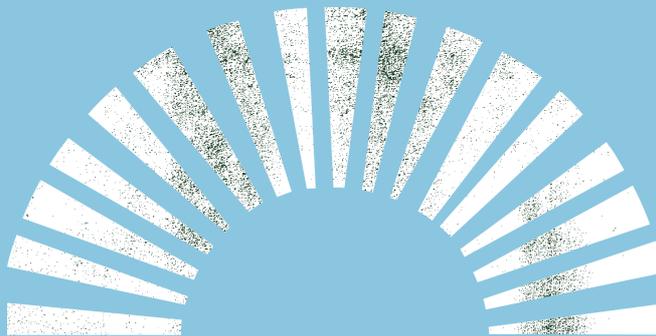




Merri Creek & Surrounds Visioning exercise Summary Report

July 2021



Merri Creek & Surrounds Visioning exercise

Background

The call for a Merri Creek & Surrounds Visioning exercise arose amongst a range of community organisations and community members, including CERES, Newlands and East Coburg Neighborhood Houses, Joe's Market Garden, the Men for the Merri Community and the Fawkner Food Bowl, who initially came together following the attack on a woman along the creek in East Coburg in 2019.

As a consequence of this terrible incident, Council engaged Monash University's XYX Lab to conduct a women's safety survey of the Coburg section of the Merri Creek between Bell Street and Moreland Road. The response level demonstrated strong concern in the community and a willingness of women to reflect on their safety and offer solutions.

While the Merri Creek Coburg Safety Report is an important response to this terrible incident, the community organisations and community members also recognised:

The unique values of the Merri catchment, the strong community interest and involvement that has developed around it, and the great things that Council and community organisations and individuals are already doing.

The opportunity to build on this to more comprehensively address issues such as safe spaces for women, indigenous connection, celebrating the creek through art and sculpture, rewilding, and embracing the urban food cultivation of the region as a leading example for other Australian and global communities.

The value of developing a shared vision to provide a framework within which relevant community collaborations can flourish.

In December 2020 Moreland City Council resolved to receive a report on the community proposal. Since then, Council officers have held conversations regarding developing a shared vision to provide a framework within which relevant community collaborations can flourish.

This report recognises the involvement of the community in determining goals, objectives and priorities for the care, management and use of the Merri Creek catchment. It was proposed that community consultation and engagement be modelled on the Collective Impact framework. In line with Council's Community Engagement Policy the Visioning exercise was proposed to be in the IAP2 range Collaborate and Empower.

Following a Notice of Motion presented by Cr Riley, a further Council report was presented in February 2021 endorsing a proposed Merri Creek Catchment visioning exercise. The report also secured funds to engage an appropriately skilled consultant to undertake this exercise.

Moreland City Council engaged CERES Consulting to Project Manage the Merri Catchment Visioning exercise during May - July 2021. CERES further engaged Ross Wyatt a subject matter expert in the Collective Impact framework to collaborate on the workshops and provide a lead in facilitation. The following reporting on the community consultation and engagement has been provided by Ross Wyatt, Managing Director Think Impact and Jane Burns, Director CERES Consulting.

Community Consultation and Engagement

Community workshop - preparation

In preparation for the community workshops, a database of 100+ key stakeholders in the Merri catchment was assembled and an invitation and background to the workshops was emailed the stakeholders. At this stage the general public was not included as it was identified that future consultation and engagement would be further shaped as a broader community-led vision.

CERES and Think Impact further engaged with key stakeholders, Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC), Friends of Merri Creek, Moreland City Council, Wurundjeri Council, and several networks in the catchment. There was a lot of engagement to assist stakeholders that the 'visioning exercise' wasn't to replace the long-standing and widely-shared vision for Merri Creek and the associated parklands such as the MCMC's Merri Creek and Environs Strategy vision for the Merri catchment waterway corridors:

To achieve healthy living streams flowing through attractive environments which provide habitat for native animals and are valued by the community as peaceful, passive open space havens. To protect the natural and cultural features of the Merri catchment waterway corridors through sensitive management which will provide a lasting benefit for the community.

Key stakeholders were assured that the community workshops were about value adding to existing work and effort, and honouring that achievement. The workshops are an opportunity to build on this to more comprehensively address issues such as safe spaces for women, indigenous connection, celebrating the creek through art and sculpture, rewilding, and embracing the urban food cultivation of the region as a leading example for other Australian and global communities. The value of developing a shared vision to provide a framework within which relevant community collaborations can flourish broadens the vision to a whole community as well as maintaining the vision for a healthy waterway and surroundings.

Community workshops

The workshops were modelled on the Collective Impact framework to Collaborate and Empower where relevant and provided opportunities for a codesign approach with key stakeholders.

Two community workshops, held on 24 May 2021 and 14 July 2021, have helped shape a community-led vision to guide the City of Moreland's planning for the future use of the Merri Creek and its surrounds. These workshops sought to answer three key questions:

- What are the key issues that need to be considered in scoping a shared vision?
- How should the vision be presented to maximise ongoing community engagement?
- What vision does the community hold for Merri Creek and surrounds in 2040?

The following is a synthesis of the key insights and recommendations.

A community vision for the future of the Merri Creek and surrounds

Communities, like ecosystems thrive when they exhibit diversity. It is no surprise then, that a rich diversity of perspectives shone through at these forums. After all, we *live in an urban world, built on a natural environment* so the balance between natural ecosystems and communities is a constant dance.

The Merri Creek is an iconic and vital waterway and ecosystem with more than 40,000 years of human interaction and use. It is the only inner Melbourne waterway that has not been largely concreted into a drain and it has a rich history of both degradation and community-led recovery. Many thousands of individuals, networks and organisations have spent decades deeply investing in the environmental restoration and preservation – notably, Friends of Merri Creek and Merri Creek Management Committee.

Environmental value – A vital biodiversity corridor

It was no surprise therefore that these forums universally regarded protection, restoration, and maintenance of the natural environment as an essential core of any vision for the future. Aspects that were raised in this area include:

- Protection and extension of biodiversity
- Indigenous species restoration
- Water quality
- Climate change
- Rewilding
- Wetlands restoration
- Identification and protection of significant vegetation
- Wildlife corridor
- Litter reduction/elimination
- Rights of non-human species

In terms of Moreland City Council's future planning considerations, their past, present and future support of ensuring Merri Creek's future as a *linear biodiversity corridor* is seen as essential to maintaining and enhancing the environmental, social and economic value of Merri Creek. This is underway and should continue. This can be viewed in stark contrast to planning decisions made in decades past which has seen the likes of Moonee Ponds Creek and Gardiners Creek be reduced to concreted drains under or adjacent to freeways.

Given the expectation that the *environmental* values of Merri Creek will continue to be built, the forums articulated a vast array of *social and cultural* values which should be actively supported. This seems to be the area where the restorative environmental work done over the last four decades can be leveraged to build a stronger and more resilient community around the creek. On this point it was noted that a colonial approach to waterways has been to adopt them as natural boundaries, hence waterways often have different state or local governments "facing off" from opposite banks. By contrast, First Nations peoples more frequently adopt hill crest watershed boundaries to define nations, thereby placing creeks at the heart of their lands. They become natural places to enrich communities. Food for thought...

Social and cultural value – A place to nurture, learn, share and grow.

Rather than environmental and community value competing for priority, the community expresses an opportunity for each to enable the other to thrive. In this forum they began to articulate a vision where Merri Creek is seen as a place to come together as a place to nurture, learn, share and grow.

This is a distinct opportunity to re-imagine the future of Merri Creek and surrounds. Allowing a small amount of hyperbole, we might be able to image a metaphorical *University of Merri Creek* – a place which enables a community of learning – a place where we learn about nature – a place where we learn about our history – a place where we learn about each other.

Social and cultural aspects that were raised in these forums include:

- Learning about and celebrating the First Nations living culture in the area
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander reparative justice
- Cultural safety
- Learning about nature (E.g. bush kinder, community events, interpretive tours etc)
- Active and passive recreation
- Immersive experiences (“smell the sassafras, taste the peppercorns, hear the wind and the birds...”)
- Cross cultural learning (experiencing Merri Creek through different cultural perspectives)
- Intergenerational learning
- Opportunities for community connection (bridging and bonding capital)
- A place that is shared, active and safe
- Identifying the creek as a connector
- Activating the spaces to preserve them
- Conferring legal status on the creek

A vision begins to emerge where Merri Creek becomes an exemplar of a place where our natural and urban worlds enable each other to thrive. We might begin to see it as follows:



How might the vision be represented? – *Dynamic, diverse and in-place*

To ensure the shared vision for the Merri Creek and surrounds can maximise and drive proactive community engagement, the community represented at this forum pointed to its need to be dynamic in how and where it lives. The vision also needs to embrace the full diversity of perspectives. Perhaps most importantly the vision needs to exist in-place (in and around the creek area and the community).

Vision 2040

During these consultations there was some tension between the notion of “conservation” where non-human species are conserved by limiting human access, and “immersion” where people are given opportunity and access to convene with the natural landscape. To help explore a community vision the forum participants participated in a future-casting exercise, placing themselves in 2040 and taking visitors for a walk along the creek. They were asked to describe what they experienced.

They described a “tantalising” experience where interest is piqued at every turn. It is a place where there are opportunities to explore the creek and its tributaries. It is a non-competitive, inviting space for all.

The experience is information-rich and interference with natural ecology is minimised using technology (think VR headsets, QR codes, apps etc). It is a delightful, immersive sensory experience where new things about people and nature are learned along the way. The First Nations People’s experience is prominent and valued.

Interestingly, some participants redefined the “creek” by recognising the creek is not just the waterway, but the entire regenerative system included in the catchment. In this way the corridor is much wider than we commonly view it.

Researchers from the world over come to Merri Creek and learning is a key component of its value.

Platypus are commonly seen, as are people of all ages swimming in the water. There is no litter and buildings are seen as glimpses only.

Bicycle transport is managed carefully and runs safely along the fringes. Interactions between bikes, walkers and wildlife are minimal and safe.

Wildlife is thriving, frogs, microbats, native birds and myriad other species in evidence.

In 2040 the complete length of the creek is connected with widespread collaboration between all local governments and other stakeholders. There are protected areas and these are supported with less-invasive infrastructure like overhead walkways and viewing platforms in preference to fences. The surrounds have expanded with numerous “pocket parks” integrated into the corridor. Wetlands have returned and are valued.

The city has no longer “turned its back” on the creek and dilapidated back fences are not seen. In fact, fences of all types are barely evident. The community is actively

stewarding the space and care deeply about its welfare. It is peaceful and private and public space complement each other well.

Our hypothetical 2040 visitors leave the space amazed, rejuvenated and stimulated by this urban gem. They have learned about plants, animals, and cultures and have seen how these can all thrive together. It is truly a place where our natural and urban worlds enable each other to thrive.

Recommendations

The vision is promoted, shared and evolved

This vision has arisen from a relatively limited engagement process with approximately 30-40 key stakeholders. The broader community must be more widely engaged and the vision as it stands should be considered a living expression which will grow and evolve with wider engagement.

An online conversation platform is instigated

To facilitate the above recommendation, it is recommended to establish an on-going public participation platform which promotes and enable a moderated community conversation over several years.

Council shares ownership of the vision across a number of Branches/Units including Community Wellbeing, Open Space and Environment, Social Policy, City Change

Merri Creek was widely seen as an enabler of community wellbeing and also has significant implications for Open Spaces and Environment. The collective ownership of the vision should ensure that environmental considerations are not considered in isolation of community considerations.

First Nations peoples are adequately represented and involved

Representation from the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Council on a steering group should be key to planning decisions into the future. Preliminary discussions with the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung Council have involved their Cultural Consultations Unit, Abbotsford team. Other first nations engagement has occurred through liaising with Moreland City Council's Social Policy and Projects Officer, Peter Svoboda and community members on the Council's Reconciliation Working Group.

Community representation is maintained and supported

This engagement should be seen as the start of a much longer process. Community representation should be actively supported in planning decisions into the future.

Stakeholder engagement extends the full length of the creek and into other sectors

While this is a Moreland initiative, Merri Creek does not recognise local council boundaries. As such, similar conversations should be held along the length of the creek. Further, other sectors, such as retail, industry and education should be brought into the conversation.

Ongoing, long-term sustained collaboration

Moreland City Council report will be a framework and reference document for ongoing long term sustained collaboration. The purpose and outcome could be a shared vision built by the guiding principles “Caring for People/Caring for Country”.

The Merri Catchment Visioning exercise will inform Council's 2021 processes for developing the Community Vision and Council Plan and this will be informed by Council strategies, policies, plans and reports including:

Municipal Public Health and Wellbeing Plan

Human Rights Policy

Statement of Commitment to Women

Merri Creek Coburg Safety Report

Reconciliation Action Plan

Food Systems Strategy

Active Moreland Framework

Moreland Nature Plan

Open Space Strategy

Urban Forest Strategy

Edgars Creek Conservation and Development Plan

Merlynston Creek Plan

Charles Mutton Precinct Plan

Integrated Water Management Strategy

Watermap 2020

Waste and Litter Strategy

Moreland Zero Carbon 2040 Framework

Integrated Transport Strategy

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