Friends of Merri Creek

NEWSLETTER
May–July
2005

Proposed Masterplan for Merri Park Northcote

The Friends' Committee agreed to oppose two of the proposals that were put forward in a draft Masterplan for Merri Park Northcote at a public meeting on Wednesday 16th March.

We objected to a proposed car park on public land, which would have mainly benefited teachers at Northcote High School. The car park seems unnecessary, given that there were over 30 unused car spaces in Sumner Avenue at the northern edge of Merri Park. It would also set a bad precedent to lose public open space for a car park, especially at a time when we are aiming for sustainability. It seemed that most of the people at the meeting, shared this view.

We also objected to the proposal to seal in concrete the path around the rim of the billabong/wetland. We thought that it would be out of keeping with the wilderness feel of the area and it would be likely to encourage speeding bicycles in an area that is currently highly used by pedestrians. However, our view was not shared by the Darebin Bicycle User's Group, who want the path to be concrete.

It should be said that we approved the large majority of the Draft, especially the proposed revegetation with indigenous plants. The consultants for the Masterplan will now consider all the public comments and produce a revised draft. We await its release with interest.

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History of the Friends' group

The Friends Committee has approved the request from Sian Smith, a new member and student at Melbourne University, to do a 15,000 word Honours thesis on the history of FoMC. Sian (pronounced "Sharn") plans to interview a number of Friends members about their experiences in the group. If you would like to contribute to the Friends' history, please contact Sian by email at siansmith@gmail.com or by phone on 9376 2446.

Newsletter Team
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Deadline: *This is your newsletter and contributions from members are welcome. The deadline for the next issue is* ***June 24****. Please send material to: admin@mcmc.org.au*

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Friends' news

Friends get friendlier

23 people, including children and almost all of the Committee members, turned up to the Friends' social event at Trevor Hausler's home overlooking the Merri Creek in Coburg on Friday 4th March. We also received 17 apologies. It was a great night and we all admired Trevor and Robyn's prolific vegie garden and the view to the Creek. Many of us also got to see Trevor and Robyn's digital photos of the Creek in flood during February this year.

New Member Welcomer

Thanks to Angie Retallek for answering our request in the last Newsletter to be our New Member Welcomer. Angie will take over the role that was left vacant when Louise Hayward stepped down after doing a great job of welcoming new members for the past three years.

Another office volunteer

Thanks too to Monica Williamson for helping out at the Friends' office along with Jack Svendsen and Warren Cooper.

Researcher extraordinaire!

While we're in a thanking mood, many thanks must go to Wendy Moore, who has been voluntarily compiling a document of the qualities (Flora, fauna, habitat etc) of the sites of conservation significance in the Merri Creek Corridor from Jukes Rd Grassland, Fawkner, north to Wallan. She has also made substantial contributions to MCMC and FoMC submissions and consultations about planning scheme (development) applications, Melbourne 2030 Smart Growth Committees, EPBC referrals and other developments in the area.

As the contact person for the Friends of Craigieburn Grasslands, Wendy has lots of first-hand knowledge of this area. She also has over ten years of experience working with government departments to do with National Parks and wildlife. So, we are extremely lucky to have her working on such vital issues.

Vale Jake Gordon

Committee members were shocked to hear of the untimely death, at only 31, of one of our members, Jake Gordon, in Indonesia on 7th February. Many of us had met him at last year's Annual General Meeting in December. We extend our sympathies to his family, particularly his father, Robert Gordon, who is not only a Friends member, but also a Councillor representing Mitchell Shire on the Merri Creek Management Committee.

Minister asked about Merri Regional Park

After telling our members in the last four newsletters to look for the release of the Draft Merri Creek Regional Park Plan from Parks Victoria, we finally resorted to writing to the Minister for the Environment, John Thwaites. Our President, David Redfearn, wrote to the Minister asking that the Plan be released immediately or at least that he inform us when it is likely to be released.

Just before the newsletter went to press, we received a response, on the Minister's behalf, from Mark Stone, Chief Executive of Parks Victoria. He wrote that the Draft Plan covers some land which is subject to a transfer from VicRoads to the Dept of Sustainability and Environment and that there are ongoing discussions between these two State Government departments. He assured us that we will be advised as soon as a date is confirmed for the plan's release.

Well, we actually knew all that already. What we still don't know (and it seems that no-one at all knows) is when the Draft is likely to be released!

Environmental mural for Merri Parade

The Friends' Committee has successfully negotiated with Darebin City Council and Northcote High School to have an environmental mural on a large factory wall in Merri Parade Northcote. Darebin council has funded $1000 for paint supplies and students at the school are working on designs for the mural, which we hope will be completed by the end of May.

At the start of March 2004, Rob Kerton saw this Echidna several times in the stretch between High Street and the low bridge at the end of Ross Street Northcote. He had to wait for about 20 minutes before the Echidna emerged from hiding to cross the path.

The politics of water

South America has the Andes following its coastline, Italy has the Appennines; and Australia has the Great Dividing Range – quite a barrier in its own way, as railway engineers could attest, not to mention the proverbial early explorers.

It stretches from about the New South Wales/Queensland border to central Victoria near Ballarat, reaching its highest point in the Australian Alps at Mt Kosciuszko, 2228 metres – the lowest and hardest to spell top peak of any continent. The nearest township to it is Charlotte Pass, which not surprisingly has our record low temperature of minus 23 degrees Celsius.

The post-war Snowy Mountains scheme supplied water for irrigation and hydro-electricity: the latter is perhaps our best source of energy, so cheap and clean and flexible by comparison with fossil fuels on the one hand, and wind, wave and solar power on the other. However there was a terrible price to be paid, the Snowy River's flow being cut to about 1 per cent and its environment degraded; the recent plan to restore it to a more viable level (10 per cent immediately, 28 in the long term) was a credit to local State MP Craig Ingram and the Governments involved.

The destruction of the Aral Sea in Western Asia by the diversion of its water supply to cotton farms was one of the greatest blunders of the 20th century: at least we've tried to put things right. This has inevitably implied a courageous decision to take some water away from farms and turbines, in the name of ecological justice; moreover global warming will mean less rain and snow and therefore less hydro capacity, just when it is needed more than ever to regulate our soaring demand for electricity.

A meteorologist friend gave me rainfall figures for Broadford in the general catchment area of the Merri: its annual average for 1997-2004 compared with 1971-2000 was down from 693 to 589 mm. (27.3 to 23.3 inches), a decline of 15 per cent; Melbourne Airport was down 17 and the CBD 18 per cent.

With the Snowy now getting something more like its fair share, it is all the more important that the Wimmera-Mallee pipeline will go ahead, thus preventing the enormous losses from seepage and evaporation that occur with open channels. Furthermore, Spring Street has recognised that building additional large dams would merely damage the economy and the ecology, since the water to fill them is just not there (sorry about that, Mr Bolt). However logging is still reducing the run-off in some catchments; and how Victoria is going to find enough water for another million people is a mystery. Stage 4 restrictions, everyone?

Elsewhere in Australia we see the excessive take from the Darling by Queensland cotton farmers depriving the downstream environment and consumers, and the Federal Government unwilling to allot the Murray-Darling system enough water to combat salinity and blue-green algae and revive the dying gum trees. In Western Australia, by contrast, the voters returned the ALP Government, rejecting the Opposition's grandiose, wasteful scheme of a Kimberley to Perth aqueduct.

Across the world, equitable sharing of water between upstream and downstream communities or countries has always been a volatile issue, and is set to become more so unless we can halt global warming and restore rainfall to its former levels – for the sake of the natural world too. Efficient, sustainable use of all our resources, including water, is going to be needed if this planet is to remain habitable for ourselves and our fellow-creatures.

Paul Prentice *(Committee member)*

The Merri Creek at Galada Tamboore. Photograph by David Tatnall, who has generously allowed this photo to be used in the new Friends' information leaflet (currently in production).

Cycle circle

If Melbourne is one of the most bike-friendly cities one could find anywhere, it's because of a rare combination of factors, including the generally flat terrain and attractive scenery of various kinds; the pleasant "Mediterranean" climate and reasonably clean air; the extensive network of shared paths, plus bridges and underpasses, and on-road lanes; Melway, especially with the cyclists' Map 592 and bike routes now on 43 and 44; and the trains, and lockers on stations.

The wheeled ride web seems to have started with the path beside the Yarra just upstream from Princes Bridge, where rowing coaches on old treadlies would bellow at their charges through megaphones; now almost every waterway has its footway, from the Werribee to the Plenty to the Patterson River. Train lines, tram lines, shorelines, nothing's exempt: even former aqueduct and rail routes in the north-east, the E.J.Whitten Bridge over the Maribyrnong and the European-style Elwood Canal help to keep the pedals turning.

And the centrepiece, the 25 km. long Capital City Trail, is now complete: up the Yarra to Dight's Falls, Merri Creek to Rushall, westward to Royal Park, Moonee Ponds Creek to Footscray Rd; Harbour Esplanade and the Webb Bridge, and on to Southbank for a well-earned cappuccino.

The biggest moment in its history was the opening by M.P. Bill Baxter of the Gardiner's Creek Bridge, leading ultimately to Jells Park on the Dandenong Creek. By contrast, his subsequent political career went nowhere: I'm convinced that Jeff's Party never forgave him for declaring he'd responded to public demand. Can't have the voters telling us what to do, who do they think they are?

A more discreet Minister, Mark Birrell, made the Trail his pet project, and proudly opened the section passing between the Abbotsford Convent and the Collingwood Children's Farm. The folk at the latter had been appalled at the prospect of being cut off from the river by the path: I had contacted M.P. Barry Pullen, whose assistant Steve Watson, a cyclist and later Mayor of Yarra Council, negotiated the perfect outcome, including a gentle gradient and a pedestrian overpass near the Farm entrance. As with the rescue of the Convent from disfigurement by the developers, the good guys sometimes win!

And what a fascinating thing the Convent complex will become, along with the Farmers' Market next door; then there are the Botanic Gardens and the Melbourne Zoo (the best of both worlds), and not far off the Trail, for a change of activity, the Fairfield and Studley Park Boathouses. Picnic sites, some with barbecue facilities, too numerous to list; bicycle hire available at Princes Bridge; ferry and cruise services; easy access from all suburban, country and interstate trains – it adds up to a magnificent recreational and tourist asset, a great investment in the physical and social health of the community.

The construction of CityLink had a couple of compensations: an endangered rail line modernised and secured, and the quite pretty creekside path below Racecourse Rd. The pontoons by the tollway in Richmond are rather austere by comparison, however the Burnley Boat Harbour and Herring Island are grand sights in this area.

The last bit to be done was in Docklands, from Footscray Rd to the arty-farty Webb Bridge – surely the most bizarre

rails-to-trails conversion ever. A Critical Mass ride, in May last year I think, duly tried out the brand-new path; and finding crossings over small channels, some cyclists named them after Mr Curly and Vasco Pyjama. Only in Melbourne…

The Capital City Trail is like the hub of a wheel, with spokes radiating in all directions: (1) Footscray Rd leads to the Maribyrnong, and via Whitehall St etc. to Williamstown and Altona Meadows; (2) the Moonee Ponds gives access to Greenvale and Roxburgh Park; (3) the Upfield Path takes you to Fawkner; (4) well, so does the Merri's, but it has CERES; (5) quiet back streets run alongside the Epping trains as far as Reservoir, or you can accompany the trams up scenic St Georges Rd; (6) the Hurstbridge line is easy to follow only up to Alphington, but from there the Darebin Path goes to the marvellously diverse Bundoora Park.

The Main Yarra Trail (7) has now reached the Mullum Mullum Creek in Templestowe, so close to picturesque Warrandyte: change trains, er, trails at Kew for Alamein, at East Kew for Nunawading, and at View Bank for Greensborough via the Plenty River. Then (9), Gardiner's Creek, see above; (10) a little gem of a connection, Clarendon St to Port Melbourne beside the light rail line, leading to the Bayside Trail to Mordialloc and on to Seaford; (11) Lorimer St to Westgate Park, with the ferry to Spotswood on weekends.

We are still waiting for No. 8: a decent level path following the Eastern Freeway from Burke Rd to Hoddle St, to give commuting cyclists the same fast run that motorists have, rather than the hilly, roundabout el-cheapo thing they presently endure. We are after all supposed to be maximising the use of bicycles, not putting obstacles in their way.

Speaking of obstacles, how about those jinxed, steep pests, the Gipps Street Steps? Some antidote, such as a ramp like the fine one at Walmer St, must be found to this monument to cyclophobia and misuse of resources. And as for the Heidelberg Rd horror, we heartily resent the perilous descent of 22 per cent: Yarra Council's shelved plans to bypass it with a couple of bridges must be revived, in order to make the Capital City Trail as safe and enjoyable as possible.

Paul Prentice *(Committee member)*

Working on the River Yarra

Dog turds or septic tanks??? This is just one of the challenges facing the newest waterways body in Victoria.

I refer of course to the Yarra Riverkeeper Association (YRKA) of which I am now president and the reference to dog turds and septic tanks relates to recent claim and counter claim about water quality in the Yarra, one of many issues facing this iconic and strategically important waterway. For me, joining YRKA has meant a whole new language for someone who had considered that there were enough issues on the Merri to last a lifetime or two. However I can discuss bulk entitlements with the best of them now! But enough levity because YRKA is indeed serious business.

Yarra Riverkeeper Association was formed in late 2004 and is committed to being an effective, independent public advocate for the Yarra River and its tributaries. A large focus of YRKA will be environmental, but we will also take a great interest in the social and economic aspects of the Yarra as well. It is a membership based organisation and the membership is represented through a committee of management. YRKA is also a member of a network called Waterkeepers Australia which was launched by Sir William Deane in late 2004.

YRKA does not aim to replicate the activities of other groups along the Yarra, but feels there is a need for an overall Yarra wide voice to support and complement the efforts of other catchment players.

We initially thought that YRKA would quietly and methodically go through the process of incorporation and building up our relationships and knowledge base but, out of left field, The Age ran a campaign on water quality in the Yarra in January when a canoeist became seriously ill after falling into the river near Richmond. YRKA was suddenly in the spotlight with media coverage on both television and in the print media. All potentially overwhelming for a fledgling organisation, but fortunately we have a solid committee membership which, with a blend of youth and experience and a range of expertise from community activism to technical/scientific, was able to well and truly rise to the occasion and contribute to the debate (and eventually the solutions we hope).

The Yarra in Warrandyte State Park

Banyule Flats with Banyule Homestead in the background

Another challenge which arose almost simultaneously and which has ramifications for the Yarra and other waterways was a planning application subsequently approved by the Shire of Yarra Ranges for a building on a flood plain. YRKA along with a local environmental group and a local resident objected and is now pursuing an appeal through VCAT with other bodies and individuals. Our interest is certainly in the individual planning application itself but also in the broader issue of protection of floodplains from inappropriate development which YRKA intends to pursue with the relevant authorities and decision makers.

YRKA is also fighting for better water quality on the Yarra and some members of our committee are represented on a Yarra Flow Study Advisory Group (although not representing YRKA specifically).

We hope that this will substantially improve information about flows in the Yarra and lead the way to an appropriate environmental flow for the Yarra in line with the State Government's white paper, "Our Water, Our Future". We are also concerned about the issue of bulk entitlements to Yarra water and are lobbying the State Government not to make long term allocations to bulk users of Yarra Water until the flow study is complete and we have an understanding of

Robin Merrick (2nd fom left) and David Redfearn (3rd from left) with other YRKA committee members at Dights Falls during a recent bus tour of the Yarra

what environmental flows are essential for the river's health.

FOMC member, Robin Merrick, has been an absolute powerhouse during the formation of YRKA and played a major role in development of the constitution. Robin is also currently actively pursuing planning issues on behalf of YRKA.

We are formulating a strategic plan and will be organising a range of activities to both inform and engage the community on issues around the Yarra. A website is also being prepared but information about us can also be found on www.waterkeepers.org.au. As mentioned, YRKA is membership based and welcomes new members. Please call me on 9489 5686 or Robin Merrick on 0418 475 238 if you would like to join YRKA (and it is perfectly possible to be a member of both FOMC and YRKA) or find out more about us. It won't break the bank and will keep you in the loop as well as providing fantastic opportunities to help protect one of Victoria's iconic waterways.

David Redfearn *(President, FoMC & YRKA)*

Wear your heart on your back!

Friends of Merri Creek Long-sleeved T-Shirt

There's still plenty of opportunity to show your support for the Friends of Merri Creek by wearing a forest green long-sleeved T-shirt with the Friends' logo in white on the back. Just the thing for winter planting days — and onlookers will know just where your heart is! The shirts are $20 and can be purchased from Ray Radford at the Merri Creek Management Committee office, 2 Lee St East Brunswick,phone 9380 8199. Sizes and numbers are limited.

Stalls Volunteers wanted

The Friends could do with the help of any members who could assist in staffing our stalls at various events. The main ones that remain for this year will be at the Return of the Sacred Kingfisher Festival in November and perhaps the Darebin Festival also in November. If you can help, please ring Ray on 9380 8199 (w) or 0422 989 166.

Rubbish kills Duck

On Clean-Up Australia Day, keen creek cleaner, Kali Balint found this duck that had starved due to a plastic milk ring around its head. Kali had registered a site from Blyth St up

to the other gate of CERES where about 30 people turned up over the day and collected around 30 bags of rubbish – mainly plastic!

Friends of Merri Creek events calendar

MAY

Sunday 1 — Woody Weed Removal
Craigieburn Grasslands, 10am-1pm, with MCMC and Friends of Craigieburn Grasslands *(MCMC Regional Catchment Investment Plan grant).* Enter off O'Herns Rd Somerton and follow the flags to the site (about 15 minutes walk) or car pool leaving outside the MCMC office at Lee St East Brunswick at 9.15am. Light refreshments afterwards. Melway map 180 F6. Phone Barb at MCMC 9380 8199.

Sunday 1 — Litter Clean-Up
Walker St East, Northcote, 10am-12 noon. Melway map 30 F12. Phone Paul 9489 5062.

Sunday 1 — Streamteam water quality testing
Upstream side of St Georges Rd bridge, enter from Miller Street North Fitzroy, 2-3.30pm. Melway map 30 C10. Phone 9354 9885.

Sunday 15 — Planting, Waterwatch snapshot event & BBQ
John Laffan Memorial Reserve, Donnybrook Rd Craigieburn, 10am-1pm. Bring your whole family to do some planting and investigate the waterbugs of the upper Merri. With MCMC, Hume City Council, and Waterwatch. Melway map 367 F6. Phone Barb at MCMC 9380 8199.

Sunday 22 — Planting & BBQ
Parker Reserve, Keady St Coburg, 10am-1pm, with MCMC *(MCMC Regional Catchment Investment Plan grant).* Melway map 17 J7. Phone Barb at MCMC 9380 8199.

Sunday 29 — Planting & BBQ
Imaroo St Fawkner, 10am-1pm, with nearby residents and MCMC *(MCMC Spicers sponsorship).* Melway map 17 K6. Phone Barb at MCMC 9380 8199. *(Note that this event has been moved from 8/5.)*

JUNE

Sunday 5 — Planting, weeding & rubbish clean-up
Friends' site, near Strettle wetlands Thornbury, 10am-1pm, with Darebin Bush Crew. Melway map 30 B3. Phone Robin 0418 475 238 for the planting/weeding, or Paul 9489 5062 for the clean-up.

Sunday 5 — Streamteam water quality testing
Upstream side of St Georges Rd bridge, enter from Miller Street North Fitzroy, 2-3.30pm. Melway map 30 C10. Phone 9354 9885.

Sunday 12 — Inspirin' to Environ
Off-path ramble from Dight's Falls to CERES and back, starting 1 p.m. Melway map 44 F3. Phone Paul 9849 5062.

Sunday 19 – Woody Weed Removal, Planting & BBQ
Imaroo St Fawkner, 10am-1pm, with nearby residents and MCMC *(FoMC Envirofund grant).* Melway map 17 K6. Phone Ruth 9489 5259.

Sunday 26 – Planting & BBQ
Central Creek grasslands, Orchid Ave Reservoir, 10am-1pm with MCMC. *(FoMC Envirofund grant).* Melway map 8 B11. Phone Paul 9489 5062.

Friday 24 — Deadline for articles for the next newsletter.

JULY

Sunday 3 — Planting and BBQ
Cunningham St Northcote, 10am-1pm, with MCMC and the Choppers of Rushall Reserve. *(MCMC Regional Catchment Investment Plan grant).* Melway map 30 D11. Phone Barb at MCMC 9380 8199.

Sunday 3 — Litter Clean-Up
Bell St, East Coburg, 10a.m.-12 noon. Melway map 30 A1. Phone Paul 9489 5062.

Sunday 3 — Streamteam water quality testing
Upstream side of St Georges Rd bridge, enter from Miller Street North Fitzroy, 2-3.30pm. Melway map 30 C10. Phone 9354 9885.

Sunday 10 — Bike Boot Boat
Pedal from CERES café to Fairfield Boathouse via wetlands; hike to Alphington Park and back; and/or have an oarsome time afloat! Meet at CERES 1.00 p.m. or Boathouse 1.45 p.m. Melway map 30 B7, 30 J12. Phone Paul 9489 5062.

Saturday 16 — Planting & BBQ
Central Creek grasslands, Davidson St Reservoir, 10am-1pm, with MCMC. *(MCMC Regional Catchment Investment Plan grant).* Melway map 8 B12. *Note that this is on Saturday.* Phone Barb at MCMC 9380 8199.

Sunday 24 — Planting & BBQ
Downstream of footbridge to Rushall Station North Fitzroy, 10am-1pm, with MCMC *(MCMC Regional Catchment Investment Plan grant).* Melway map 30 D12. Phone Barb at MCMC 9380 8199.

Sunday 31 — National Tree Day Planting, Activities & BBQ
Burnley Park, Yarra Boulevard Burnley, 10am-2pm. Yarra City Council event. Melway map 2H H10.

AUGUST

Sunday 7 — Litter Clean-Up
Harding St, East Coburg, 10a.m.-12 noon. Melway map 30 A2. Phone Paul 9489 5062.

Sunday 7 — Streamteam water quality testing
Upstream side of St Georges Rd bridge, enter from Miller Street North Fitzroy, 2-3.30pm. Melway map 30 C10. Phone 9354 9885.

Sunday 7 — Running Waters, Rolling Wheels
Bicycle ride beside the Merri, the Darebin and the Yarra. Start at Rushall Station 1.00 p.m. Phone Paul 9489 5062.

Sunday 7 — Planting & BBQ
Clara St/Abrahams Reserve, East Brunswick, 10am-1pm. (PowerNet grant to MCMC.) Melway map 30 A5. Help replant the area, where some trees have been removed, with lower vegetation. Phone Judy at MCMC 9380 8199.

Saturday 13 — Planting & BBQ
Jukes Rd Grassland Fawkner, 10am-1pm, with MCMC *(MCMC Regional Catchment Investment Plan grant).* Melway map 18 A2. *Note that this is on Saturday.* Phone Barb at MCMC 9380 8199.

Sunday 21 — Planting & BBQ
Galada Tamboore, enter from Hatty Court Campbellfield, 10am-1pm, with MCMC *(MCMC Regional Catchment Investment Plan grant).* Melway map 7 K6. Phone Barb at MCMC 9380 8199.

Sunday 28 – Planting & BBQ
Downstream of footbridge to Rushall Station North Fitzroy, 10am-1pm, with MCMC *(FoMC Envirofund grant).* Melway map 30 D12. Phone Dick 9853 3162.