

Monday, 11 July 2011

Dear Mr Willis and Committee,

Submission to Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health in Victoria

Thank-you for holding this inquiry as there are many ways local environments can better support health and well-being for all people and especially our children.

The Victorian Government's interest in offering people opportunities for happier and healthier lives is very welcome.

Improving urban environments to foster health and wellbeing can also help Victorians live more sustainably and adapt to climate change, carbon constraints and peak oil predicted to soon end readily available cheap oil for transport and food distribution. Planning to provide local services, meeting places and natural areas accessible by walking, cycling and high quality public transport can reduce isolation especially for young and old people and those without cars.

The inquiry should also consider ways to create and enhance opportunities to enjoy nature, beauty, art and a shared sense of community in public places; in urban, suburban and country town environments.

Can you please consider the following specific issues, opportunities and recommendations as part of the inquiry?

1 Nature-based and active play in parks and schools

Metropolitan Parks and suburban creeks and Melbourne's Green Wedges offer some Victorians valuable opportunities to enjoy and experience nature – these should all be protected and expanded. However, these opportunities are not local to most Victorians and generally require car access ruling out most children having independent access.

1.1 Adding small areas of native vegetation with frog ponds, nesting boxes and other small habitat areas for local wildlife to local parks and school gardens would extend these opportunities to many more Victorians particularly local children.

Recommendations The actions listed below would expand opportunities for more people especially children to enjoy a little bit of nature close to home

- Provide Government funding and teaching support to schools to develop schools gardens with small bushland gardens for nature discovery and learning about local biodiversity
- Provide Government funding from DSE for schools to complete the Biodiversity Module of the ResourceSmart Schools AusVic Program – recent funding has been for the core module and waste – but children at my kid's school are most interested in biodiversity and planting playground gardens to attract lizards, frogs, butterflies, possums etc. Parents have raised funds from cake stalls to plant some gardens with indigenous plants from the Bayside Community Indigenous Nursery but lack the skills and funds for a more comprehensive plan to create sustainable, engaging and safe habitats where children can play
- Develop and distribute through the Department of Education a guide to creating safe frog ponds for schools and kinders and funding to install them
- Expand parks where local parkland is limited by reducing road space e.g. Gardenvale Park was created by closing a street and buying 3 houses to create an attractive local park. There would be many similar opportunities across Melbourne and in Victorian towns. A State program to encourage local councils to identify such opportunities and develop these would provide more space for local recreation, children's play and to reintroduce small pockets of nature in the city.

1.2 Play Spaces for Older Children – Most playgrounds in Victorian parks and schools provide for play by preschool aged children but fewer cater well for primary and high school aged young people.

Recommendations – expand play opportunities for older children by

- **Installing play equipment which challenges older children** e.g. taller climbing frames, small rock-climbing walls, flying foxes, skate ramps, basketball hoops for an informal game or to shoot hoops after school or on weekends with friends and family – many school basketball rings are removed after hours and many local parks do not provide a ring. State Government could assist in identifying ways to reduce controversy in local communities planning to install a skate ramp. A guide to designing an appealing skate facility that reduces perceived neighbour problems could assist.
- **Maintaining and upgrading local outdoor swimming pools** with diving boards and waterslides and teenage events – especially where accessible by public transport or from a bike path. Many recent council plans to building new large regional indoor pools away from public transport deny older children and teenagers easy access to local pools in summer – a cheap local summer recreation enjoyed by many generations of children and teenagers under threat in Victoria.
- **Opening school playgrounds** of both government and private schools for play after school and at weekends – often school grounds are the main local open space in communities and when these are closed after school hours local people have less recreation and play opportunities. The Victorian Government could make new funding for school conditional on providing some play spaces for local communities within their grounds after school hours.

1.3 School and Community Veggie Gardens – Several municipalities have great community food gardens which provide both healthy local food and a sense of community – this program should be expanded to more municipalities and include permaculture design teaching. Some larger school gardens could cater to both student veggie gardening and their local communities. An option to include food growing in the primary and secondary school curriculum could encourage more schools to establish veggie gardens. The requirement for a kitchen classroom and dedicated teacher time limits the opportunities for the otherwise fabulous Stephanie Alexander Kitchen Garden in small schools.

Recommendations – encourage the creation of at least 1 new community permaculture veggie garden in each municipality and encourage more schools to establish veggie gardens and review ways of including veggie growing and sustainable eating in school curriculums.

2 Urban Design and Transport Planning/Traffic Engineering for Walking and Cycling

Urban design is a key means for creating safe and attractive urban environments especially for people walking and cycling, accessing public transport and for children living fully in their local neighbourhoods.

2.1 The Safer Design Guidelines and Activity Centre Design Guidelines and Urban Design Charter are great documents identifying the value and key elements of good urban design that can play a key role in promoting walking and a sense of safety in urban environments.

Recommendation Require these documents to be more widely used in assessing development applications, road management and transport planning by local councils, VCAT, developers, planning panels, VicRoads, and by others with a role in public places such as utilities and public transport providers.

2.2 High Front Fences can create unattractive and unsafe streets for walking. Our family has experienced several dangerous incidents caused by high front fences - a personal assault pinned against a high fence when walking home from the tram on a dark winter afternoon, a car in a driveway on fire and no way to alert the household behind the high fence to call the fire-brigade and children knocked off bikes and scooters by reversing cars. High front fences also hide attractive gardens creating a boring walk more affected by passing traffic. The current planning scheme provisions and building regulations also operate in a perverse way encouraging high front fences on main roads precisely where more people walk to reach public transport, shopping centres and main local destinations. If traffic noise is a problem double glazed windows should be installed before high fences are considered.

Recommendation

Revise the planning scheme and building regulations on front fences to limit their height to 1m including on main roads to provide safe and attractive footpaths.

2.3 Structure plans for activity centres prepared by local councils can plan improvements to destinations by foot and cycling and accessing public transport, employment shopping and community services. Structure plans can guide new development to optimise the appeal of local public places and encourage healthy transport and create a sense of place and community. Unfortunately my local council - Glen Eira has resisted preparing structure plans or detailed urban design plans for any activity centre and as a consequence 3 major supermarket development including apartments and shopping complexes have been approved in the past 2 years with very poor urban design outcomes for the shopping centres, ad hoc development and inefficient use of prime land near public transport. Each development has ignored pedestrians and cyclists and instead featured car-parking as a key priority even within a Major Activity Centre with train and tram access. A structure plan for activity centres including railway land would encourage development of this land to promote public transport, walking and cycling and higher density development. A supermarket recently approved in the Glenhuntly Activity Centre plans to use railway land as a new at grade car-park with development turning its back on the tram and train and shopping centre to face this newly enlarged car-park - contrary to creating a safe attractive shopping centre accessible by healthy transport.

Recommendation Require and help fund local councils to prepare structure plans for all activity centres identified in Melbourne 2030 as Principal or Major Centres. Require the promised Public Transport Planning Authority to manage and plan its land to promote development in activity centres that supports public transport use, good urban design, cycling and walking and reduces car-dependence.

2.4 Planning Schemes offer many opportunities to create new environments and enhance established ones to improve health and well-being.

I am concerned that my local council - Glen Eira's Planning Scheme from the 1990's is seriously out of date, with limited consideration of sustainability, urban design, pedestrians, cyclists, development supporting public transport and reducing car-dependence. This limits opportunities to plan for good health, well-being and sustainability.

Recommendations

- Identify health, wellbeing and environmental sustainability as a goal for all planning including in the Planning and Environment Act and planning schemes
- Review opportunities in Planning Schemes to enhance health, wellbeing, sustainability, attractive public spaces/urban design, promote walking, cycling public transport reduce car-dependence
- Require revision of out-dated planning schemes.

2.5 Pedestrian Standards - Strengthening Australian Pedestrian Standards for exemplary design and more widely using them in road management, traffic engineering and new development would significantly enhance the attractiveness and safety for walking. Two local instances illustrate why stronger pedestrian design standards are required

- Yarra Trams recently installed a new tram wire pole in the middle of the footpath at the north-west corner of Glenhuntly and Hawthorn Roads in South Caulfield. This pole limits people's access to press the button to cross at the pedestrian lights and means that people with prams or wheelchairs are unable to safely get off the road onto the footpath. (Photo available if needed) When I raised my concerns about this poor pole location with Yarra Trams, Glen Eira Council and VicRoads I was informed that the 1990's privatisation of public transport services exempted the operators from complying with pedestrian standards. Similar tram poles block other footpaths along the Hawthorn and Glen Huntly Road Tram Routes.
- Ramps at kerbs are rarely the full width of the white parallel lines at traffic lights creating a step that can trip people. In Melbourne in Swanston Street in 2 recent instances I have seen people fall tripping up these steps - including a blind women who was in tears from her heavy fall flat on her face. The narrow ramp also makes crossing roads with prams and wheelchairs and children on scooters difficult. This unnecessary step should be avoided at all intersections. Pedestrian standards should be revised to require ramps to be the full width of the white crossing lines and all old crossing ramps widened. Stonnington Council has installed raised pavements continuing the footpath at grade along many shopping streets which is another good alternative. When I reported the narrow ramp concerns to Melbourne en City Council their engineer advised me that the ramps complied with Australian Standards and no action would be taken.

Recommendations revise pedestrian standards to provide exemplary pedestrian design requirements and

- Apply to all road managers, Councils, VicRoads, public transport operators and utilities
- Require no poles or other obstacles in the middle of footpaths especially at traffic lights
- Require pedestrian kerb ramps to be full width of crossings to match the parallel white lines across traffic lights or apply the Stonnington raised footpath over the road model.

2.6 Transport Plans

All transport plans and transport investments should prioritise with actions and funding the healthiest and most sustainable transport modes and aim to actively reduce car-dependence. All transport and land-use planning and new development should achieve the fullest possible integration between design for walking, cycling and public transport and good urban design. Priority should be given first to pedestrians (as the most universal, healthiest and sustainable transport mode), then cycling, then public transport and lowest priority private motor vehicle travel.

The Victorian Government should invest significantly in improving public transport to attract more people to using public transport and provide more frequent, connected and extensive services across all of Melbourne within the urban growth boundary and urban areas of Victoria's main towns. Previous Transport Plans lacked a clear priority for the healthiest and most sustainable transport modes and promoted car-dependence through new road projects. Peak Oil and carbon constraints in addition to health concerns require a new approach to transport planning in Victoria.

Recommendation

Develop a new Victorian Transport Plan that prioritises walking, then cycling then public transport and actively reduces car-dependence. Require this order of priority in all transport decisions by state and local government and by developers.

2.7 Walking plans have been developed by several municipalities and can plan improvements to walking facilities and environments.

Recommendation Encourage and fund every local council to prepare a walking plan and incorporate the plans into planning schemes for consideration when assessing new development.

2.8 Transport Plans for new developments

When considering development proposals, planning authorities should consider pedestrians and cyclists and public transport as a high priority for access and supportive urban design. Council and developers traffic engineers in recent supermarket developments in Glen Eira completely failed to consider access by pedestrians, cyclists or public transport and these expert traffic reports were not criticized by Council, VCAT or a Planning Panel. In one case earlier this year the developers expert traffic engineer questioned at VCAT was not even aware that Council had a Bicycle Strategy and admitted to only considering the planning scheme numbers for bicycle parking but not to considering safe and convenient bicycle access to that bicycle parking. Pedestrians were completely forgotten in the plan and a last minute amendment to the plans was made when a resident raised pedestrians as a concern. Council's failure to incorporate the Bicycle Strategy and the new Towards Sustainable Transport Plan limits the effectiveness of these strategies in providing environments that support cycling and other healthy transport options. Planning for pedestrians and cyclists should be given a higher priority at the outset in designing new development and retro car focuses traffic engineering should be rejected as inadequate for current development planning.

Recommendations

- Amend Planning Schemes to require new development to give first priority in transport to access by walking then cycling, then public transport and to reduce car-dependence.
- Require planning authorities to consider all walking, cycling and other transport plans in making planning decisions.
- Amend the planning scheme provisions for bicycle parking to require not just bicycle parking but consideration of safe and convenient access to it by bicycle and locating bike parking in the safest and most convenient place

2.9 Speed limits

Fast moving traffic is a serious inhibitor to walking and cycling. Reducing traffic speeds in activity centres, where people walk and cycle to public transport, activity centres and key destinations can make walking and cycling more attractive and safer. An urban speed limit of 60kmph in all roads other than freeways with reductions to 40km or 30kmph in activity centres and past schools would significant improve safety and attractiveness for walking and cycling. A 40kmph speed limit along shopping streets with trams would provide a safer environment for people to walk and catch the tram and discourage through traffic reducing tram delays. On key streets in Melbourne a 40kmph speed limit would help to reduce car use and car dependence.

School Crossing Speed Limits The current school crossing times finish too early with my children's school finishing at 3.30 for 3.45pm. With kids regularly playing with friends for a while and eating a snack, we usually leave the school at 4.30 when the school crossing speed reductions has ended at 4pm. The 2.30pm start is only relevant to the last day of term with a 2.30pm finish.

Our school had many years of difficulty getting a 40km speed limit because VicRoads argued that our main school gate was located on a side street and the front entrance was mostly used by our kinder students who were not entitled to a 40kmp speed reduction. This seems particularly unhelpful as kinder children are especially vulnerable when walking in busy streets and many students walk past the schools main street frontage home and to access the shops and tram. An expansion of the criteria for a school speed reduction is warranted to consider schools that have a side boundary to a main street, kindergartens and main parks with playgrounds that children use after school.

Recommendations reduce traffic speed limits to

- A maximum of 60 kmph in urban areas except on freeways
- 40kmph or 30kmph in activity centres and past schools, kinders and parks and along key cycling routes
- Revise School crossing speed reduction times to reflect school finish times and provide safer walking for students till 5pm

Thanking you,

Catherine Mc Naughton