

Cr Garry Thompson  
Mayor  
City of Boroondara

## City of Boroondara. Proposed Budget 2021-2022

This submission is made on behalf of Lighter Footprints Inc, a group of concerned residents (now around 2500) 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.

We welcome the opportunity to comment on the Proposed Budget for 2021-22. While we support many of the proposed funding initiatives, we have concerns about a number of aspects including:

- the way these consultations are conducted and the likelihood that they will not lead to any change in overall priorities or level of funding for any specific measure;
- the overwhelming focus on carbon emissions generated by Council activities and the lack of systematic attention to reducing community emissions in either the 2021-22 funding proposed for the Climate Action Plan or other initiatives. Council emissions are approximately 22,000 tonnes whereas community emissions are approximately 1,804,000 tonnes;
- the small amount of funding provided for initiatives under the Climate Action Plan in 2021-22 and subsequent years;
- the priority given to capital projects over and above service delivery and administrative programs that incur recurring costs over time. This leaves programs such as the Tree Protection Local Law with insufficient resources to be effectively administered and monitored.

All of these points are discussed in more detail in our submission below. 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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Co-convenor  
Lighter Footprints Inc

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## **Lighter Footprints values the contribution of local government**

We applaud the more pro-active role that Boroondara has taken in recent years in response to the threat that the climate crisis represents to our community. This includes the signing of a power purchasing agreement to source all electricity used in Council activities from renewable sources and the commitment to develop a Climate Action Plan that seeks to reduce carbon emissions.

Council has an important role in helping residents adapt to and mitigate the impact of climate change. We note the success of initiatives such as FOGO and the range of activities that help residents adopt a more sustainable lifestyle.

We believe, however that we are now facing an emergency that requires urgent and immediate action. Council has an obligation to its constituents to expand its response by tackling the complex problem of community emissions. This involves both direct action and more forceful advocacy to other levels of government.

## **Community Engagement**

Lighter Footprints welcomes the opportunity to comment on the City of Boroondara's Proposed Budget for 2021-2022. Input from local residents and community groups such as Lighter Footprints makes a significant contribution to democracy at the local government level through increased transparency in Council governance and scrutiny by residents affected by the decisions contained in this document.

Community engagement is a two-way process whereby the community and Council work together to produce something that satisfies the needs of both parties. It is a means to exchange ideas, to build understanding of problems being addressed and solutions proposed and to take advantage of the knowledge and expertise each party brings to the table. We see this as a process of give and take and would not expect that Council agree with everything suggested by the community.

We wish to register our concern that public consultations on the Council's Proposed Budget take place so late in the process of developing this important document. This document was opened up to public comment on 28 April 2021 and the deadline for submissions is 26 May 2021, a total of 29 days. By this stage, there is little opportunity to influence the substance of decisions that were finalised some time previously.

The Proposed Budget is a complex and detailed document that brings together the results of significant amount of work by Council officers over many months. The document is presented as a finalised report that meets all the requirements of the Local Government Act and the Local Government Model Financial Report.

However, the format of the document does not allow effective public discussion or enable amendments to arise out of these consultations. On the current consultation timetable, fundamental changes would be difficult to achieve even if Council thought that the community feedback was worth incorporating.

History suggests that absolutely no changes will be made as a result of this community feedback. By way of example, last year there were over 90 submissions made by members of the public concerning the budget and none resulted in any

changes being made. The previous year there was a lesser number of submissions, but they had the same outcome – no change. This is consultation in name only.

We would like to see community consultation on the Council Budget go beyond compliance with the requirements. It should aim to increase residents' understanding of Council activities and facilitate their capacity to contribute to the discussion of priorities and initiatives.

Some other councils start the process of community engagement during the last three months of the previous calendar year with an invitation to their residents to submit ideas of what they would like to see in the budget. Such an approach would enable the use of major elements of deliberative engagement.

**We recommend that:**

- Community engagement with development of the Proposed Budget commence during October and November of the previous year using a range of techniques to swap ideas, identify priorities and increase understanding of community needs and ambitions and providing information in a form that is accessible and understandable to most people.

***Public participation in community consultations should involve greater use of the elements of Deliberative Engagement***

Boroondara's Community Engagement Policy 2021-26<sup>1</sup> sets out:

*how Council will fulfill its commitment to create genuine and transparent opportunities to enable community members to provide feedback about matters of interest to them through Council's decision-forming processes*

The Policy discusses the use of two forms of public participation, with the more limited being participatory engagement followed by increasing degrees of deliberative engagement. It identifies five stages in the spectrum of public participation: inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower.

We are aware that the Community Plan is currently being reviewed and a survey of local residents has been undertaken. The budget papers point out that Stage 1 of this process has been completed. We seek reassurance that a process of deliberative engagement covering the five stages of public participation identified in the Community Engagement Policy will be used to finalise the Community Plan. This will include surveys, opportunities for public comment, focus groups, workshops, an online wiki<sup>2</sup>, and people's panels.

We acknowledge that decision making for the Budget is ultimately the responsibility of Councillors and therefore it is not appropriate to extend public participation across the spectrum to include the final stage of empowerment. We believe, however that the current limitation on public participation to the first two stages of the spectrum (inform and consult) is inadequate in current times when there is:

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.boroondara.vic.gov.au/media/60441/download?inline>

<sup>2</sup> Definition of wiki: a website or database developed collaboratively by a community of users, allowing any user to add and edit content. A website that allows visitors to contribute content to its pages and comment on and make changes to information posted by others.

- increasing community expectation to be actively involved in democratic processes; and
- growing complexity of public policy issues which increases the need to provide information to the community and to hear back from different voices.

**We recommend that:**

- Public engagement in the development of the Council Budget:
  - be extended to cover the more deliberative engagement elements of the public participation spectrum to include involvement and collaboration; and
  - should start at least 6 months before the commencement of the coming financial year.

**Budget priorities**

We acknowledge that the size of Boroondara’s budget and the nature of much of its operations are similar to that of a medium sized company. As such, it requires a high level of financial management to ensure long term stability and responsible use of financial and other resources.

While Council must conduct itself in an efficient and effective manner, it should be driven by imperatives that give priority to quite different outcomes than those of the corporate world. Local Government exists to use its resources in ways that create a well-functioning local environment with appropriate infrastructure and services that enable its residents to live safe and healthy lives.

***In light of the changing circumstances of climate change, Council must question whether it should continue to give priority to major capital projects over service based projects with recurring cost profiles.***

We note the Council’s commitment to give high priority to providing quality infrastructure. We question, however, whether the priority being given to such projects is too high in light of increasing financial pressure that climate change is putting on budgets.

Climate change has become an existential threat to all aspects of planetary life. All levels of government have an obligation to respond to this risk and to use the resources and authority available to them for this purpose. This obligation requires local government to commit to prioritising measures that help its community adapt to and mitigate the impact of the climate emergency.

The climate crisis has an impact on Council Budgets in a number of ways:

- Climate change is becoming an increasingly damaging ‘disruptor’ to Council assets. Extreme weather events such as flooding, rain deluges and excessive heat will cause damage to assets such as roads, drains, bridges and other infrastructure.

- The consequential cost of being first responder to handling these events and assisting the community recover will increase rapidly in coming years as their frequency rises.
- Local government's greater proximity to the local environment will impose a growing cost burden on Councils as they confront the effect of climate change on vegetation, biodiversity, heating of the urban environment, water management and health of residents.

Greater attention needs to be given to appropriate adaptation and mitigation measures that focus on reducing community emissions. Such measures will generally take the form of service-based programs that require establishment and implementation costs over a number of years.

Particular examples already covered in the Budget include protection and enhancement of tree coverage; water management initiatives such as the development of wetlands and the use of water sensitive urban design principles; and attention to more active forms of transport. A more open and timely budget consultation would allow the community to offer its ideas and expertise to identify other measures.

### **Addressing community emissions**

We ask the City of Boroondara to use its Budget for 2021-22 to give increased priority to initiatives that address the problem of community emissions of carbon and other greenhouse gases.

There are a number of ways in which this could be done including:

- a shift in the preference given in the Budget away from capital projects towards the funding of programs that develop capability and deliver services that assist the community to reduce its emissions;
- increased use of external expertise to expand the capability of Councillors and Council officers to advocate for policy change at the State and Federal levels of government particularly in planning, building regulation and infrastructure projects that address the impact of climate change;
- the allocation of more human and material resources to the implementation, administration and management of programs that protect, expand and build on existing resources and infrastructure as means to adapt to and mitigate the impact of climate change.

### **We recommend that:**

- Higher priority be given to programs and initiatives that address the problem of community emissions of greenhouse gases.
- Funding be allocated for developing the skills and capability of Council officers to respond to these challenges through greater access to expert advice, establishment of community advisory groups and staff training.

- Additional funding be allocated to programs such as the Tree Protection Local Law to enable the employment of more staff and the delivery of community educative programs to encourage better community understanding of the benefits arising from these initiatives and to ensure more effective surveillance and community compliance.

### **The Climate Action Plan**

The Climate Action Plan is identified in the Proposed Budget as a Major Initiative. Funding to the value of \$400,000 has been earmarked for 2021-22 to '*... deliver a range of initiatives including LED lighting upgrades, heating and cooling upgrades to reduce Council's energy and greenhouse emissions and lowering of Council's use of gas and electricity to meet our climate related targets*'.

This funding forms part of the allocation of \$3.61 million for a range of environmental initiatives including

- \$2.2 million to implement the Sustainable Council Building Policy requirement to deliver a minimum 5 Star Green Star equivalent standard for all new buildings and applicable retrofits;
- \$420,000 to support an ongoing park and street tree renewal program;
- \$266,100 to enhance and maintain urban biodiversity across the municipality by implementing initiatives including the Backyard Biodiversity project, Wildlife not Weeds program, interpretive signage and to extend the areas of Boroondara which are actively managed for their significant biodiversity values; and
- \$240,000 for additional street tree planting.

We welcome these initiatives as a start to responding to the climate emergency. We are concerned, however, that the activities identified under the Climate Action Plan appear to be directed solely to the reduction of emissions related to Council activities. Since Council emissions represent less than 1 percent of the total emissions for Boroondara, this leaves a huge gap in addressing the major factor that drives the climate crisis.

In addition to the \$400,000 listed for implementation of the Climate Action Plan in 2021-22, an amount of \$3 million is foreshadowed for expenditure for the ensuing three financial years. We consider the proposed funding for the Climate Action Plan and other environmental initiatives listed here for the current and future years is nowhere near enough for the task at hand:

- In no way is this enough to deal with the magnitude of the climate emergency and, in light of the comparative size of the Council's budget, this can only be interpreted as a token gesture.
- We are extremely concerned that the scope and range of the plan over the coming years will be limited to whatever can be achieved within an allocation of \$1 million per annum.

You will recall that 67% of the Boroondara community when surveyed by Council stated that they strongly supported the development of a Climate Action Plan. When

two thirds of a community significantly support the development of an action plan it is reasonable to assume that they want to see real action. \$1 million per annum will not provide that. The surpluses forecast in future years shows that much larger action can be supported by Council.

**We recommend that:**

- The Council clearly articulate that the Climate Action Plan will address community emissions as well as those generated by Council related activities in 2021-22 and subsequent years.
- Budget allocations for the Climate Action Plan be significantly increased to:
  - ensure that the Council is net carbon neutral on its own emissions by at least 2025;
  - provide resources commensurate to addressing a climate emergency and enabling the reduction of community emissions;
  - build on existing measures and introduce new initiatives that help the Boroondara community adapt to and mitigate the impacts of climate change.
- Future funding for the Climate Action Plan not be capped to the level of foreshadowed expenditure listed in this Budget.

**The need for increased advocacy capacity within Boroondara**

Much of local government activity is controlled and reliant on the actions of the State and Federal Government through legislation, regulation and program development. This limits the degree of direct action available and requires skilled, well informed and consistent advocacy to achieve change that best meets the needs of the local community.

There has been a growing shift in recent years between those who draw up the legislation, regulation and policy that controls matters affecting people's everyday lives and those who deliver and manage these programs. This is particularly so in the area of planning and regulation associated with the built environment where loss of control by local authorities has seen problems develop that threaten local amenity.

Effective advocacy requires a highly skilled team of well informed people with a well developed position for achieving change. It would appear that current Council officers are under considerable pressure to carry out their current responsibilities and often do not have the time or resources to improve their advocacy skills or to build more persuasive cases for change.

More funds need to be set aside in the Budget to develop the advocacy capacity of Council officers. This will include:

- training of existing officers in a wide range of communication skills and technical knowledge;

- recruitment of officers with appropriate skills and knowledge;
- increased access to external experts and consultants;
- purchase of appropriate materials to present the case;
- funds to enable officers to access the skills and expertise available within local residents including the establishment of advisory bodies and other means of continuous community consultation.

### **Increased advocacy capacity for planning and building regulation**

We continue to be concerned by the built environment's contribution and vulnerability to the impacts of climate change. This is a growing issue in Boroondara where there is a significant degree of demolition of existing housing and replacement with large multi-unit developments or substantially larger single houses.

Local Government is involved in the regulation of this sector in two ways:

- the issue of planning permits under the Victorian Planning & Environment Act 1987; and
- the issue by the local council of building permits under the Victoria Building Regulations to cover the constructional aspects of a building or other development.

We acknowledge that these two processes are primarily State Government based and that Council has little capacity to directly change their provisions or delivery. We believe, however, that Council should advocate more strongly to make the legislators better aware of the weaknesses in these systems and to get change that recognises the importance of the built environment in combatting climate change.

### **Changes are needed in the regulation of the built environment**

We set out below issues that we believe should be addressed when advocating change in the planning and regulation of the built environment.

The major weakness in the current provisions for planning permits is that they cover only a very limited range of building developments. The criteria for assessing planning permits also ignore many issues that could enhance the capacity of the built environment to respond to the impact of climate change. These include:

- the massive footprint of many new buildings and poor internal design which contribute to high energy consumption and water usage;
- the way a new dwelling, its huge associated underground structures and cramped surrounds interferes with the capacity of rainwater to seep into the water table and increases flows into the storm water system; and
- the lack of external space to grow trees or other vegetation to ameliorate climate change.

The Building Act 1993 makes no acknowledgement of the impact of extreme weather or increased temperatures that will accompany climate change. We consider that the building permits process should play a stronger role in encouraging building design, construction techniques and materials that contribute to meeting the challenge of climate change

The disruption of water seepage into the water table is a growing problem in Boroondara. As a consequence, there is drying out of the subsoil; trees and other vegetation are being threatened by less access to essential moisture; building instability on the heavy clay soils is increasing; and there is a rising flow of water into the stormwater system and local creeks and rivers.

The primary contributors to this include:

- the increase throughout the municipality of hard surface areas such as public car parks, roads, pavements, the loss of private garden areas to be replaced by car parking and other hard surfaces;
- changes to the planning and building regulations that allow residential and commercial developers to excavate deep and extensive basements under a building and to build closer to boundaries.

Issues that need to be addressed here include:

- the definition of a permeable surface;
- the lack of any incentive or reward for innovative design and construction techniques that reduce a building's impact on the environment;
- identification of ways that local governments can take a more active role in promoting better design and construction of residential buildings.

**We recommend that:**

- Funds be provided in the Budget for a review of the regulatory processes covering the built environment with respect to climate change.
  - The purpose of the project would be to produce high quality information that Boroondara in concert with other local councils could use to boost advocacy for regulatory changes that respond to the relationship of the built environment to climate change.
- The Council make provision in the Budget to strengthen its current capacity to advocate to the State and Federal Government for change in planning and building regulation. This should be done by directing a greater proportion of existing resources to this purpose; and by allocating new funding to boost the level of expertise available amongst Council officers

Thank you for the opportunity to participate in consultations relating to the Proposed Budget 2021-22. We would welcome the opportunity to address the Council when submissions are being considered publicly.

22 May 2021