

## **City of Boroondara Draft Community Plan 2017 -2027**

### **Submission by Lighter Footprints Inc to the Council's request for comment on its draft Community Plan**

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the City of Boroondara's draft Community Plan. Lighter Footprints congratulates the Council on the extensive consultation process that it has implemented in order to create this strategy document. We see this as a significant exercise in community participation in establishing priorities that will influence activities for the next 10 years and a valuable contribution to democracy at the local government level.

#### **Who is Lighter Footprints?**

Lighter Footprints Inc is a group of concerned residents from the Boroondara and Whitehorse municipalities who came together in 2006 to see what we could do about the serious challenge of climate change. Our members and supporters recognise that climate change has been scientifically demonstrated for some years, and the extent of the challenges leads us to be impatient for effective action.

#### **The Community Plan as an agreement between Councillors and the Boroondara residents**

Lighter Footprints sees the Community Plan as an agreement between the City of Boroondara and its residents which articulates a shared vision for the municipality over the next 10 years to 2027 and how this vision will be achieved. This agreement will only work if it is underpinned by the principle of public office as a public trust.

#### *Public office is a public trust*

As holders of public office, councillors and council officers operate under a public trust whereby they are obliged to act in the common interest of the people of municipality. The principle is basic to democracy at all levels of government and relates to the ethical dimensions of public decision making; it can cover compliance with legal obligations as well as other broadly defined standards of behaviour.

In Victoria and Australia, this principle is expressed in a number of different ways. For example, it can be seen as supplying the ethical foundation for the development of our administrative law both in the courts and in parliaments. The principle is intrinsic to the oath that Councillors take at the time they take up their position on the Council. The Codes of Conduct that cover public sector officers at the State and Federal levels of government provide the environment in which officers operate at the local government level.

At the international level, this principle is reflected in the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, a binding international treaty that Australia has ratified and in our commitment to implement the United Nations Sustainable Goals.

It is within this context that we believe this Community Plan offers Boroondara the opportunity to join others in Victoria, Australia and internationally to enhance sustainability and curb climate change and its harms in mankind's common interest.

## Priority Themes: our Position on the specific elements of the Community Plan

Lighter Footprints welcomes the inclusion of several priority themes in the Community Plan that directly address the question of the environment. These are:

- Priority Theme 2: Your Parks and Green Spaces
- Priority Theme 3: The Environment
- Priority Theme 4: Neighbourhood Character and Heritage

We note also that all other themes have implications for the environment. Priority Theme 5: Getting Around Boroondara in particular raises important issues with respect to transport and the need to find ways to reduce carbon and other emissions.

We are concerned that:

1. The Plan adopts a limited interpretation of the concepts of sustainability and nature. This suggests a lack of appreciation of the need for all levels of government to take a more pro-active role in dealing with the rapidly growing impact of climate change and the pressing need for mitigation and adaptation measures.

The concepts of sustainability and sustainable development have been basic to the environment debate for many years. Sustainability encompasses the idea that *'...goods and services should be produced in ways that do not use resources that cannot be replaced and that do not damage the environment.'*<sup>1</sup> Sustainable development is defined as development *'...that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'*<sup>2</sup>.

Local governments were highly visible and active participants in the 2015 negotiations for the Paris Agreement. The Paris City Hall Declaration, which was signed by over 1000 mayors and governors from 150 countries during this conference included Australian representatives from the Cities of Melbourne, Sydney and other municipalities.

The United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals includes a target that by 2020, member countries will *'...substantially increase the number of cities and human settlements adopting and implementing integrated policies and plans towards inclusion, resource efficiency, mitigation and adaptation to climate change and resilience to disasters'*.

We are concerned that the onset of climate change has become so pressing that all levels of government must adopt a more active approach to curbing this problem and to protecting the interests of all parts of society. Sustainability cannot be dismissed as a peripheral 'green' issue directed at reducing energy and waste disposal costs. It is a real and present mainstream issue that must be taken into account in all Council activities and decision making.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sustainability>

<sup>2</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brundtland\\_Commission](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brundtland_Commission)

2. The strategies proposed by Council are quite modest in their scope and effect.

There is considerable opportunity for the Council to be more ambitious in its targets and its initiatives. We acknowledge that the City of Boroondara has already implemented a number of important measures such as with the building design and operation of its facilities. At the same time, we would encourage the Council to consider how it can take a more active role and extend its influence and effect into other areas.

3. The strategies should explicitly recognise the unique importance of local government in solving problems which affect peoples' daily lives especially in the area of climate change.

Climate change is likely to create significant damage of the local environment in which people live, cause health problems for many residents especially the elderly and young children and force people to make large alterations to their lifestyle. All of these circumstances will pose problems that will fall within the responsibility of local government.

The Council's unique position in solving climate change problems can take a number of forms including:

- As the first responder to the damage and other impacts caused by extreme weather events that will result from climate change;
- In the provision of leadership by modelling good environmental behaviour, establishing opportunities for new initiatives, increasing community awareness and representing community interests to other levels of government

We anticipate that the role of first responder could be a major expense to Council budgets and involve substantial Council resources in the protection of people's welfare and the repair and restoration of community infrastructure.

Leadership can be exercised through example, education, cooperation with other bodies including other municipal councils and through more effective advocacy of the State and Federal Governments to ensure environmental values are basic, mandatory considerations in all decision making.

4. In those cases where environmental matters are not directly recognised, we believe it will be essential to have in place mechanisms that address competing agendas within these themes to ensure the adequate reflection of environmental values.

We welcome the recognition the Plan gives to health priorities and their links with the seven priority themes of the Plan. We believe that greater recognition needs to be given to the impacts that climate change will have on the health of all members of the community and in particular the effect of extreme temperatures.

We agree that the Plan will require continual evaluation and refreshment throughout its ten-year life. This should involve regular consultation and reporting back to the community to ensure accountability. It should also be done by evaluators

independent of the Council and in ways that facilitate scrutiny and complete transparency.

We acknowledge the limits to Council's legislative authority in a number of areas but remind the Council that it can achieve a significant amount through skilled advocacy based on high quality evidence; by working together with like-minded organisations such as other municipal governments and their umbrella organisations; and by harnessing the passion of the local community to bring about change.

### **Framework for the implementation of priorities, strategic objectives and strategies**

We acknowledge the Council's initiative to seek community input to establishing a set of priorities to guide the City's decision making over the next years. Faced with limited financial resources, the Council must find a robust and sustainable way to allocate these funds to reflect both Council responsibilities and community preferences. With many competing claims on these resources, the challenge is to assess the relative strength of these claims. Community engagement has been found to be particularly effective in reconciling competing priorities.<sup>3</sup>

Action needs to be taken to ensure these priorities, strategic objectives and strategies remain continuously and immediately relevant to Council decision making throughout the ten years of the Community Plan.

This aspect has been addressed to some extent in the section of the Community Plan entitled *Evaluating and Refreshing the Plan*. We note the Council's intention to publish a comprehensive set of indicators in the Council Plan 2018-21 to be reported against in the Annual Report. We support this initiative because the indicators will facilitate the values of open government including accountability and scrutiny.

It is essential that this monitoring and reporting be done more often than once a year to ensure that decisions are evaluated in a timely manner, problems addressed immediately and the community is kept informed.

#### We recommend:

The establishment of a framework that:

- captures all decisions relating to the use of Council resources
- is an essential and necessary step, easy to comply with and does not add unnecessary layers of bureaucracy and expense
- establishes mechanisms that facilitate community participation on a continuous basis
- incorporates procedures that require frequent and regular reporting on progress and outcomes and uses precise and quantifiable measures that are specific to the task, relevant and timely.

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<sup>3</sup> Victorian Auditor General's Office (2015) *Public Participation in Government Decision-making*. Better Practice Guide.

## **Specific Priority Themes**

### ***Priority Theme 1: Your Community, Services and Facilities***

We support the Strategic Objective for this theme: the provision of community services and facilities which are high quality, inclusive and meet a variety of needs now and into the future. At the same time, we consider that specific recognition should be made of the risk that climate change represents for the achievement of this objective. To adequately manage this risk, Council must take precautions which position it effectively to address the adverse effects in a timely and effective way.

Ten years is a substantial period of time in which many things can and will happen. To design a Plan that remains effective and relevant over this timeframe, it must have the flexibility to be able to respond to changing circumstances. We are already seeing trends in weather patterns including reduced rain and increased extreme weather such as heatwaves where the temperature is above 35 degrees C for many days. We are also seeing rapid changes in technology and shifts in the attitudes and values of the community and the commercial and business world as awareness of climate change grows.

#### We recommend

That the strategic objective for this theme be extended to:

- adopt a timely and deliberate approach to the management of risk that recognises the size, potential damage to the community and Council's capacity to contribute to the management and amelioration of this risk
- ensure that these services and facilities have sufficient flexibility and responsiveness to be able to meet the changing demands caused by the growing pressure of climate change on the environment.

### ***Priority Theme 2: Your Parks and Garden Spaces***

Neither the Strategic Objective for this priority theme nor the related strategies give recognition to the important role that parks and garden play in the mitigation of or adaptation to climate change. Vegetation of all forms is important in drawing down carbon from the atmosphere; trees make a large contribution to lowering temperatures in their immediate vicinity and providing shade.

At the same time, these important community resources will be detrimentally affected by climate change through increased temperatures and reduced rainfall. It is likely that we will see large scale deaths amongst local tree cover as weather patterns change.

We note that the City of Boroondara has sought community response to its Draft Tree Strategy. We are aware of the submission made by Ian Hundley to that process and support the views he has expressed.

#### We recommend:

That a further strategy be added to this theme to document the existing tree cover and to investigate the effect of climate change on the health and diversity of the vegetation cover throughout the municipality. This would include the identification of ways to preserve the existing trees and other plant life, establishing regimes to

protect immature trees and choosing plant and tree species best suited to the changing environment.

### ***Priority Theme 3: The Environment***

We welcome the importance the community has given to this theme and support the strategic objective identified. We are disappointed, however that it does not mention the huge challenge of climate change that is confronting our society and our decision makers at all levels.

We see the concept of sustainability as a basic value and primary driver for all action directed at responding to climate change. At the same time, the concept will be ineffective unless it is coupled with a strong commitment to action that goes beyond creating balance and harmony between using natural resources and minimising the damage this inflicts on our natural surroundings.

In designing actions to achieve sustainability, the policy must go beyond what is being proposed in the various strategies listed in the Plan under this theme. While we welcome all these actions, we encourage the Council to adopt a more pro-active program that is motivated by more than the pursuit of efficiency in resource usage, waste minimisation or conservation of the natural environment.

Strategy 3.1 is a good example of the potential inherent in the strategies listed under this Theme. We encourage the Council to explore the many opportunities for building community capacity with an open mind and willingness to consider innovative, imaginative measures and adopting a time frame for managing risk and cost considerations that reflects the nature of the problem being addressed.

We recommend:

That the concept of sustainability underlying the proposed strategies in Priority Theme 3 be extended beyond a focus on achieving efficiency in resource usage, waste minimisation and conservation to cover the challenge of climate change and take advantage of the capacities demonstrated by local governments to develop and execute high quality solutions to curb this problem.

### ***Priority Theme 4: Neighbourhood Character and Heritage***

This theme reflects the conflicting values and agendas of different groups within the City of Boroondara, some of whom are opposed to any development that threatens the long-standing character of this area and its heritage. Others value these aspects while recognising the need for change that is sympathetic but responsive to the needs of a rapidly changing city faced with environmental and population challenges. Building design and planning permits are the point where much of this division is played out.

We support the seven strategies listed under this theme with some reservations with respect to the balance they adopt between preserving heritage and encouraging development in response to changing needs and influences.

We also have a major concern with current planning and building controls which underpin these strategies. These controls lack any substantial recognition of the

notion of climate change and the contribution residential construction can make to increasing as well as adapting to this threat.

Particular issues that have been ignored by these controls include;

- the waste of embedded energy in buildings that are demolished rather than renovated and/or extended
- the massive footprint of many new buildings and poor internal design which contribute to wasteful energy consumption and water usage
- the way a new dwelling and its associated underground structures and cramped surrounds interferes with the capacity of rainwater to seep into the water-table and increases flows into the stormwater system; and
- the lack of external space to grow trees or other vegetation to provide shade, lower temperatures and ameliorate climate change.

This deficit in the current planning and building controls has seen the proliferation of huge, ugly and poorly designed 'McMansions' designed to maximise internal space and making no concessions to the local streetscape or their environmental impact.

To counter this sort of development, planning and building controls should be formulated in ways that facilitate increased innovation in building design and construction. This includes design that is energy efficient and not reliant on additional air-conditioning or heating; and encourages the use of materials and techniques that are environmentally friendly.

We are aware that Boroondara participated in the initial consultations for the Sustainable Design Assessment in the Planning Process scheme. This scheme is intended to provide a framework that municipal councils can incorporate into their planning provisions to ensure environmental factors are considered prior to the granting of development permits. We are disappointed, however that the Council has not incorporated this process either formally or informally into its development permit process. In contrast, many councils in Melbourne and throughout Victoria have adopted this scheme.

We hope that Strategy 4.5 which provides for the introduction of environmentally sustainable design policies and principles into the Boroondara Planning Scheme to facilitate sustainable development will rectify this deficit. These principles can be used to create a well-designed, environmentally sensitive and efficient residence at little additional immediate cost and at considerable savings in operating costs over the long term.

Planning Controls can also contribute to greater environmental sustainability through Zoning that encourages greater density around shopping centres and transport hubs.

We recommend

- That the strategies make recognition of the importance of high quality building design in creating residential developments that respond effectively to climate change.
- That the Council look to ways to increase the effectiveness of its advocacy of State and Federal Governments for changes in legislation and regulation of

building codes and planning processes to incorporate environmental values to ameliorate and mitigate climate change

**Priority Theme 5: Getting Around Boroondara**

Private transport and especially petrol driven cars are major contributors to carbon emissions that lead to climate change. Accordingly, we welcome the focus in this Priority Theme on travel options that are environmentally sustainable, reduce road congestion and encourage public transport, cycling and walking.

We recommend

That you include a further strategy designed to reduce people's reliance on private petrol driven cars which would explore initiatives such as electric vehicle charging stations, temporary preferential parking for electric vehicles and further facilities for car share schemes.

**Priority Theme 6: Your Local Shops and Businesses**

As part of creating a 'vibrant local economy and shops that are accessible, attractive and a centre of community life', this Theme should also make recognition of the effect that climate change will have on these areas.

Climate change is bringing with it longer heatwaves and sudden torrential downpours. Local shopping centres will need to provide infrastructure and planted vegetation including trees that give shading and protection from the hot sun and heavy rain.

Shopping centres should also be designed to reduce car usage and encourage greater use of public transport, walking and cycling. An example of what Council could do under this objective would be the closure of part of Maling Road to traffic.

We recommend

That Strategy 6.1 (Improve and upgrade the amenity of local shopping centres) be expanded to include the inclusion of infrastructure, trees and other vegetation to provide protection for users of the centre from the high temperature and heavy rain caused by climate change.

**Priority Theme 7: Civic Leadership and Governance**

The Strategic Objective for this theme is '*Ensure that ethical, financial and socially responsible decision making reflect community needs and are based on principles of accountability, transparency, responsiveness and consultation*'.

The values expressed in this objective are central to good government and to a healthy democracy. The six strategies will contribute to effective scrutiny of Council decision making and to responsible financial management.

Civic leadership encompasses the need for Council to reflect the needs of the local community to other levels of government and to advocate for change in those areas where it does not have primary authority. Too often change at those other levels has been blocked by lobbying by vested interests.

This can lead to outcomes that are contrary to the public trust principle that should motivate all holders of public office at all levels of government. As the level of government that is closest to the everyday lives of people, local government is in the best position to identify the common interest of its community.

We recommend:

That the Strategic Objective for Priority Theme 7 include mention of the 'Public office is a public trust' principle to reflect the Council's obligation to act in the common interest of the people it represents.

## **Conclusion**

We have already seen a number of good initiatives on the part of the City of Boroondara and are aware that officers are working on many other proposals with respect to the environment. We encourage Councillors to look positively at adopting a more pro-active agenda to addressing climate change and incorporating this in the Community Plan for the next ten years.

This approach would offer a range of advantages to Boroondara including:

- long term benefits to the City's budget by reducing the cost of the Council's role as first responder to damage caused by climate change;
- enhanced reputation of the City as a leader in identifying high quality solutions in a timely and responsible manner while managing the risks associated with climate change;
- more effective advocacy by working with other like-minded organisations and through the use of high quality evidence to make a stronger and more persuasive case for change;
- a policy agenda that is attractive to members of the business community because of its capacity to respond to challenges as they arise and readiness to adopt timely and well managed solutions
- economic benefits arising from the new employment that will result as Council initiates things that build on opportunities arising from climate change solutions