

LAEPC - Inquiry into Environmental Infrastructure for Growing Populations Submission from ACF Community, Bendigo District Group

To: The Committee Manager,
Legislative Assembly Environment and Planning Committee,
Parliament House,
Spring Street, East Melbourne, Vic. 3002

eii@parliament.vic.gov.au

28th September, 2020

From: Bendigo District ACF Community

To whom it may concern,

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute a submission to this important inquiry. Our submission is the combination of ideas from all attendees at our monthly August meeting. We have arranged these in a table where each of the criteria your committee will be looking at will be addressed, namely

- A. the benefits of accessing and using different types of environmental infrastructure
- B. the impact of population growth in Melbourne and regional centres on the provision and preservation of environmental infrastructure
- C. differences in the availability of environmental infrastructure between different suburbs and between different regional centres
- D. the effectiveness of current legislation and planning provisions in securing environmental infrastructure
- E. existing delays or obstacles to securing environmental infrastructure
- F. the impact of COVID-19 on the importance, use and design of environmental infrastructure
- G. examples of best practice and innovative approaches to securing environmental infrastructure in other jurisdictions
- H. Other issues – impact on climate,

The Bendigo District ACF Community began in 2017. We are a community group under the umbrella of the Australian Conservation Foundation and operate under the principles of the ACF including being non-partisan, respectful, and speaking out as independent voices for the environment and not as spokespersons for ACF. We are an active group that meet regularly. There are 350 members of the local branch. Nationally ACF have over 700,000 members and growing.

As an ACF Community group, we focus on these four goals:

- Solve the climate crisis
- Stand up for Nature
- Redesign our economy
- Fix our democracy

These goals are all relevant to this inquiry and relate directly to the areas you are considering.

Appropriate and sufficient Environmental Infrastructure is vital as a tool to solve the climate crisis. Having funding that focuses on the needs of nature, having environmental laws that protect our native species and being able to prioritise providing a safe habitat for them, are the ways we can stand up for Nature. Decisions relating to environmental infrastructure need to ensure this happens. We believe that there is a need to redesign our economic goals, rules, and institutions so they help people achieve their goals in harmony with nature, for business to serve our common good and create products and services that replenish our living world, and for communities, corporations and governments to take care of people and our planet.

We understand that the Committee considers examples of environmental infrastructure to include parks and open space, sporting fields, forest and bushland, wildlife corridors and waterways. Also that the Committee is primarily interested in environmental infrastructure that is within or close to urbanised areas. Our submission addresses a range of infrastructure, in and around the regional city of Bendigo but mainly focusing on the parks and open spaces. We will concentrate on two types of terrain common to the public lands: public open space and forests – see details below – however other environmental infrastructure will be mentioned briefly.

We are available for further discussion, and can be contacted by email bendigodistrictacf@gmail.com or phone [REDACTED]

Yours faithfully

Marie Bonne, Julie Flynn, Ian McCaw and Ken Rookes – Group Leaders

CRITERIA	DISCUSSION	RECOMMENDATIONS
<p>The benefits of accessing and using different types of environmental infrastructure</p>	<p>There needs to be a balance between recreational and natural environments as both types have their benefits. This is possible in Bendigo. There are an array of walking paths, tracks, and nature trails; cycling tracks and courses; sporting fields, athletics tracks, courts, ovals, pools and buildings; parks, gardens and reserves; playgrounds, exercise points, art trails, history trails, open air venues, picnic and shelter areas, comfort stations. There is shade, sunshine, beauty, and fresh air.</p> <p>Sport and recreation and eco and cultural tourism are all catered for. Adventure activities are found nearby, for example the new La Larr Ba Gauwa (Harcourt) Mountain Bike path partly funded with \$1million support from the Victorian Government.</p> <p>Greater Bendigo National Park and Regional Park were established because their significant flora and fauna needed protection from expanding human impacts. These parks surrounding Bendigo attract nature lovers, Field Naturalists, Nature clubs, bushwalkers, birdwatchers, environmentalists, and educators who value the natural environment and biodiversity.</p> <p>Bendigo Family Nature Club has found that Crusoe Res 7 is an excellent facility in all regards for bush family recreation and nature study. The rangers have been excellent in that they can provide a focus for activities.</p>	<p>Protecting the important biodiversity in Bendigo's National and Regional Parks requires certain restrictions. The balance between protecting biodiversity and human activity can be difficult when adjacent to urban areas. Restrictions need to be known and enforced. Education and clear signage with marked tracks. We recommend innovative solutions to deter rubbish dumping in the forests, such as well- placed cameras, educational advertising, etc...</p> <p>The forests also attract mountain bike and trail bike riders, 4WD, fossickers and firewood collectors etc which can threaten the Biodiversity protection of natural inhabitants. Sufficient funds are needed to increase the presence of rangers and provide structures which prevent these destructive activities.</p> <p>Potential opportunities for further recreation, parkland, mining history trails etc lies in the many Ex mining terrain scattered throughout the City of Bendigo and outlying areas could be enhanced to support healthy recreational activities while the mining heritage is valued and protected. We recommend consultation with community groups and interested residents so that unused areas can be transformed for various uses, such as the creation of legitimate mountain bike parks, trail bike parks, areas for walking and exploring, dog off lead parks and areas which can be revegetated for urban forests.</p>

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<p>The impact of population growth in Melbourne and regional centres on the provision and preservation of environmental infrastructure</p>	<p>In sporting and recreation facilities and in Parks and Gardens, increased usage and overuse means constant maintenance is required to protect the assets which require consistent and adequate funding. The limited water supply in Bendigo also has an impact on the usability of parks while sporting facilities are prioritised.</p> <p>The main risks to the health of the Bendigo forests come from the proliferation of illegal tracks by mountain bike and trail bike riders, and 4WD create erosion, siltation, disturbances to wildlife and destruction of sensitive flora. Around 120km of illegal bmx tracks have been mapped by the orienteering Club in places like Wildflower Drive, from the Calder to Mandurang along Big Hill Range, the districts of Sedgwick and Barkers Creek..</p> <p>There is rubbish dumping and illegal firewood collections causing damage as the population of the city increases. Vandalism of signage or lack of signage is evident in the regional and national parks. Gold fossicker's diggings leave holes and disturb sensitive flora and can create hazards for visitors</p> <p>Weed infestations impact native flora.</p> <p>Feral cats and cat curfews not adhered to or enforced threaten sensitive wildlife.</p> <p>Arson is a constant threat. Deliberately lit fires in our region during the recent summer caused considerable damage to natural and built infrastructure. Climate change is an existential threat to our built and natural infrastructure. Bendigo is surrounded by forest and the warmer temperatures increase the risks of fire.</p>	<p>Bendigo is almost surrounded by the Bendigo Regional National Park. This forest is of the box ironbark type, and much of the Bendigo box ironbark forest with mostly undersized trees, regrowth after the forests were cleared during the historic gold mining period. The biodiversity of these forests is quite fragile, topsoil is thin and low rainfall means that the indigenous flora have difficulty recovering when disturbed. Management of these forests varies according to the land category, and is usually either Parks Victoria, DELWP, Coliban Water in some instances and City of Greater Bendigo. Funding to these authorities must be increased to protect these parks from degradation.</p> <p>Part of passive recreation is proper payment and increased employment of rangers and staff to enforce conservation measures, encourage community participation in looking after our parks, providing proper signage, toilets and hand washing facilities. E.g. The One Tree Hill part of the Greater Bendigo National Park could have composting toilets at the towers to minimize the distribution of toilet paper throughout the bush.</p> <p>The National Parks biodiversity must be protected with careful and consistent management. Parks Victoria needs adequate funding to conduct regular reviews of biodiversity health and manage restoration projects and plans for the impacts of fire and visitors. Currently Parks are understaffed and under resourced.</p>

<p>CRITERIA cont The impact of population growth in Melbourne and regional centres on the provision and preservation of environmental infrastructure</p>	<p>DISCUSSION cont The use of the Bendigo National Park by mountain bike riders is of great concern to environmental groups. The activities of these riders are contributing to the threat of the endangered tuan and are destroying the fragile nature of the habitat of other species</p> <p>Urban development is encroaching on the borders of Greater Bendigo National Park. Developers are clearing remnant bush and maximising profits by building large houses on small blocks with few green spaces or providing any wildlife corridors. Increased bitumen roads, concrete paths, large buildings, and traffic increases the air temperature unless adequate sustainable shading and cooling via good design and appropriate planting and greening</p>	<p>RECOMMENDATIONS Cont More funding is needed to monitor and eliminate invasive weeds from along street and road edges, railways line verges and vacant and private land to prevent them from getting into the nearby National parks. Eg gazania (African daisy) is considered an environmental weed in Victoria. It is spreading rapidly in the Bendigo region.</p> <p>The damage caused by mountain bikes in the Bendigo National Parks must be addressed. The manner in which this user group was introduced needs to be investigated because it is currently shrouded in secrecy. An alternative venue for this activity needs to be found, or at least an education program to highlight the environmental responsibility this group have if they are to continue to use the part. Enforcement of staying on the official routes can only occur through increased staffing levels of rangers in the parks.</p> <p>The oversight of the city's planning and development needs to be refocused away from the profit of the developers and back to protecting the environment. With the Greening Greater Bendigo Strategy yet to be enacted, there is no value placed on vegetation that is removed to make way for housing. It should be part of the planning process that developers must satisfy an environmental protection audit. Mitigation when vegetation is removed and habitats disturbed, should be of equal value to what is removed, and not a token gesture. Site inspections should include checks on the environmental impact of the construction.</p>
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<p>CRITERIA Differences in the availability of environmental infrastructure between different suburbs and between different regional centres</p>	<p>DISCUSSION</p> <p>The former mining areas within Bendigo has less natural environmental infrastructure. This is a legacy of the days of impoverished miners being congregated in cottages near the mine they worked at. The notion of equity was not practiced as infrastructure was developed in the city over the last 170 years.</p> <p>Passive recreation is often overlooked. Walking was shown to be the most common physical activity in Bendigo, and yet walking paths and bike paths are infrequently sensitively provided, certainly not on major thoroughfares to get from A to B. Active, formal recreation is more likely to be catered for, and have a big spend.</p> <p>Council does have tree planting initiatives. However there is a disparity in Council grants for the environment as opposed to sporting facilities. This is largely due to ignorance of environmental groups about Council grants, and the fact that people don't apply for them in this area.</p>	<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p> <p>We recommend that the City of Greater Bendigo introduce an audit of environmental infrastructure against areas of low socio-disadvantage and ensure that funding for infrastructure is equitable across all areas of the city.</p> <p>We recommend that the spread of funding be balanced more equitably.</p> <p>We recommend the appointment of a permanent person to encourage tree planting initiatives in concert with Urban Landcare or a similar group.</p>
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<p>The effectiveness of current legislation and planning provisions in securing environmental infrastructure</p>	<p>Because of local and state government planning laws, developers are maximising profits over sustainable and liveable housing and environments. Habitats are being destroyed by development, ambient temperatures are rising and heat sinks being created because of the use of certain types of building materials and an overall loss of shade.</p> <p>The 10 Minute Neighbourhoods movement is part of Bendigo's future planning. This encourages walking and cycling, but there needs to be infrastructure for this to work. The case of Ironbark Gully's linear park with a shared trail along it is an example of how many years of delay are possible before the infrastructure to be built. In this example, the delay has been due to both soil contamination from mining (EPA required a management plan) and it being on crown land which required a lengthy period for Cultural Heritage Management Plans and Land Use Activity Agreements with the local aboriginal corporation.</p>	<p>There needs to be a different approach to housing where it is required that buildings be sustainable and energy efficient, that the banning of solar panels in certain estates be disallowed, that the Public Open Space fee paid by developers be monitored for sustainable replacement solutions, and that the development of wildlife corridors and stormwater wetlands be part of the planning application.</p> <p>We recommend Crown land management arrangements when this is shared between agencies and community groups should be reviewed and simplified to enable better community access and legitimate land improvements. Management plans of the various categories of crown land must be made available and accessible to the community. At present the management plans are not even available on the department websites. Community members could be much better informed about how and where land managers allow different activities in the forests. Some categories of land use such as grazing leases are no longer relevant within the regional city</p>

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<p>Existing delays or obstacles to securing environmental infrastructure</p>	<p>Delay in approving Wellsford Forest as a National Park. we are most concerned that the government has not followed the recommendations of the independent panel to protect the old growth areas in the Wellsford State Forest on the doorstep of Bendigo by declaring it a National Park and Regional Park within the time frame required – the 6 months which expired in March 2020. This delay has allowed wood collection to continue, threatening the habitat of native species living in the forest.</p> <p>Ex mining terrain: As a town with a strong gold mining heritage, there are many areas of ex mining, unrehabilitated open land within the township and between suburbs that are poorly used by the local population. These areas often still contain mining relics and diggings, pits, mounds of mullock from underground, and bare areas from a range of historic practices: alluvial mining, sluicing and underground tunneling. Significant erosion and weed invasion are common. (Some areas are contaminated with chemicals used to separate the gold and there is the risk of some of the many old mine shafts opening up because the capping material is rotting). These areas of public land are not highly valued by the community, but they have amazing potential for recreation while the mining heritage can be protected. Management of these areas is again shared between the various agencies listed earlier, with some shared management arrangements. Voluntary community groups find it very difficult to negotiate any efforts to rehabilitate and make open spaces more inviting to residents due to the complex management arrangements of the various pockets of land</p>	<p>We ask that the Wellsford Forest be declared a National Park now.</p> <p>The ex-mining areas within the regional city of Bendigo could be enhanced to support healthy recreational activities while the mining heritage is valued and protected. We recommend consultation with community groups and interested residents so that unused areas can be transformed for various uses, such as the creation of legitimate mountain bike parks, trail bike parks, areas for walking and exploring, dog off lead parks and areas which can be revegetated for urban forests.....etc</p>

<p>CRITERIA The impact of COVID-19 on the importance, use and design of environmental infrastructure</p>	<p>DISCUSSION In Bendigo all existing bike paths, trails and walking tracks faced increased usage. Bendigo bike shops experiences a surge of bike sales as families were seen out riding and walking together. Adequate and safe infrastructure is vital. Many people in our group explored local areas not previously traversed.</p> <p>Combined walking cycling and nature observation sites like Kennington Reservoir is a real asset used frequently by some of our group's members. Cruise Reservoir & No 7 Park is experiencing an upsurge in use. Both these environments have been developed by Council Parks and Open Spaces staff working with volunteer community groups.</p>	<p>RECOMMENDATIONS There needs to be adequate and varied number of open, green, shared spaces within a 20-minute walk of people's dwellings for wellbeing.</p> <p>There needs to be an audit of location, size, purpose and status of environmental infrastructure within the city limits and in its surrounding area, so gaps can be identified and funding can sought to rectify imbalances.</p> <p>There is a great opportunity at Crusoe Res with an old house being sold right on site. Why can't State government and Council buy it and make it an information centre, tourism comfort station and café. Birdwatchers come from all over to Crusoe Res, and such a facility would mean the already good walking paths would be made even more use of.</p> <p>.</p>
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<p>CRITERIA</p> <p>Examples of best practice and innovative approaches to securing environmental infrastructure in other jurisdictions.</p>	<p>DISCUSSION</p> <p>Within Central Victoria there are a wealth of best practice and innovative approaches to environmental infrastructure:</p> <p>Rail trails. Using and restoring existing unused infrastructure for cycling and walking eg The O’Keefe Trail.</p> <p>Bendigo Creek trail for walking and cycling along an existing small waterway.</p> <p>The Reimagining Bendigo Creek Plan adopted by Council sets out opportunities to restore the health and presentation of the Bendigo Creek, its catchment and tributaries.</p> <p>The Plan is the result of a collaborative process of knowledge-sharing and leadership by eight project partners, including the Dja Dja Wurrung, and engagement with community members.</p> <p>To read to the plan and find out how you can be involved, go to www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/bendigocreek</p>	<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p> <p>Further funding for The Reimagining Bendigo Creek Plan would assist with providing another unique space for the rapidly growing population to learn from. There is a Prospectus soon to be published with the breakdown of costs. We recommend this funding be considered by the State Government.</p> <p>https://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/About/Document-Library/Reimagining-Bendigo-Creek</p>
<p>CRITERIA</p> <p>Other issues – impact on climate,</p>	<p>DISCUSSION</p> <p>There is so much “upside down” land within the city limits of Bendigo. This land needs to be regenerated urgently. The destruction of forests in the last 170 years is contributing to the climate crisis and the limited waterways heavily impacted by mining sludge need to be returned to their former state.</p>	<p>RECOMMENDATIONS</p> <p>Economic Recovery programs should have a focus on restoration of the environment and its infrastructure. This type of program is looking to the future because leaving this work undone is not protecting the future of the next generation.</p>