

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING ASSOCIATION

SUBMISSION REGARDING *LINKING PEOPLE AND SPACES: A DRAFT STRATEGY FOR MELBOURNE'S OPEN SPACE NETWORK*

1. Introduction

The Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), as an advocate of sustainable planning, welcomes an open space strategy which is intended to complement and be an integral part of the wider Metropolitan Strategy. It is our view that sustainable urban planning must include more attention to medium and even high density housing in the middle and outer suburbs, including new greenfield residential development, and this strategy should be complemented with a well planned diversity of open spaces.

Urban consolidation and revival of the inner-city will not only increase the social value of public open space, it will also lead to greater pressures for change in land use and inappropriate uses of public open space. Consequently, the TCPA sees the need for greater safeguards to protect existing open space.

On-road and off-road trails for cycle transport for both recreational, local trips and commuter use is an essential adjunct to sustainable planning. International experience has demonstrated that a network of safe cycle routes will enhance the use of public transport in areas where the PT network cannot be within walking distance of a viable market.

The Association supports the vision of a network of larger and smaller parks linked by public transport and accessible by bicycle and walking trails. However, the network needs to be much finer than is proposed in the draft.

We would also support the vision of accessible local open space as a central part of local communities (p.17). However, this 'village green' concept will need stronger planning guidelines than is presently provided for in ResCode and will require specific support from the Metropolitan Strategy.

In the case of at least two regions, the North and East, the ultimate strategic directions for open space appear to hinge on plans for freeways and the final Metropolitan Strategy, and future policies on green wedges and belts. As both regions, but particularly the North, can be expected to come under pressure for development, the Metropolitan Strategy must contain specific proposals and targets for open space, including parkland.

2. Open Space Issues

Protection of parkland

The Association understands that the Government plans to release a Parklands Code, which will provide a more detailed code of practice to govern the use and management of parkland. This is welcomed as the open space strategy provides little more than a set of desirable goals and principles, which do not adequately address statutory protection of parkland.

General commitment to "protecting existing metropolitan parklands" and protecting Melbourne's legacy of parks and gardens, with a goal of "no net loss through incremental development", will be received with a considerable degree of cynicism among community groups engaged in campaigning to preserve inner city parks from various forms of development and inappropriate uses. There is nothing in the strategy to suggest any real changes to the present safeguards or procedures relating to the use of parkland or land use changes.

Unfortunately, the principle of managing open space to ensure “changing and emerging community needs are catered for” (p.18) is a reminder that governments will too often determine those community needs and will ride roughshod over the flimsy protection at present afforded open space, particularly Crown land reserves. The TCPA endorses the observation of the President of the Frederick Law Olmstead Association in 1985 that the city’s parks “are not free land for the taking of those temporarily in possession of public office.” Park manager should see themselves as trustees of an invaluable heritage.

The Planning Scheme processes referred to under the Management Objectives have proved to be no protection in recent years and merely demonstrated that short term political interests tend to override any long-term vision for Melbourne’s open space.

It is proposed that changes in land use and excision to parkland “will need to provide significant community benefits and be subject to appropriate public consultation with the local and wider community. There should be no reduction in open space as a consequence of any development or redevelopment.”(p.17).

The TCPA strongly supports the philosophy behind this statement. But it is no more than a statement of good intention. In the case of Albert Park Reserve the concept of “open space” has been subject to convenient changes in definition to suit changing circumstances. The Association is concerned at the absence of more specific processes which provide protection against the whims of the majority of the day, specifically formal mechanisms to provide rights of objections for appeal in the case of Crown land reserves.

It is trusted that the Parklands Code will provide better protections. Commitments and procedures to maintain and protect open space should be built into the Metropolitan Strategy and the Victorian Planning Scheme.

The Association is concerned that the proposals for the inner metropolitan region contain no reference to any longer term actions which might provide some assurance that the use of Albert Park Reserve for commercial motor racing will cease. The continued use of a major recreational public park for such an inappropriate and intrusive commercial activity remains a glaring inconsistency with the proposed strategy and vision for Melbourne’s open space.

Recovery of Parkland

The Strategy notes that “The shortage of available land in the inner areas will make meeting the needs of a growing inner city population more challenging.” (p. 20). In light of the present population density trends in inner and middle area, and the desirability of increasing densities around transport corridors, State Governments should be committed to recovering previously excised open space when the opportunity arises.

The North Region map shows a grave shortage of parks north of Royal Park between the Merri Creek and Moonee Ponds trails. While the natural barrier of the rail line exists, there is a strong case for long term plans to recover excised land in the northwest of Royal Park to increase accessible open space to residents immediately north of Brunswick Street.

Protection of Conservation Values

The draft strategy makes specific reference to the conservation values of the Craigieburn Grasslands and the Merri Creek habitat corridor (p. 25). These are two excellent examples of the tension between an open space strategy and the freeway-driven transport strategy that has overridden conservation values and protection of open space with indigenous plant values and urban habitat.

Clearly, the list of threats to the natural values of urban open space on p. 27 must include freeways, which have taken up so many of Melbourne's creeks. If the Open Space and Trails strategy is to have significance, it must take priority, wherever reasonable, over other developments that threaten it. The natural values of open space and habitat need to accord an appropriate value, which becomes part of the cost of options such as road routes. Protection of urban open space and conservations values will come at a cost and this will have to be recognised by governments.

The Merri Creek freeway option, the construction of indoor sporting facilities in parkland, and the construction of a Formula One track and garages in Albert Park Reserve for the Grand Prix are examples of the temptation by governments to use parkland, or open space which is potential future parkland, as the cheaper option to purchasing developed land. If open space values are to be accorded true importance, the strategy should ensure that buildings that do not have to be on parkland are built in more appropriate locations, and only considered if there is available compensatory land which complements the existing parkland.

3. Trails

The draft proposals depend too heavily on the coarse network of routes based on the VicRoads principal bicycle network (PBN). The network has a number of problems:

- there remain many gaps in the links between open spaces for the next 5- 15 years
- there are no shown routes to connect to the designated on-road links and trails
- the on-road bike lane routes, whether kerbside car parking lanes or narrow separate lanes, will not be used by pedestrians unless there is a suitable footpath, and they are generally only suitable for more experienced and confident adult cyclists. This observation applies particularly to the links to outer Melbourne parks.

If the strategy is to encourage walking and cycling between or to open spaces facilities, it must draw on the existing fine network of safe, attractive and alternative back roads and residential streets which are highly suitable to serve as both cycling and walking routes. It is a waste of public capital investment by local government in attractive tree-lined streets, local bicycle paths and footpaths to ignore this resource.

This network if properly mapped can provide relatively direct routes. Two measures need to be taken to maximise the value of the network:

- where the minor roads/streets cross major arterial roads, VicRoads will be need to install safe refuge points to enable safe and easy crossing
- Victorian legislation should be amended to enable to parents accompanying young children to use the footpath where needed. At the moment it is legal for children under 12 years of age to cycle on footpaths. The proposal would bring Victoria in line with NSW.

The strategy should aim to provide a comprehensive map and shopping list of alternative pedestrian and bicycle routes. Apart from filling in the present gaps, alternative local road routes will help to manage the heavy week-end demand on present trails such as the Bayside Trail within the City of Port Phillip stretch which cannot always accommodate the demand from both recreational cyclists and roller bladers at the weekend.

Attached to the submission is a more detailed argument made on behalf of the Victorian Bicycle Federation which amongst other matters recommends a 500 metre mesh bicycle network based on a hierarchy of road categories and the updating of the Melbourne Bike Plan maps of the alternative bicycle

route maps. A copy of the 1984 Melbourne Bicycle Plan is also attached. This map classifies roads according to the degree of safety and identifies dangerous intersections; it demonstrates the potential for mapping routes that will encourage both walking and cycling. Individual sections could be developed in relation to specific open space facilities such as Albert Park Reserve and the Bayside Trail.

The Inner Region exemplifies a number of issues:

- There are many safe and pleasant residential roads linking the Bayside Trail to Albert Park Reserve. However, there are also major unsafe junctions and barriers to both pedestrians and cyclists between the trails on the bayside and in Albert Park Reserve on one hand and the facilities of Fawkner Park and the Royal Botanic Gardens, and the Yarra trail on the other.
- There remain other major gaps between the main Melbourne trails which need to be addressed immediately, for example the gap between the trail from Beacon Cove to Spencer St, and the consequent gap between the Footscray Rd trail and Southbank. The present situation involves use of busy roads without adequate bike lanes, which forces cyclists to break the law by using footpaths.
- The Yarra River Punt connection provides, on weekends only, a safe and pleasant connection for recreational cyclists and walkers. It would provide a safer commuting link for Williamstown residents to the Southbank and COPP employment, once the current gaps are addressed along the Yarra trail between the punt and Southbank. However, during weekdays cyclists are directed to sections of on-road lanes that are suitable only for experienced cyclists.

4. Implementation Issues

Co-ordination

The Strategy is described as not a “Master Plan”, but as a “basis for setting future priorities and allocating funding”. There are several aspects that raise questions about its status, implementation and the final shape of what will happen.

The Strategic is explicit that implementation will “involve the cooperative resources” of a range of government and non-government bodies and what is described as “effective partnerships between these agencies”, and the acceptance of the priorities by the relevant open space managers and the wider community.

A genuine partnership will need to have a proper process for resolving conflicts over land use between levels of government.

In the past any potential partnership approach to open space management has broken down in the face of State Government priorities and power of the Minister of Planning to override local planning schemes and local community preferences, without any requirement to call for, or take note of, an environmental effects assessment.

There is in the Strategy no evident mechanism for coordinating the priorities, and it is not clear who sets the priorities, how they are set, and who is responsible for reviewing them. It is not clear how the strategy was developed in the first place. In the absence of extensive preliminary consultations and planning, the fact that “In many cases the actions proposed will require feasibility assessments” and more detailed site specific planning is yet to occur. This suggests that a second draft should be released for public scrutiny after all interested parties, local communities and the broader community have had an opportunity for first-round comments.

Funding

Crucial to the implementation and development of the strategy will be funding resources available to Parks Victoria. As the draft acknowledges “funds will always be scarce.”(p.55). In the financial year 2000-2001 Parks Victoria had a capital works budget of only \$6.41 million and a Parks Victoria Grants Program of \$3.93 million across 43 projects. The level of funding for the Grants Program (\$44.5 million over the past 8 years) can be put in some perspective by comparing it with the \$20 million spent on Albert Park Reserve alone by Parks Victoria (the AGPC was further funded to the tune of over \$34 million).

Given this, it would seem imperative that Parks Victoria adopts a commercial return approach to any use that does not meet the accepted criteria of community recreational and open space values use. Usages which involve corporate entertainment, or corporate run events, and more commercial enterprises such as golf driving ranges and commercial motor races which are run for private commercial profit should be charged appropriately.

The TCPA is particularly concerned at the case of the Australian Grand Prix Corporation, which remains liable to a maximum of only \$100,000 for the annual use of Albert Park Reserve. On the evidence of the latest impact report, the Corporation should be paying closer to \$900,000. Parks Victoria should be seeking an amendment to the Australian Grands Prix Act 1994 and a commercial rate commensurate with previous commercial usage, such as Department of Defence Barracks in the post-WWII period. While the AGPC is a statutory body, the event is a major corporate event and major national and international companies profit directly from the use of public open space.

If open space managers are to be encouraged to seek corporate funding there must be precise guidelines set for the terms and conditions of any such funding. The TCPA is strongly opposed to the branding of parkland, to advertising signage which is not ancillary to the “activities consistent with the management objectives of the park” and to the loss of access to public parkland due to corporate-run and commercial events.

The Parklands Code must address this. The Parkland Principles, which were initiated by this Association to complement the Planning Charter, set out clear principles regarding commercial signage.

Town and Country Planning Association
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