

Environment and Planning References Committee, Parliament of
Victoria

Inquiry into the contribution of environmental design to prevention and public health in Victoria

Submission by Yarra City Council

June 2011

Contact:

Ross Goeman

Acting Manager Community Planning & Advocacy

Ph: 9205 5397 or 0417 152 226

Ross.Goeman@yarracity.vic.gov.au

Introduction

It is widely understood and agreed that good environmental design promotes health and wellbeing. The corollary to this proposition is that poor environmental design diminishes health and wellbeing.

As noted in the new Metropolitan Health Plan (May 2011), there is an ability to 'prevent and reduce much chronic illness and disease'. Urban design and infrastructure provision have a major influence on how people are active in their community. Physical activity and participation in community life are crucial to good physical and mental health – all of which are protective factors to the development or severity of chronic illness.

Environmental design includes:

- look and feel of a neighbourhood, its streetscapes, heritage and character
- ease with which everyone can move around – including people with restricted mobility, parents with prams or young children
- range of public spaces, parks and commercial spaces for people to meet, socialise, recreate.

It is also important to be mindful of the social determinants of health – the underlying factors that impact on health, including access to secure and appropriate housing, stable employment, access to affordable services and activities, education and access to affordable and nutritious food.

Health literacy is a further complicating factor – the extent to which people have the skills and knowledge to make informed choices about their health – both preventative health behaviours (such as healthy eating and physical activity), as well as managing chronic illness. Estimates cited in the Metropolitan Health Plan are that 59% of the Australian population do not have adequate health literacy, which is particularly higher amongst young adults and older adults.

Council's submission to this Inquiry articulates the challenges and opportunities facing the municipality and outlines some key areas where local initiatives could be strengthened through improvements in State Government policy and programs.

Yarra City Council, Council Plan 2009-13

Yarra City Council's strategic direction is set out in the Council Plan. An extract from the strategic objective *Making Yarra More Liveable* illustrates some of the issues relevant to this inquiry:

Strategic intent

Council will work to improve the services that affect the liveability of Yarra. Town planning, roads and transport, as well as waste management all impact on our local amenity. Continued construction and development, as well as sustained population growth, place significant pressure on Yarra's liveability.

Yarra today

Liveability is also about Yarra being a place where people are able to easily access and enjoy community amenities. To make the municipality liveable is to embrace the needs of people experiencing barriers into the mainstream economic environment. Social inclusion and connectedness make Yarra a liveable community.

Strategies

Council's work to achieve this Strategic Objective will include the following strategies:

- Ensure appropriate land use planning
- Advocate for public transport improvements
- Increase bicycle use through improved access and infrastructure for bicycles and pedestrians
- Promote improved community amenity and liveability in the context of the late night economy and other contested factors.
- Ensure access to, and improve, public space in activity and neighbourhood centres.

City of Yarra

Profile

Yarra comprises ten neighbourhoods: Abbotsford; Carlton North / Princes Hill; Clifton Hill; Collingwood; Fairfield / Alphington; Fitzroy; Fitzroy North; Cremorne / Burnley; Central Richmond; and, Richmond North.

Figure 1: Yarra's Neighbourhoods



Fast growth

Yarra has undergone rapid population growth over the last decade to reach 79,540 residents as of 30 June 2010 (ABS Estimated Resident Population). This was an increase of 10,593 people between 2001 and 2010 (a 15.4% growth rate). Between 2009 and 2010 Yarra was the 9th fastest growing municipality in metropolitan Melbourne.

Continued Growth

Yarra is forecast to reach around 98,000 residents by 2026, almost an additional 20,000 people in the next 16 years (for detail see www.id.com.au/forecastid/yarra).

In the Victoria Street East precinct (Abbotsford and North Richmond) an additional 3,000+ apartments are at various stages between design and construction, with an expected population increase of 6,000+ people. Other areas, such as Collingwood, Fitzroy North and Central Richmond, are expected to increase by 3,000+ residents over 20 years, while the Amcor site in Fairfield alone is expected to add an additional 2,000 residents.

Large Social Housing Population

Yarra has the largest public housing population in Victoria - around 8,000 residents living in some 5,000 dwellings. Residents are predominantly located on the three high-rise estates: Atherton Gardens (Fitzroy), Collingwood and Richmond North. The high-rise estates are very densely populated.

There are also many residents living in walk-up public housing flats (smaller blocks) across the municipality, as well as tenants of almost 300 Community Housing Association dwellings and approximately 70 rooming houses.

This concentration is positive in that it allows residents access to greater facilities and services, however it also concentrates a very high level of disadvantage in to small areas. Whilst there may be significant cultural and social diversity, there is definitely minimal economic diversity.

Population density in Yarra varies from the City average of 36 people per hectare (2006 Census data) to the high-rise estates where the density ranges between 202 and 329 people per hectare.

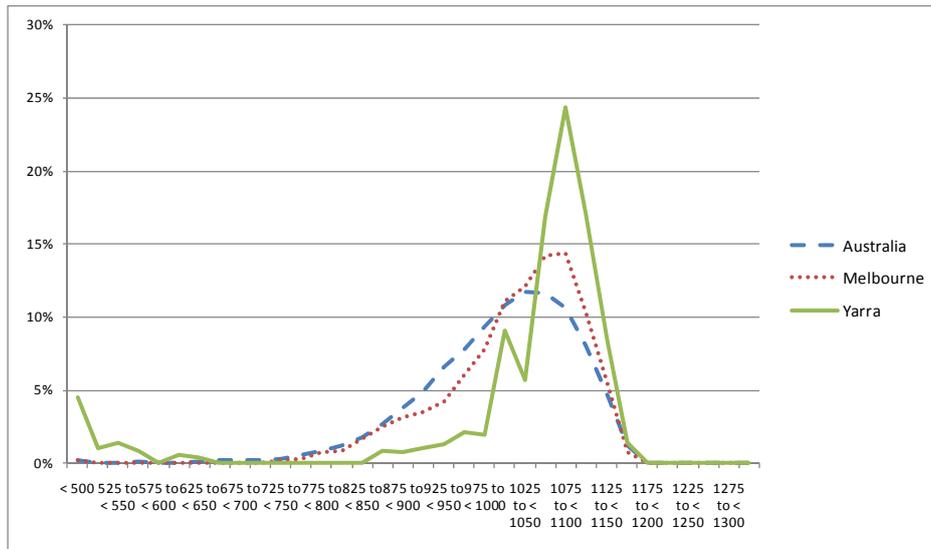
Polarisation – Disadvantage and Affluence

The *Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas* data (SEIFA), drawn from the 2006 Census, shows that Yarra has large affluent and disadvantaged communities, with very few residents in between. A value of 1,000 is the median for Australia, with a higher value reflecting relative advantage and a lower value relative disadvantage.

8.8% of Yarra's population live in Census Collector Districts (CCDs) with a SEIFA Index below 650 (very disadvantaged), compared to a 0.7% average for Australia or 0.4% for Melbourne.

At the other end of the Index, Yarra has over 83% of the population in CCDs with an Index of 1,000 or higher (advantaged), compared to an average of 59% for Australia and 68% for Melbourne.

Figure 2: Socio-Economic Indexes For Areas, CCDs



Based on Australian Taxation Office data, in 2007-08 the Yarra residents had the 2nd highest median wage in Victoria, having risen from 4th highest only 2 years earlier.

New Residents

Yarra has one of the highest turnover rates of residents in metropolitan Melbourne?. At the 2006 Census, 62% of residents were new to their address in the last 5 years, with 11% from other parts of Yarra and 51% from outside.

Council has started to survey residents in new apartment buildings (1-5 years old). Respondents universally talk about moving to their apartment for its proximity – to work, shopping, restaurants or entertainment, the active lifestyle, as well as the vibrant and diverse community they are moving into.

Active Transport

Yarra has the highest rate of people using active forms of transport in metropolitan Melbourne?, with 40% walking, riding or using public transport to go to work (2006 Census), compared to the Melbourne average of 16%.

Opportunities to Improve Environmental Design

Six actions that would assist in improving environmental design are outlined below.

Elevate local responses to be at least metropolitan-wide

While Yarra City Council can work on local approaches to appropriate environmental design, a metropolitan-wide framework would provide greater certainty and consistency. Areas could include:

- Open space contributions from developers
- Planning requirements for Environmentally Sustainable Design
- Framework for negotiating developer contributions for community infrastructure as part of major new residential developments
- Provision for social and affordable housing within major new residential development (potentially inclusionary zoning).

Understand impact of high density development in inner-city context

Inner-city municipalities are essentially reliant on converting existing land-use to open space and community infrastructure as there are few or no 'green-field' sites to provide this land. Further, the demand on existing open space and facilities is significant with sustained population growth – especially as new residential development contains little communal / open space compared to traditional low density housing stock.

A mix of residential, employment, entertainment and recreation spaces with sustainable transport is needed to ensure the desire and opportunity for people to easily walk, ride and use public transport for everyday needs.

There is also a need to retain (and increase) employment alongside residential development to ensure that the transport and infrastructure benefits of higher density development can be maintained. Losing industrial and business land will lead to more residents needing to travel outside the municipality to work.

Integration of social housing into new developments is also desirable. High concentrations of disadvantage, as experienced in Yarra, require long-term government support and management. Incorporating social housing into neighbourhoods helps to maintain the City's diversity and vibrancy rather than the current large housing estates.

Inner-city areas also experience intractable, complex, social problems such as illicit drug use, excessive alcohol consumption (both day-time and night-time), mental illness and homelessness.

Declining apartment sizes will reduce the diversity in buildings – more single bedroom apartments, or apartments with a nominal second bedroom (no windows or natural light) will reduce the number of families with children. A mixed community will expect a greater mix of spaces – child play areas and informal public spaces. Greater variety in dwelling sizes will also provide greater flexibility for the community to change over time – too many single bedroom dwellings restricts the mix of who will be able to live in them.

Engage residents and businesses in planning for new communities

A critical issue for this inquiry is how to build a more diverse community and improve open space, public realm and transport to achieve a vibrant and healthy place. Community planning requires there to be the opportunity for existing residents and businesses, as well as future residents, to keep shaping and evolving new precincts.

It is important that new development does not completely build out these precincts, that there is space that can be shaped to develop a sense of place and identity over time.

Continue joint use of State Government facilities

Greater use of public land and facilities is important for alleviating some of the contesting and demand for space. Continued State Government support to actively encourage schools, Office of Housing and other land to be available to the community is required.

In Yarra there are great examples of Neighbourhood Houses operating on schools and of extensive community gardens on Office of Housing land.

Improve collaboration on planning for vacant or underutilised State land

Again, with increased pressure to service and support a larger residential population, a more collaborative approach to planning for State owned land to meet local needs is necessary. Local government has limited financial capacity to purchase the scarce land – especially in inner-city areas – required for community infrastructure.

Greater support to learn from experiences of similar communities

It would be timely for the State government to work with Councils to bring together the different experiences and learnings from managing sustained population growth and residential development. Individual Councils and peak bodies, lack the capacity to ensure that the breadth of experience, innovation and learnings are shared widely.

Conclusion

Yarra's sustained high level of population growth and development was outlined, along with a description of the demographic, economic and social context in which this growth is occurring.

This submission also notes six actions that would assist to improve environmental design in Yarra, and therefore public health and wellbeing:

- Elevate local responses to be at least metropolitan-wide
- Understand impact of high density development in inner-city context
- Engage residents and businesses in planning for new communities
- Continue joint use of State Government facilities
- Improve collaboration on planning for vacant or underutilised State land
- Greater support to learn from experiences of similar communities