



## **Nillumbik Shire Council**

### **Submission to the Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health**

#### **Introduction**

Nillumbik Council appreciates the opportunity to make a submission to the Inquiry into Environmental Design and Public Health.

Council fully recognises the contribution of the natural environment to human health and well-being. The integration of the planning and management of the natural and built environments is and should be undertaken with the specific purpose of having a similar positive impact on our residents. The sustainability of community and their local environment are intertwined; legislation, planning and management should reflect this.

This submission will therefore focus on our practice in integrating this planning, and will respond to specific criteria raised as part of the Inquiry.

#### **Nillumbik background**

Nillumbik Shire Council is an Interface Council in Melbourne's northeast, its population of 64,000 expected to grow at about 0.7 per cent per annum over the next 20 years.

As such, opportunities for environmental design in the shire will be mostly limited to retro-fitting existing public space and infrastructure, in accordance with our Major Activity Centre plans and Green Wedge Management Plan, all of which are available upon request.

Council and the community face a number of challenges, including:

- Car dependency, with 70 per cent of the working population travelling outside the shire to work each day.
- With 28.8 per cent of households owning three or more cars.

#### **Identify and report on those elements of environmental planning and design which provide the most promising opportunities for improving health outcomes**

The approach of Nillumbik to the pursuit and promotion of public health is governed by a number of documents, including the Council Plan and Planning Scheme and, most particularly, the Municipal Health and Wellbeing Plan 2010-2013. These are discussed below.

### Council Plan

The Council Plan includes the following in its vision.

*"Our Vision for Nillumbik is a shire which has:*

- *Safe, healthy and engaged communities .....*"

Within its Goals and objectives are many statements regarding community safety especially with regard to fire and road safety, as well as others relevant to public health such as the following.

*"1.1.15 Provide services that enhance public health and wellbeing."*

The following urban planning approaches all provide an opportunity to positively contribute to health outcomes:

### Nillumbik Planning Scheme

The scheme contains a number of statements which touch on the link between environmental design and health.

Specific policies that are included in the planning scheme that contribute to this include:

- The Medium Density Housing Policy and neighbourhood Character Policy which recognise how the built character of residential areas contributes to a sense of place for the community.
- Siting and Design Policy for Buildings and Works in non-urban areas which aims to ensure the built environment is designed in order to minimise fire and flood risk.
- The Eltham and Diamond Creek Major Activity Centre Policies, both of which encourage the development and design of the centres to create and focus community and leisure facilities within an accessible, attractive environment.

### Urban Design Guidelines for Eltham and Diamond Creek

Council has developed a set of design guidelines for its two Major Activity Centres to provide design direction for new development. The guidelines cover a number of design matters including responding to topography, vegetation and existing streetscape patterns, and of most relevance to health and well being - building functionality. In particular, the guidelines aim at designing buildings to reduce the impact on public spaces and footpaths, improving visual and physical aspects, improving linkages to open space, street networks and public transport.

### Urban Design Projects

Council has commenced planning for town squares for its major activity centres to provide for public meeting places. The development of such places is an opportunity to improve the image of both Activity Centres, but also to improve the amenity for shoppers and visitors, to showcase local design themes, including local indigenous plants, enhance the surrounding retail activity orientated to outdoor dining and social interaction and to create an identifiable, functional, safe and active space which generates activity after 5pm.

One of the major limitations with implementing urban places such as town squares is the lack of funding. Council to date has been reliant on joint funding from the State Government in order to have preliminary design concepts prepared for such projects. Significant funding for capital works will be required to build the town squares at Eltham and Diamond Creek. Public-private partnerships could also assist with implementing such projects.

### Place making

*Place making is a powerful and holistic process of understanding, facilitation, innovation and activation that results in unique, resilient and vibrant communities. (Village Well 2011)*

Nillumbik is taking more of a place management approach in how it manages the Shire and this could well be of benefit to other councils. Black Saturday changed Nillumbik Shire forever. The impacts on its citizens, the environment and Council will be felt for many years. It has provided a live demonstration of the importance of community resilience in this time of change. Nillumbik is vulnerable to change, given such characteristics as its high car dependence, transience, rural decline and economic leakage. Strengthening local connections through the social, economic, natural and built environments is critical to Nillumbik's future. It is also essential that citizens, organisations and Council are mobilised together as co-producers. These ideas are encapsulated by the concept of place making and are reflected throughout Nillumbik's many strategies and plans.

Internationally we see a convergence of disciplines around "place". Locally this is demonstrated through Nillumbik's bushfire recovery and renewal activities. For Council, place management is critical for integrating and brokering solutions. With a strong community development background, these positions help to mobilise community strengths and foster active and productive partnerships between community and Council.

Innovative methods of citizen engagement and place management that bridge the domains of social, economic, built and natural environments are critical to urban renewal and environmental design success. These need to adapt to the local context and utilise the unique energy and essence of each township. Recent Nillumbik strategies demonstrating this resilience and relocalisation agenda:

- Nillumbik Health and Wellbeing Plan (2010-13)
- Nillumbik Economic Development Strategy (2011-16)
- Nillumbik Green Wedge Management Plan (2010)
- Nillumbik Recreation Strategy (2011-19)
- Nillumbik Council Plan (2009-13)
- Nillumbik Municipal Early Years Plan 2009-2013

### Family Friendly Spaces, Places and Structures

Nillumbik's Municipal Early Years Plan (MEYP) 2009-2013 defines Council's role as a leader in planning and service delivery as well as advocacy on behalf of children, their families and the wider community. The MEYP priorities are based upon information obtained from research, commonwealth and state government policy directions, service reviews and community consultation. Further it supports the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) principles that local authorities have the responsibility and opportunity to change and impact the lives of children through the development of safe environments that nurture children of all ages with opportunities for recreation, learning, social interaction, psychosocial development and cultural expression.

### **Determine opportunities to influence environmental planning and design for health, including the consideration of the role of legislation, guidelines and public private partnerships**

Currently the *Planning and Environment Act 1987* contains a number of objectives for planning in Victoria. One of the objectives relates to the link between the natural and built environment and the promotion of health and well being *"To secure a pleasant, efficient and safe working, living and recreational environment for all Victorians."*

An opportunity exists to strengthen this objective or include a more focused objective within this act to draw a stronger link between urban design and community health outcomes.

The State Planning Policy Framework (SPPF) that is contained within all planning schemes in Victoria contains strategic issues of state importance which must be considered when planning decisions are made. Whilst several of the themes contained within the SPPF relate to health and well being, an opportunity exists to amend or add to the themes to strengthen the link between urban design and community health.

**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:**

Nillumbik Shire Council developed its Municipal Health & Wellbeing Plan 2010-13 based on a platform incorporating the Four Environments for Health (being the Social, Built, Natural and Economic Environments) and a Community Resilience framework co-developed by Council and La Trobe University.

This framework identifies the resources for resilient communities; among the five areas for focus Council identified the 'Connection to Place and Space' as a resource that influences the capacity of a community to be resilient in times of stress.

Integrating this Community Resilience framework with the four environments for health identified areas of investment and focus for Council to build the capacity of the community.

In this example, the built and natural environments integrate as asset areas for management and development; their relevance in health and wellbeing is understood in the context of the Resilient Communities framework.

For Nillumbik, this approach is particularly relevant for communities affected by bushfire and for the ageing community. Environmental design should of course be amenable to all sectors of the community. Places, spaces and structures should be friendly to the aged, the disabled and to children alike.