

Cr Jane Addis
Mayor
City of Boroondara

City of Boroondara. Proposed Budget 2022-2023

This submission is made on behalf of Lighter Footprints Inc, a large group of concerned residents mostly from the City of Boroondara who came together in 2006 to work together to meet the critical challenge of climate change. Our members and supporters recognise that climate change has been scientifically demonstrated; that it has become an existential threat to the future of our world; and requires urgent and decisive action by all levels of government.

Lighter Footprints congratulates the City of Boroondara on adopting a Climate Emergency Declaration in September 2021 and for putting in place a Climate Action Plan. Both these initiatives have reassured our community that the Council takes the climate crisis seriously. We note that this commitment is recognised in the current Budget in a number of ways.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Proposed Budget for 2022-23. While we support many of the proposed funding initiatives, we have concerns about a number of aspects including:

- the lack of any change from previous years in the way these budget consultations are conducted to address the absence of meaningful community engagement with this process;
- the lack of detail on initiatives funded by this Budget and the effect this has on the community's capacity to assess their suitability;
- the overall low level of funding for the Climate Action Plan, that there may be an underspend in 2021/22 of the allocated funds and the possibility that any such underspend will not be rolled over to 2022/23;
- the absence of funding for certain initiatives that we consider important.

We request that a representative of Lighter Footprints be given the opportunity to make a verbal presentation to the Council Meeting considering community submissions.

Yours faithfully

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Lighter Footprints wants greater community engagement with Council activities including the formulation of the Annual Budget

Lighter Footprints regards local government as a significant part of Australian democracy. To fulfil its role effectively, councils rely on an informed and involved community that understands and values the work of its local council.

It is very disappointing to us that there is apparently such a low level of interest amongst Boroondara residents with council matters. Very few people attend regular council meetings unless it relates to a particularly contentious topic. Consultations for the 2021/22 budget attracted only 37 submissions.

This level of disengagement must be addressed and changed.

The matters that Council deals with have a significant impact on people's everyday life and have a substantial effect on the larger community. As the first responder in crises and the closest level to people's everyday life, the relevance of local government will continue to expand. Local government will also continue to grow in reach as other levels of government increasingly call on councils to deliver more of their programs.

We want to do more than just give feedback on the Proposed Budget. We want the Boroondara community to be active participants in formulating this significant document.

In strategic planning terms, the Annual Budget can be considered as the roadmap for implementing the vision and strategic framework of the Community Plan and Council Plans.

In these rapidly changing times, the vision and goals set out in the Community Plan (reviewed every 10 years) and the Council Plans (reviewed every 4 years) can no longer be seen as adequate reflection of the community's current and emerging priorities. They can only be seen as a broad strategic framework to guide the implementation planning that takes place during the development of annual budgets.

More responsive, interactive and timely approaches are needed for the community to be involved in the development of the Annual Budget. This requires methods that enable residents to become actively involved in the choice of possible projects, to collaborate with officers in the development of bids and to experience a degree of empowerment in how the community vision is achieved.

How to get greater community participation in budget consultations?

We are aware that other Councils are exploring or have adopted measures that extend the way they conduct their budget consultations to encourage greater community participation. We refer you to the work of the City of Greater Shepparton at <https://shaping.greatershepparton.com.au/2022-2023-budget>.

Shepparton began its budget consultations in November 2021 calling for feedback from the community on what they would like to see in the 2022/2023 and future

budgets. In the invitation to their local community to contribute to the consultations, they stated:

Council is changing the way they do community consultation for next year's Budget and have included a community feedback phase ahead of the document being drafted early next year.

Council decided to hear from the community before the draft Budget was created to better understand the needs of residents and find out what the priorities are in the next financial year.

In Stonnington, community engagement around their proposed budget for 2022/23 started in late 2021 using "... a new online budget simulation tool to better explain our budget planning process and better involve our community in shaping the priorities." This approach was seen as helping "... to increase engagement at the early stage of the budget preparation, with hundreds of submissions providing insight from people across Stonnington."

In November 2021, the City of Yarra invited community participation in preparation of their budget, stating that:

Working in partnership with community to identify priorities, will allow Council to make important financial decisions, balance current and future needs, while also ensuring Yarra is financially sustainable well into the future.

The timing of these consultations is critical.

The consultations should be conducted at a time when council officers are beginning to identify potential projects and develop bids for the next budget. This should be before the various council departments begin negotiations on relative priorities.

Consultations should start no later than November and continue into February. To leave it until April is much too late in the budget cycle for any opportunity for meaningful change or revision. In particular, it is much too late to include new bids which may have community support.

Meaningful consultations depend on information that is sufficiently detailed, accessible and understandable by all parties

The Proposed Budget is presented for consultation as a high level, summary report that meets all the requirements of the Local Government Act and the Local Government Model Financial Report. Expenditure is described in broad terms with nothing about the nature of the particular project being funded.

In the Budget's current form, it is not possible to assess whether any specific item of expenditure represents a good use of available funds, what specific initiatives are being funded or whether this is the best way to meet the particular need. More detail must be made available either in this document or by other means so the community can judge whether they support the approaches being taken.

There are many ways that this information could be presented so that it can be more meaningful. For example, Bayside includes a Q&A facility. This includes a list of Frequently Asked Questions on things like Why is Council increasing rates; What new initiatives are included in this year's budget; and Which projects have been

deferred and not included in this budget. This is followed by a facility for people to ask their own questions and identifies who will be listening. Shepparton residents can also request a virtual meeting with Council staff.

Graphics can help but need to address a wider range of questions than those currently on the Boroondara website. Greater Shepparton has one graphic to illustrate how the Council spends \$100, one to show where the money comes from and a third which gives a number of 'Success Stories' ie projects taken up by the Council that came out of suggestions by the community.

Recommendation

We recommend:

- Boroondara begin budget consultations in the first half of the current financial year.
- These consultations employ the range of deliberative engagement techniques beyond informing and consulting to include involvement and collaboration as described in Boroondara's Community Engagement Policy and on the Victorian Local Governance Association website here: <https://www.vlga.org.au/resources/deliberative-engagement-councils> .
- Attention be given to more effective ways to present information about the Budget in order to stimulate open discussion by the community about the Budget's overall structure and specific initiatives.

Council meetings including ward meetings

The low public attendance at regular Council meetings and the lack of regular ward meetings reflects a lack of community engagement in municipal matters and inhibits discussion and debate about important local issues. Council meetings and ward meetings are important because they can encourage greater involvement and sign on by residents. This increased community participation can also assist the Council to carry out its work more effectively.

The way Council meetings are currently conducted provide little incentive for people to attend. Points that need to be addressed include:

- the unwelcoming layout of the Council Chamber. The placement of the front table where the Mayor and senior officers sit is quite intimidating and gives the room a court like appearance. Depending on where they sit, people in the public gallery often find they cannot clearly see each and every councillor;
- the low quality of the acoustics in the Council Chamber. Aspects such as the high roof in the Chamber, and the placement of the public gallery in what is virtually an ante-room off the Chamber make it difficult to clearly hear much of the discussion;
- the poor quality of debate and the ready acceptance of agenda papers prepared by Council officers on most matters brought to the meeting for decision;
- the limitations placed on public question time including the requirement that questions can only relate to matters on the agenda and which have previously been submitted to Council officers for a response;
- the lack of respect shown by some Councillors to other Councillors and to questioners with whom they may have a disagreement

- the reluctance of some Councillors to conduct ward meetings especially when requested to discuss sensitive issues.

Recommendation

We recommend:

- Provision be made in the 2022/23 Annual Budget to investigate and implement improvements to the Council Chambers that address poor acoustics and layout of the Chamber and the public gallery.
- Funding be provided to individual Councillors to conduct regular ward meetings open to all people living in or working in that ward.

The Council as a leader in reducing community emissions

We acknowledge the work done by Boroondara Council to reduce emissions related to its own activities. Such emissions however, represent only a very small fraction of all emissions attributable to this municipality. We want to see the Council adopt a more pro-active leadership role in helping the community address this difficult problem of reducing its level of emissions.

The Climate Action Plan

The Proposed Budget identifies two line items with respect to the implementation of the Climate Action Plan (CAP) in 2022/23:

- An allocation of \$1 million as part of “... *Progress towards the targets to reduce Council and community emissions established in the Climate Action Plan by implementing the actions detailed in the Climate Action Plan Implementation Plan for 2022-23.*”
- Works to be performed using existing resources to “...Enable monitoring of community progress towards the Community emissions targets in the Climate Action Plan through the implementation of a community emissions measurement model.”

We are concerned about two aspects relating to the funding of the CAP. Firstly, the annual allocation of \$1 million is a very small amount to cover such a serious challenge. It is also a tiny allocation when compared to the overall bottom line of the Budget. If we do not address this crisis with increased determination now, it will become much more costly in the future. A significantly larger allocation now would enable the Council to address this challenge with more ambition and effect and ensure that future responses will be more manageable and less costly.

Secondly, we are concerned that there may be an underspend of the \$1 million that was allocated to the CAP in the 2021/22 Budget. This may include funds intended to employ staff to administer specific aspects of the CAP. If funds are not totally spent in 2021/22, we believe that they should be rolled over into the following year in order to retain the total allocation of funds over the full 10 year period of the Plan.

Request for further information

We request that:

- Detailed information be provided as to how this allocation of \$1 million is being spent on specific initiatives in 2021/22 and what impact each was assessed to have on the reduction of emissions.
- Detailed information be provided on what specific initiatives from the CAP Implementation Plan will be funded in 2022/23 and what actions will be taken.

Recommendation

We recommend:

- All unspent funds allocated to the Climate Action Plan in any one year be rolled over to the following year to ensure that the total budget continues to be maintained at no less than the level originally identified for this program.
- Active consideration be given to substantially increasing the level of allocation to the CAP to enable a broader and more ambitious program of initiatives in its earlier years.

Environmental sustainability initiatives

We welcome the inclusion of an allocation of \$1,593,000 to undertake a range of Environmental Sustainability initiatives. These include

- helping the Boroondara community live more sustainably in response to emerging environmental challenges (e.g. climate change, water shortage, biodiversity conservation);
- promoting sustainability within built and natural environments in Boroondara;
- developing and implementing policies and strategies that set direction in environmental management, public space improvements, conservation of natural resources and sustainable development;
- building the capacity of Council to integrate environmentally sustainable approaches into its building and public space improvements, daily operations and decision-making processes.

The success of these initiatives and those contained within the CAP Implementation Plan depends to a large degree on the active involvement of residents, local businesses and organisations, and other stakeholders in ensuring they are fully acted upon. A first step in encouraging this involvement, would be to give greater access to relevant and sufficiently detailed information on what is being done. A longer, more faceted consultation period for the Budget as previously discussed would allow greater exchange of information and better understanding of the initiatives planned.

A second step would be to develop active and on-going consultative mechanisms. This would provide a forum for an exchange of information and facilitate meaningful discussions between the Council and the community on the climate emergency.

We are aware that Boroondara has sent invitations to community members to participate in a Community of Interest arrangement. We are unaware of whether this arrangement will focus on specific matters and whether it will have any authority to make recommendations, to seek briefings from Council officers or to obtain external advice.

We welcome mechanisms that provide opportunities for the community to work more closely with Council officers and Councillors. We are concerned, however that the Community of Interest initiative will be little more than a one way mechanism for Council to promote its activities.

To date, the only advisory committee that relates to the Climate Action Plan is an internal one comprising six councillors and which lacks the capacity to seek out external expertise. There is no external committee that can represent the community and provide insight on what is important to them.

We strongly advocate for the establishment of an advisory committee on the Climate Action Plan and other climate focused initiatives. This would provide opportunities for Councillors, Council officers and residents to come together to work on important matters over time, to give access to external expertise and would encourage the community to feel a sense of ownership in the implementation of the CAP.

Recommendation

We recommend:

- Funds be allocated within the 2022/23 Budget for a widely recognisable and promoted Q&A facility that gives the public access to Council officers so they can seek out information on items of interest and be provided with sufficient detail to understand what is being done and why.
- Funding be provided in the 2022/23 Budget to establish and maintain an external advisory committee on climate action and the implementation of the CAP.

Active Transport policies

Policies that relate to the reduction of community emissions include initiatives to increase active transport such as cycling and walking. It is reported that \$1.58 million of funding will be spent as part of the Services Operating Budget for sustainable transport initiatives. Such a generic statement does not, however provide any insight into what this involves.

We note that the 2022 Boroondara Bicycle Strategy is currently under development. We support the purposes of this strategy which is intended to deliver:

... an integrated bicycle network which is safe, connected, protected, efficient and appealing to users of all ages and abilities. The bicycle network will include off-road paths and on-road links providing access to a range of destinations and making bicycle riding a feasible and attractive option for all residents, workers and visitors.

We have previously recommended that Council approve the 2022 Boroondara Bicycle Strategy at the soonest opportunity. We also previously recommended that Council review and update the Integrated Transport Strategy. This review of the Integrated Transport Strategy is a very broad strategy across all modes of transport and the review should not delay the approval and funding of the 2022 Boroondara Bicycle Strategy.

The Bicycle Strategy needs to be approved and funded to take full advantage of the pandemic-induced increase in public support for, and use of, bicycles for both transport and recreation.

Recommendation

- The Budget identify whether a specific allocation has been made for the implementation of the Bicycle Strategy and the nature of the initiatives to be taken.
- Additional funding be identified in this Budget to start work on updating the Council's Integrated Transport Strategy

Open Space

We note the comment in the Budget regarding open space:

The availability of open space for passive and active recreation is a limited resource for the city and to that end, Council sets aside \$800,000 each year for the open space acquisition fund which is designed to acquire additional open space as the opportunity arises.

Request for information

We seek further information on how this annual budget allocation of \$800,000 has been spent in previous years, whether unspent amounts are accumulated and carried over to the current year, and whether this amount is adequate in light of increasing property values.

Trees

We welcome the inclusion of a number of initiatives that relate to the tree canopy cover of Boroondara, some of which are being funded within existing resources and others given new funding in this Budget. These include

- the creation of an Urban Greening Strategy to protect and enhance our landscapes, trees and green cover in response to the challenges of climate, urban heating and urban densification;
- \$675,000 to support ongoing park and street tree renewal program;
- \$621,000 to administer Council's Tree Protection Local Law and assess applications for tree removal.

We are concerned, however that while the tree canopy in public areas in Boroondara has stabilised or begun to increase, that on private property continues to be under threat. This appears to be due mainly to the high level of residential redevelopment occurring in Boroondara. It would seem that many residents do not understand or value trees for their contribution to the quality of life and the environment, consider them as inconveniences to their housing plans and recklessly damage and destroy them.

More education is required to demonstrate the value of trees to home owners and builders. Also needed are increased resources to ensure administrators of the relevant local laws to protect trees on private land are consistent and predictable in their decisions.

A further factor is the absence of staff over weekends who can respond to complaints regarding violations of local regulations on protecting trees. Experience has shown that although officers are available, they generally have no understanding of the relevant regulations and no access to anybody who can respond effectively to the complaint.

Recommendation

We recommend:

- Funding be allocated in the current and future Budgets to educate home owners and home builders of the value of trees on private land in combating climate change and reducing the effect of higher temperatures.
- The level of funding for the administration of local laws to protect trees on private land be increased to a level where officers are able to respond quickly to all reports of threats to existing trees and to effectively monitor all replacement orders. This includes having offices available over weekends who can immediately deal with reports of violations.

Thank you for this opportunity to comment on Boroondara's Proposed Budget for 2022/23. We would appreciate the chance to speak further with Councillors and Council officers on the matters we have raised here.