public and private) grounds for the community outside of school times is a critical focus.

As an example, in the City of Melton some primary schools have interim enrolments of 1,000 students, which requires most of the school site being covered in temporary buildings. Council has allowed JUAs in some circumstances for schools to use adjoining Council active open space reserves for play space for students during school hours. In many circumstances the use of active open space for school play space has resulted in compaction of the playing surfaces and loss of grass which has rendered the active open space unsuitable for the playing of sport by clubs. Where JUAs are signed with schools, it would be beneficial for Council to be paid a ground maintenance fee to assist to deal with the higher level of ground management required such as ground remediation works associated with compaction and grass loss.

Government schools should be designed in a manner that allows grounds to be used by the wider community after school hours. Improved guidance should be provided regarding the afterhours use of school sports grounds as their use is at the discretion of the school principal. Changes in school leadership can result in sports grounds that were available to the community being removed from community use overnight. The community would benefit if Council and Government School sports recreation assets were both available for community

use, for example the recently constructed Springside West Secondary College has an AFL cricket oval / basketball courts / sports hall next to Council's soccer facility with four rectangular fields – if all the assets are usable by the community after hours a substantial sports hub has been created.

The inquiry should consider opportunities to promote increased access to open space for the community, both by the acquisition of land by local government (and considering how this land is treated and the planning regulations impacting on it) and by making land owned by other entities more accessible.

Supporting the design of spaces and facilities to ensure they are used as intensively as possible and attract a wide cross section of user groups.

This is highlighted above particularly in relation to structured and unstructured recreation and a number of key points should be considered.

The co-location of playgrounds, outdoor exercise equipment and skate parks to better use space and encourage intergenerational play should be promoted. Alongside outdoor exercise equipment and skate areas, playgrounds can also consider co-locating with multi-court spaces. These spaces allow participation in unstructured tennis/basketball etc without the need to commit to club structures or timelines. Many people are seeking out these opportunities as they are time poor or lack the skill or interest in competitive or club based activities. The maintenance and development of appropriately designed spaces in popular and accessible sites is key to their success:

- Better develop walking paths, bike paths and other trails to encourage tourism and to get people out into nature, generally located on encumbered land (drainage reserves, creeks, easements etc).
- Consider more innovative new opportunities that often use space not appropriate for other purposes (pump tracks and the like).
- Focus on encouraging people to exercise by providing opportunities for their pets, such as dog parks.
- Improve and increase energy efficient lighting and improve surfaces to increase the carrying capacity of grounds. Lighting is particularly efficient in increasing both the use of a sportsground whilst also encouraging unstructured exercise in the immediate vicinity.
- Upgrade supporting infrastructure (changing rooms, parking etc) and encourage surfaces that can facilitate a number of uses. This also includes encouraging community groups to utilise sporting pavilions during the day therefore enhancing the use of an existing asset.

In addition to this, some local government areas are now considering the opportunity to light open space areas, underutilised sports grounds or areas adjacent to grounds to respond to these needs and promote greater activation of parks and open space until later in the evening. This approach could also be utilised on many of the facilities and activity examples cited above to encourage greater participation and increased security.

- Improve and upgrade current buildings to improve efficiency and space utilisation. This includes provision of underground parking, double storey pavilions, rooftop facilities and the like. There are numerous examples of roof top facilities in Europe and Asia, but it is not something that has really taken off in Australia yet.

The inquiry should consider opportunities to develop open spaces with a variety of different facilities to help intensify the use of land and encourage intergenerational participation.

It is important that local governments aim to provide a range of activity types, challenges, opportunities and diversity across the public open spaces. Parks and public open spaces generally have their own unique character and charm. With good design and commitment to ensuring that the local character and environment is protected and enhanced (e.g. trees, vegetation types, view lines, etc) our public open spaces will continue to be valued and respected by the public.

With backyards becoming smaller and some not wanting the ongoing maintenance of their own backyard, public parks are being seen as the new 'backyard space'. While a sense of ownership and pride of public spaces can be of value, the need for sharing spaces with all members of the public may prove to be a challenge for some residents. Strategic planning and design for parkland upgrades and improvements needs to be viewed from a holistic perspective where the broader context of 'the community' can gain improved value from use of the public open space. It is also worth noting that on occasion not developing a space can be of greater value, e.g. leaving it open with a sense of freedom, respite and relaxation can also assist the mental well-being aspect of enjoying public open spaces.