Summary

In considering the infrastructure and business development options for outer suburban Melbourne, Whittlesea Community Connections has a number of concerns relating to investment in social infrastructure to underpin the social and economic inclusiveness of the outer suburbs.

- Whittlesea Community Connections believes that opportunities exist within Whittlesea, and other growth areas, to build a viable social infrastructure that enhances not only the liveability of an area but also attracts and sustains new economic and business development.
- We wish to stress the importance of a well-developed transport system to the economic and social health and well-being of our area and urge the government to develop a three dimensional approach to transport policy that recognises the need to support community transport alongside investment in public and private transport infrastructure.
- We emphasise the chronic need for capital funding to create a range of community service facilities for growing existing services and delivering new ones in direct response to dramatic population growth.
- We believe that there is insufficient community infrastructure to support community building and connection. The associational benefits arising from investment in community facilities to bring people together should be enhanced through community governance arrangements that put people at the centre of decision making for their community.
- Whittlesea Community Connections believes that it is the role of government to ensure that as land is released for housing development through an extension of urban growth boundaries that more resources are also identified to invest in the regeneration of older disadvantaged areas such as Lalor and Thomastown.
- We argue that more can be done in the support of community service activities that enhance pathways into employment and develop the skills of a local workforce. We strongly urge state government to explore innovative ways to enhance and facilitate the social and economic inclusiveness of citizens with barriers to immediate participation in a competitive employment market.
- Whittlesea Community Connections acknowledges that the newly arrived, in particular those from refugee and humanitarian backgrounds, can face significant barriers to economic participation. We recommend investment in projects such as the “Women in Work” Childcare Community Enterprise that successfully merge support to overcome barriers with pathways to qualifications and employment.
- Whittlesea Community Connections believes that locally targeted social businesses that are developed with a clear social purpose that include training and employing local people are clear examples of ways in which the skills of a local workforce can be enhanced to create new employment and new enterprises. We recommend that the state government works closely with the commonwealth in ensuring that government resources for the development of social enterprises are sufficiently targeted to growth areas.
INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) welcomes the opportunity to make a submission to the Growing the Suburbs: Infrastructure and Business Development in Outer Suburban Melbourne inquiry.

WCC is an independent community service agency with strong community links that has been working in the Whittlesea LGA since 1973. Based in Epping, but with a municipal-wide profile, WCC’s vision is for a Whittlesea in which people and agencies work together to make a positive difference to their community, ensuring that everyone has equal access to the community’s resources and services. The six core work areas of the agency are:

- Information, support and referral services
- Whittlesea Connect Community Transport Service
- The Whittlesea Volunteer Resource Service
- The Emergency Relief Service
- The Whittlesea Community Legal Service
- The Settlement Support Program

These core areas cover a broad spectrum, from prevention and early intervention work undertaken through community education, grounded research and support programs to the provision of short term emergency funding and case work support for people in crisis. Specific initiatives and services we undertake include,

- Crisis intervention, support and assistance
- Direct casework and client advocacy
- Targeted community education, information and training
- Research and consultation with members of the Whittlesea community
- Partnerships with other agencies and organisations that share our goals and aspirations in providing services to communities within Whittlesea
- Community development initiatives that resource and support disadvantaged communities and new arrivals
- Advocacy on behalf of, and with, members of the Whittlesea community to build capacity, and to contribute to increased access and equity of service provision in the municipality

WCC has many years’ experience contributing to social and community development in the outer suburbs of the Whittlesea interface LGA.

WCC recognises that economic and social infrastructure development are interconnected and made the more complex by issues of population growth and rapid urbanisation. WCC maintains that planned infrastructure development is necessary to ensuring that all citizens benefit from urban growth. We are particularly concerned to ensure that those who face disadvantage within the community are enabled to share the benefits of growth. We believe that it is imperative that all levels of government work collaboratively together and meaningfully engage with community service agencies and organisations at the local level to build a capacity to work together and invest in targeted infrastructure and business development that delivers benefits to all.
Our response to the Terms of Reference focus on issues that directly relate to how the benefits of growth can be harnessed to the betterment of vulnerable and disadvantaged residents of the outer Melbourne suburbs. Due to the limited nature of our expertise relating to commercial or business matters (e.g. export development opportunities) we have refrained from addressing some of the Terms of Reference.

**ACCOMMODATING INCREASED POPULATION GROWTH (TOR (B))**

Population growth in Whittlesea is significant and rapid. In 2010 Whittlesea grew at a rate of 171 people every week (Whittlesea Community Futures, 2011). This rate of growth has challenged and stretched the capacity of existing infrastructure and places Whittlesea as the second fastest growing municipality in Victoria. Projections indicate that the estimated population of 155,000 will almost double to 300,000 by 2031 (WCF, 2011). This will have significant implications for infrastructure; road congestion, public transport, and place increased pressure on public and community facilities including the ability of human services providers to deliver essential supports and programs to residents.

**The Transport Challenge**

As highlighted by the ADC Cities Report 2010, development of the fringe must be accompanied by attention to decent public transport service levels at an early stage of development (ADC Cities Report: Enhancing Liveability, 2010). Whittlesea Community Connections fully endorses the conclusion reached by the report that a concerted effort is needed to ensure that pressure is reduced on infrastructure though active measures to reduce demand for travel. This includes integrated locality planning and creating networks and multiple access points for employment and services, reducing the dependence on large or single central hubs (ADC, 2010). We note that this position is totally consistent with the Commonwealth Government’s position on locating housing close to facilities, including jobs and public transport in more compact mixed use development (Dept Infrastructure and Transport, 2011).

Employment mobility, both in terms of people changing jobs as well as being able to obtain work outside of their immediate community, is linked directly to issues of access. The geographic and social isolation inherent in the development of new suburbs combined with a lack of adequate public transport limits or prevents access to information, services, childcare and employment. These issues affect all parts of the community and can be critical for some high-risk groups (e.g. young families). Newer suburbs, characterised as they are by low or non-existent public transport connections locks people into unsustainable and costly private modes of transport. The focus of much of the growth of outer Melbourne has been on ‘green-field’ developments utilising land that has been traditionally designated as agricultural/rural. Attractive though this is to property developers, the experience to date has been that this has caused difficulty for residents.

Whittlesea Community Connections believes that preventative approaches to transport disadvantage must be taken at the earliest stage in planning for new communities on the urban fringe. This includes ensuring not only that new estates are connected adequately to an integrated public transport network but that communities are designed in such a way that residents are able to access employment, health, community and recreational activities without reliance on extended travel to distant centralised hubs.

By including public transport and adequate road infrastructure at early stages of green-field and new estate development it is possible to avoid the social disconnection that otherwise results. Limiting capacity
of residents to travel has considerable ripple effects on capacity for social, economic and recreational participation impacting directly on the health and well-being of whole communities as well as individuals within them. Without adequate planning, car ownership becomes embedded and contributes to community fragmentation and social isolation and exclusion (Gray et al, 2006). We also agree with the World Health Organisation that places designed for cars are to a future of congestion, costly traffic management problems and reduced rates of community connection (WHO, 2007).

Whittlesea Community Connections also believes that the role of social and community transport is overlooked in reducing the cost of public transport as well as in delivering community-specific solutions to improved access to services and to the public transport system itself. Community Transport, in particular, has potential to cost-effectively bridge the gap between private and public modes of transport.

Whittlesea Community Connections agrees with Helen Battellino in her review of transport policy and service delivery models in New South Wales (2009) when she says that “Governments cannot avoid the social responsibility to provide transport for the transport disadvantaged. The bringing together of the current Community Transport Projects’ expertise in servicing the transport-disadvantaged and the bus operators’ expertise in bus fleet management could allow for the development of an appropriate system of transport for a wider transport-disadvantaged market.” (p 128).

WCC believes that there is a role for state government to facilitate the creation of collaborative partnerships between developers, the state government, bus operators and community transport providers that can deliver transitional transport connectivity specific to new developments. A partnership approach may be appropriate in situations at the early stages of development of new estates when road and population levels may be inadequate to facilitate public transport services. Such a partnership would aim to provide transport connectivity to residents to the public transport network – for example taking/picking-up commuters from nearby bus routes or railway stations; providing transport to essential services, social and recreation hubs; and reduce the reliance on private transport and multiple car-ownership.

With developers, state government and bus operators providing in-kind and financial support and working in partnership with a community transport provider it is possible to establish service targets that deliver preventative approaches to transport disadvantage and social exclusion before they become embedded into new communities at the critical early stages. Such an approach has been explored by WCC with a major local developer and our view is that with government involvement, to broker and resource a partnership, a viable and best practice service model can be established and piloted with potential to be duplicated elsewhere.

Innovative and flexible solutions such as this could provide a “gap filler” in responding to local transport needs that are still not met under an existing system centred on a two-dimensional approach (private and public) that ignores the potential of community transport (Battellino, 2009).

The challenge of human services infrastructure
A wealth of research and needs analysis documents the relative inequity of access to community, health and support services in outer-suburban growth areas as compared with the inner-city. The greater education, health, employment and community connection choices available to inner city residents is in stark contrast to the lack of suitable and affordable social infrastructure in the suburban growth areas.
The recently published Whittlesea Community Futures Human Services Needs Analysis (2011) reports that a majority of agencies are experiencing difficulty in acquiring additional space needed to respond to growing demand or are in need of resources to relocate services to Whittlesea from outside of the area. Affordable office/program space in Whittlesea for instance is rare. This limits opportunities and the capacity of existing local agencies to extend the reach of their services and programs to a growing population as well as acting as a deterrent to agencies wishing to relocate services and programs into the area.

The inability of agencies to relocate creates a context in which valuable resources are wasted as workers travel to and from the area and results in missed opportunities by the agencies to develop sufficient expertise and knowledge about the area.

Whittlesea Community Connections believes that government has a strong obligation to ensure that growth areas have sufficient community and human service infrastructure to support the dramatic rates of population growth. Targeted capital funding to create a range of community service facilities are needed and we recommend capital funding be provided directly to community organisations to purchase, adapt or build facilities for growing existing services and delivering new ones.

**The Challenge for community infrastructure and governance**

Access to social and cultural activities, transport, and to health and community services, are fundamental to community wellbeing. Places to meet, learn, play and celebrate are essential to the health of a community and are in gross under-supply in outer growth suburbs. An investment in community infrastructure is needed to develop communities.

Given the projected urban growth anticipated throughout areas such as Whittlesea, it is essential that effective planning of key community, cultural and recreation infrastructure projects is undertaken. Examples of such projects may include:

- Community facilities – cultural centres, community centres, youth venues

Whittlesea Community Connections believes that community infrastructure development should be accompanied by a commitment to community governance and ownership of facilities, creating a direct linking government action with community action to progress community and government goals (Cavaye, 2004).

Unfortunately much of new facility development, particularly in new suburbs, at worst excludes community input, or at best, is undertaken with minimal or tokenistic consultation/involvement. The engagement of local communities in decision-making and local management builds on our belief that local communities have forms of social capital that can facilitate better community outcomes. The associational benefits arising from investment in community facilities to bring people together to share learn and connect with each other can reduce the inherent social costs of growth (Maclennan et al in Chisholm, 2011)

We strongly recommend that facility development is prioritised and is preceded by relevant needs assessments, feasibility studies and concept plans that fully engage residents in planning for their own community. An example of this is the concept-of an intercultural centre developed by the community of Whittlesea aimed at building relationships and connections between different cultures and new and
established communities. Whittlesea Community Connections has worked closely with the Cultural Bridges Community Action Group, made up of residents, that has progressed the concept over a 3 year period; successfully engaging the Council and the Whittlesea Community Futures Partnership (made up of 40 local and regional agencies). A feasibility study has been completed, through joint funding from the Council and state government, which has confirmed the need, support and options of the construction of a centre. Community engagement in and commitment to the concept is high and Council and agencies are engaged in such a way that the potential for real community partnership involving government and communities in joint decision-making, shared leadership and common goals is possible (Cavaye, 2004). The realisation however of this solution to a proven need with full community support is dependent on the planning and prioritisation of projects by government and its ability to provide or broker the financial investment needed.

Of recent times place-based policies have been developed aimed at building the local capacity and social connectedness of areas of high disadvantage. However their success is limited by the ability/inability of local areas to connect and integrate with a robust mainstream community and transport infrastructure. An approach that isolates place-based approaches from a broader investment in infrastructure can only deliver limited capacity building benefits. It is our view that it is unrealistic to expect that a relatively modest amount of investment at a local level (principally to establish networks and partnerships) to be sufficient to “catalyse a series of events” leading to major improvements in well-being for the poorest people in the most distressed communities within a limited time frame (Kubisch et al, 2010).

The achievement of meaningful change in disadvantaged and disconnected communities rests on social, community and economic infrastructure development (led by governments in partnership with communities). Without investment in infrastructure that allows communities to access services, supports, employment and education, significant and sustainable benefits for the health and well-being of the community will be limited. Whittlesea Community Connections supports place-based investment that integrates local capacity building with the responsibility of government to invest in physical infrastructure that supports the social and community well-being of a community.

Whittlesea Community Connections recommends that the State Government takes leadership and responsibility for working in partnership with local communities to

- Prepare for capital funding for the delivery of community infrastructure, including the identification and brokering of Commonwealth and private sector funding.
- Engage with key stakeholders, and not just councils and developers, through appropriate consultation strategies for the delivery of community-specific infrastructure plans.
- Establish meaningful partnership with the state and commonwealth major project teams in the development of community infrastructure projects.

The challenge of balancing new growth and urban regeneration in the outer suburbs

Disadvantaged established urban areas within growth municipalities are home to high concentrations of residents on below average incomes, have higher rates of unemployment and are often characterised by aging populations and receive higher numbers of new arrivals and refugees. The high support needs of residents of these areas coupled with aging and/or insufficient investment in community or economic infrastructure unsuccessfully compete for investment from growth councils that are forced to allocate scarce infrastructure resources to connecting and building communities on new green-field housing estates.
For instance, within Whittlesea the focus of growth has principally centred on the development of new suburbs, creating a need for the local Council to balance the investment required to develop the infrastructure to service them with the equally urgent attention needed to support and develop established urban areas in need of regeneration. As the new developing suburbs of Epping North, Laurimar, Mernda and South Morang grow at a rapid rate, local government is struggling to attract investment into areas such as Thomastown and Lalor (2 of Victoria’s most disadvantaged communities).

Whittlesea Community Connections believes that it is the role of government to ensure that as land is released for housing development through an extension of urban growth boundaries that more resources are also identified to invest in the regeneration of older disadvantaged areas such as Lalor and Thomastown.

Currently within Whittlesea there is underway a community engagement project, jointly funded by the State and local government, in Thomastown and Lalor. The Thomastown and Lalor ‘Shape Your Future’ project involves key stakeholders in the process of creating community plans to regenerate these 2 suburbs. It is hoped that support from state government will provide for a fully funded urban regeneration project to implement these plans. Without such commitment the work of the community, the local Council and resource-strapped local organisations will have been wasted. At present, no commitment is given by government bureaucrats as the direction of current government policy is unclear. Whittlesea Community Connections urges the government to commit resources to establish an urban regeneration project for these two suburbs in recognition of the high needs present and the substantial work already undertaken.

NEEDS OF REFUGEES AND MIGRANTS: PROVIDING FOR SKILLS TRAINING AND RETENTION (TOR (D))

New arrivals, particularly refugees, face additional barriers to community participation and social inclusion. “Factors such as awareness and understanding by the mainstream community, language, lack of interpreters in emerging languages, limited or no access to services prior to migrating and financial hardship create additional stress in the initial settlement period” (Rebuilding Social Support Networks in Small and Emerging Communities, WCC 2008). Refugee women are often the most marginalised within these communities as they attempt to prioritise their settlement within the context of family and childcare responsibilities.

Whittlesea Community Connections’ own research and work with new arrival communities shows a keen commitment to connect with the mainstream community. However there is still a feeling of isolation and lack of real connection. Racism is a factor in this for some and many participants in the above research indicated that this was a barrier to their connection, social inclusion and their ability to find employment and move towards independence and self-reliance. Whittlesea Community Connections recommends that innovative approaches to skilling and re-skilling refugee communities is required if they are to be assisted to full participation in the social and economic growth of the outer suburbs.

Whittlesea Community Connections’ ‘Women in Work’ childcare community enterprise is illustrative of a successful innovative approach that combines training, support and employment whilst simultaneously building participant’s confidence, self-esteem and employability. In this program, 37 refugee and new arrival women with multiple barriers to employment were trained in Certificate 3 and the Diploma in Child-care. To overcome the obstacles of poor English language skills, interrupted formal education as well
as their own childcare barriers a support worker worked intensively with the women to ensure a high completion rate for the courses. The women were also supported through the work-placement component of their training and provided with additional training on communication and interview skills. Once the women were qualified, they were offered casual employment (at award rates) to provide a multi-ethnic mobile childcare service. To date:-

- 21 women have completed certificate 3 and
- 11 women are completing the Diploma level qualification.
- The community enterprise element of the project has completed 50 jobs for 10 organisations and provided valuable paid employment experience to 12 women.
- 8 women have established themselves as self-employed family day-care providers and
- 5 women have found employment on a permanent basis with childcare employers.

The Women-in–Work community enterprise employs a strength-based approach which maximizes the skills and talents that new arrival communities bring with them to create appropriate employment opportunity. Their cultural and linguistic skills are utilized to create a multicultural childcare service which is well placed to serve the diverse community it reflects. This type of business model meets a service need and also increases the capacity of the community to support one another, at the same time creating employment. Social or community enterprises, such as the Women in Work Childcare community enterprise, focused on providing employment opportunities to those excluded from the employment market ensure that as communities grow those with barriers to full social inclusion are able to benefit.

We urge the state government to develop an approach to supporting social enterprises that compliments the Commonwealth Government’s strategy to increase social investment and support social enterprises through the Social Enterprise and Investment Fund.

**CONCLUSION**

In summary, Whittlesea Community Connections supports an approach to infrastructure and business development that is informed by an appreciation of the need to ensure that all (including those most vulnerable and disadvantaged) share in the benefits of growth. This includes investment that ensures people of all ages and abilities are not excluded from educational, employment, social and recreational opportunities. We strongly recommend that the government plan adequately for the provision transport infrastructure, community facilities, human service infrastructure and services in urban planning. We emphasise the importance of addressing social and economic marginalisation through initiating and supporting investments in the skills of disadvantaged residents by supporting social enterprises with a clearly articulated social purpose.
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