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**Yarra  
Ranges  
Council**

20 June 2011

The Secretary  
Environment & Planning References Committee  
Legislative Council, Parliament House  
Spring Street  
MELBOURNE VIC 3002

Dear Secretary,

**Yarra Ranges Council - submission to the enquiry into the contribution of environmental design to prevention and public health in Victoria**

Thank you for your letter of 2 May 2011 inviting submissions to the Legislative Council's inquiry into environmental design and public health. Yarra Ranges Council asks the Legislative Council inquiry to consider the following comments:

1. *Review the evidence of the contribution of the natural and built environments to the promotion of health and well being;*

Comment:

Yarra Ranges Council is aware that significant evidence exists about the relationship of built and natural environments to health and well being. Council urges the References Committee to take the evidence seriously and consider how it may best inform outcomes from the Committee's process in order to "move health into the mainstream of the planning domain" (Min Davis 17.6.2011).

2. *Identify and report on those elements of environmental planning and design which provide the most promising opportunities for improving health outcomes in Victoria;*

Comment:

Attention to growth areas must not be allowed to distract from the importance of improving existing urban environments. There is now a large area of urban and suburban development which contributes to poor health outcomes as a direct result of its physical form and layout.

One of the key determinants of health is the ability to engage in meaningful physical activity and social interaction. Many urban environments inhibit

walking. Possible improvements include new footpaths, pedestrian crossings and lower speed limits.

Building design itself can influence health. Council House 2 in Melbourne's CBD demonstrates how overall health can be improved by creation of an environment with good natural light and ventilation. State provisions for building design, supported by local planning provisions, can and should have specific requirements for healthy buildings. In particular, reducing the need for mechanical heating and cooling is important for low income households who limit the use of mechanical heating and cooling in extreme weather (either hot or cold) due to household budgetary constraints and as a consequence create or exacerbate health problems.

Another building design aspect affecting health is the ability for buildings to be used by people with movement impairments. New housing and major housing renovations should incorporate universally accessible housing features, such as wider hallways for wheel chair access and level entry showers. Council notes that the former State Government released a Visitable and Adaptable Housing Features Regulatory Impact Statement in 2010 which proposed such changes.

Public open space plays two major roles in public health. The first is to provide space for physical activity. The second is to provide for human interaction and social life. Open space needs to be designed and laid out so that it provides flexibility and value to a variety of users. Such open space must not only be well designed but also well located. It must be located where it can be reached and there must be good connections to the surrounding environment. Quality of open space will depend as much on connections to it as to the space itself.

Public open space is typically landscaped 'green' space, but need not be so in every instance. Sealed-surface spaces in urban environments, such as plazas, can provide quality space so long as they encourage movement and social interaction. As with 'green' open space, quality of plaza open space will depend on good location, as well as good edges – it needs to have active edges generating activity.

Urban ecology and biodiversity can play a direct role in human health. Excessively developed environments can lead to a sense of disconnection with the natural environment, lack of appreciation for biodiversity values, and erosion of environmental values (such as inadequate open spaces and fragmentation of habitat areas). Studies have shown direct links between individuals' mental and physical health, and contact with nature. 'Environmental' matters are often seen as being their own discreet category of attention, but they have a fundamental role in human health.

Attention to the issue of climate change has increased to a point where it is often perceived in isolation as a purely 'environment' issue. However, measures to address climate change can be direct contributors to physical and mental health. Reducing consumption through such means as

increased walking or cycling and growing food at home can help reduce financial stress as well as directly improve physical health. Measures to address health should look holistically at the range of relevant factors and not allow them to be confined to silos such as 'environment', 'design' and 'health'.

Increasing density of urban development is known to contribute to 'urban heat islands', although this can be mitigated by appropriate design responses.

3. *Assess the extent to which these factors are currently taken into account in environmental planning and design in both the public and private sectors, and their effectiveness, with particular reference to new growth areas;*

**Comment:**

There is latent capacity for Statutory Planning processes to consider a range of health related factors as part of the planning process, but this capacity is limited by a lack of commitment to health outcomes in the Planning and Environment Act and subordinate instruments such as planning policy.

There is opportunity for the Planning and Environment Act to make health and well being a specific outcome. This would enable the planning system to contribute to outcomes including walking routes, physical activity and other strategies such as the ability to influence or prioritise businesses which address healthy eating and food security, which can have positive impacts on long term population health.

The Planning and Environment Act 1987 allows greater opportunity for health outcomes than is currently implemented. Subordinate legal instruments such as State Planning Policy could be improved. There are a number of elements in Clauses 11, 15, 16 and 18 of the SPPF which could be amended to contain specific references to health outcomes (Refer to attachment A).

Engaging the private sector in partnership with the public sector in planning for new and in-fill developments is recommended. There is potential for planning provisions to be changed to encourage or require developers in activity centres to design developments so as to create street life and active public spaces.

There are substantial statutory challenges associated with securing appropriate public open space, particularly in activity centres. Administrative and financial assistance should be considered for the acquisition and development of public open space. Suburban development has been predicated on the basis that recreation space will largely be private rather than public, and the current 5% open space provision contained in the Subdivision Act 1988 was determined in this context. This standard may not be suitable for activity centres where higher-density development is to take

place. The mechanisms for determining appropriate amounts and locations of public open space, and the means for their procurement and development, should be reviewed.

4. *Determine opportunities to influence environmental planning and design for health, including consideration of the role of legislation, guidelines, and public private partnerships, and the costs and benefits of various options*

Comment:

Direct linking of Councils' Health Plans and Planning functions is seen as an important step forward. For example, there could be specific requirements that developments include provisions for health priorities such as physical activity, social connection, and meeting the health needs of children.

The authority of the Municipal Public Health Plan needs to be elevated in terms of influence on statutory and strategic planning. The Health Planning framework is valuable, with ongoing capacity building in evidence based approaches to be a continued priority.

The importance of health planning working in collaboration with urban design, strategic planning and other planning processes is not reflected in the resources available to local governments. Consideration of increased resourcing to this work is proposed.

5. *Provide recommendations for future planning and investment; and that the Committee will consider:*
  - *the effectiveness of the Environments for Health Municipal Public Health Planning Framework;*
  - *the State Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008, the Transport Integration Act 2010 and the Planning and Environment Act 1987,*
  - *International experience such as the World Health Organisation's (WHO) Healthy Cities initiative;*
  - *the consistency of policy approaches across the Victorian Government to promote health through evidence based environmental planning and design measures; and*
  - *the role of public open space in promoting health.*

Comment:

The framework Environments for Health is sound, but has limited impact on planning and regulatory processes in the current legislative regime. This can be strengthened through the current review. Integration as a principle and practice is a priority goal.

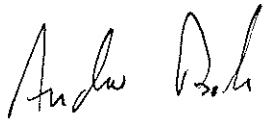
The World Health Organisation and other best practice examples can be used to inform this review and we suggest that there are a number of international examples that demonstrate how the health and statutory planning processes can work hand in glove (e.g. Minnesota).

Policy approaches across the Victorian Government have sought to do "the right thing" but achieving the desired outcomes has been difficult (Melbourne 2030 articulated health and environmental outcomes but struggled to achieve these). Considering the role of the Planning and Environment Act may be the critical change needed;

Quality and accessibility of space are crucial to their effectiveness. As with other strategies there are many quality open spaces in Melbourne which are highly used, valued and safe, such as Lillydale Lake, Warburton Rail Trail and in the inner city, Edinburgh Gardens. The success of these spaces should be sought to be emulated in new and redeveloped open spaces.

Yarra Ranges Council hopes that these high level comments will assist the Referencés Committee in the development of its recommendations. Please contact Council's Executive Officer, Community and Social Planning, Isha Scott on 9294 6429 or Kris Hansen in Strategic Planning on 9294 6195 should you require additional information.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Paxton". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Andrew" and the last name "Paxton" clearly distinguishable.

**Andrew Paxton**  
Director Planning Building and Health

Encl.

**Yarra Ranges Council - submission to the enquiry into the contribution of environmental design to prevention and public health in Victoria**

**Attachment A – Suggested changes to the State Planning Policy Framework**

SPPF Cl.	Suggested change
11.01-2	"Improve the social, economic, <i>health</i> and environmental performance and amenity of the centre."
11.02-3	This clause contains clear implication of health outcomes, and it would be beneficial to insert 'health or 'healthy' in appropriate sentences, eg: "Provide for the development of sustainable, <i>healthy</i> and liveable urban areas in an integrated manner"
11.03-1	"Ensure that urban open space provides for nature conservation, recreation and play, formal and informal sport, social interaction and peace and solitude." This wording sums up much of goes into 'public health', so it would be beneficial to link these outcomes with the concept of 'environmental health' by inserting the term in here.
11.05-1	Regional areas show lower overall health outcomes – 'health' should be a stated objective.
11.05-4	<p>"To develop regions and settlements which have a strong identity, are <i>healthy</i>, prosperous and are environmentally sustainable."</p> <p>In the phrase "Environment health and productivity", 'health' is used in context of land capacity and productivity. There needs to be reference to 'health' as a <i>human</i> factor.</p> <p>"Liveable settlements and healthy communities". This is a good summary, and should be applied to all settlements, not just those in rural/regional areas.</p>
15	<p>"Land use and development planning must support the development and maintenance of communities with adequate <i>healthy</i> and safe physical and social environments for their residents, through the appropriate location of uses and development and quality of urban design."</p> <p>** Enhances liveability, diversity, amenity, <i>health</i> and safety of the public realm".</p>
15.01-2	Strategies should include reference to health – ability and encouragement to move on foot or bike, and to have healthy social interaction
15.01-3	"To ensure the design of subdivisions achieves attractive, <i>healthy</i> , liveable, walkable, cyclable, diverse and sustainable neighbourhoods." This dot points sum up content of 'health', so use the word 'health' or 'healthy' should be used to directly link them
16.01-4	A new dot point should be added to Strategies: " <i>Provides healthy, liveable housing</i> "
18.01-2	"Locate transport routes to achieve the greatest overall benefit to the community and with regard to making the best use of existing social, cultural and economic infrastructure, minimising impacts on the environment and optimising accessibility, <i>health</i> , safety, emergency access, service and amenity."