



Community Alliance of Port Phillip

RESPONSE TO THE CITY OF PORT PHILLIP UPDATED DRAFT COUNCIL PLAN AND BUDGET 2020/21

The Community Alliance of Port Phillip (CAPP) represents community members from across the municipality of the City of Port Phillip. The purposes of CAPP are:

1. to promote the development and implementation of policies in the City of Port Phillip that
 - maintain Port Phillip as a well-planned, liveable municipality
 - progress equity, social justice, inclusiveness and environmental sustainability
 - value cultural diversity and the arts
2. to promote sound governance and community representation by the City of Port Phillip
3. to promote community awareness, debate and action on issues affecting the community and residents of Port Phillip.

This CAPP submission in response to the Draft Plan and Budget 2020/21 covers:

1. Capital Works and Project deferrals and the reluctance to Borrow
2. Temporary and Service Level Reductions/Changes
3. Economic and Social Recovery Plan
4. The Arts and Music
5. Housing
6. Climate Action and Sustainability
7. Libraries

1. Capital works and major project deferrals and the reluctance to borrow

CAPP is concerned by Council's 'austerity' response to the revenue hit it is suffering due to the extraordinary circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. The approach taken has been to 'balance the books' via a range of service cuts, organisational restructuring, paying off already low debt and deferral of major capital and other projects. We do not believe this is in the community's best interests.

At a time when our community and our economy is being turned upside down by COVID-19 we had hoped for a more visionary budget. Such a budget would respond to the crisis by developing a plan for prudent borrowings to achieve a bold vision. That vision would contribute to stimulating the local economy, create local jobs and enhance the community services we have all come to appreciate and rely on through these challenging times.

The effects of the crisis on our community are escalating. Childcare fees were re-instated for parents on 13 July and JobKeeper is being removed for childcare workers on 20 July. Businesses and workers in our community currently supported by JobKeeper and others receiving increased JobSeeker payments face ongoing uncertainty about how long this support will last. And we know that both St Kilda and Elwood are in the list of the top ten postcodes with the highest proportions of people receiving these payments. Post September, even more of our community will be doing it tough.

We understand that the Draft Budget has been framed with an incoming Council in mind, and from a desire not to pre-empt the priorities the new Council may determine for its four- year term. But we disagree with the current Council shying away from presenting its own vision for responding to the crisis now in a way that gives the community some confidence that Council will lead, support and invest in our community into the future, as we struggle to meet the challenges thrown at us by the COVID-19 crisis.

The Draft Budget states: 'We have the capacity to borrow up to \$75 million and still achieve a low risk rating in accordance with Victoria Auditor General's Office (VAGO) financial sustainability risk assessment.' (p59) If there was ever a time for prudent borrowing to reap economic stimulus and intergenerational benefit, then it is now.

Rather than defer major projects to subsequent years, Council would do well to support expenditure on them in 2020/21.

We approve of the proposal to conduct quarterly in-depth reviews of the Budget in this financial year to enable adjustments to be made in response to the ongoing crisis.

We believe however, that the deferral of expenditure in the 2020/21 financial year is short sighted and will have the dual effect of delaying critical projects and further dampening our local economy.

RECOMMENDATIONS

a. That Council re-visit the decision *not* to borrow in 2020/21 and develop a plan supported by prudent borrowings, to bring forward major projects currently proposed for deferral, including:

Children's Centres Improvement Program (\$1.4 million)
Water Sensitive Urban Design Program (\$550,000)
Energy Efficiency and Solar Program (\$350,000)
Greening Port Phillip Strategy Implementation (\$200,000)
Building Renewal and Upgrade Program (\$655,000)
Bike Infrastructure Program (\$430,000 proposed for deferral)
Elster Creek Catchment Partnership and Elsternwick Park Nature Reserve (\$930,000)
St Kilda Library re-development (\$250,000)
Designate the Fitzroy Street Public Toilet as a high priority site

b. That Council contribute to post pandemic economic recovery by investing in a 12-month job creation program (\$10 million for '100 Jobs Port Phillip') to employ local residents who have lost jobs/income due to the pandemic. The focus of this should be on employing those from sectors most affected, such as hospitality, the Arts and early childhood services and contribute to services that will enhance community recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. The positions created would be short-term, up to 12 months in duration.

Examples might include:

- Commissioning local artists to produce a range of public mural and public sculpture projects in our shopping strips and open spaces.
- Employing a team of neighbourhood recycling ambassadors (out of work actors?) for creative community education projects to reduce contamination in recycling bins (the costs of which have skyrocketed for Council by \$50,000 a month in recent times).
- Employing a community greening team (as gardeners?) for a co-ordinated program of tree, shrub and grasses planting in open spaces, footpaths and verges.
- Supporting our local early childhood education and care services who face a range of challenges during the continuing crisis (such as the costs of replacing staff needing to take leave due to COVID-19/COVID-19 testing and isolation) by employing a pool of part time relieving staff from among the often regular casuals 'laid off' in recent months.
- Creating and training community connections' team to undertake a range of community support functions for those in most need – walking with older citizens or others in need of companionship, food delivery, library book deliveries, transport to appointments (in partnership with local community service organisations). This would build on volunteer models such as the Port Phillip Welcomers Program run out of the SouthPort Community Centre Inc.

2. Temporary and Service Level Reductions/Changes

CAPP is concerned that the service level reduction focus on youth, early education, kindergartens and pre-schoolers leaves our younger citizens vulnerable. Examples:

- Defer Youth Leadership and Engagement program for 6 months (\$12,000).
- Suspend Early Education Partnership for 1 year (\$40,000).
- Suspend Youth Service Development for 1 year (\$18,000).
- Reduce operational subsidy to kindergartens from \$4,000 to \$2,000 per centre (\$19,000).
- Cessation of pre-school dental check program funding agreement with Star Health (\$36,000).

The Draft Budget states that some of these deferrals are due to social distancing requirements and so CAPP requests that the funds that could be not used on these programs be allocated to other parts of the program areas for youth and early education that require funding, rather than be seen as savings.

CAPP also notes that the halving of the kindergarten subsidy can only have a negative impact on programs and educational activities. The saving is minimal but the effect on services and on children is significant.

CAPP notes the one proposed service increase in children's services, being to:

Provide additional Lead Family/Assertive Outreach resource to meet Council-endorsed Children's Services Policy commitments to support families experiencing vulnerability to access early years education services (\$100,000)

We ask: How will this position relate to the existing Enhanced Maternal and Child (EMCH) Program which already focuses on identifying and supporting families from birth who are identified as vulnerable, or with additional needs?

CAPP believes that EMCH Service is Council's key service area for identifying families in need of extra support and facilitating better access to early years education services.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- a. That the proposed service level reductions be rethought, in particular to ensure that younger citizens are not disadvantaged.
- b. That the new Family/Assertive Outreach position be clearly integrated with the EMCH Service.

3. Economic and Social Recovery Program

CAPP welcomes the Economic and Social Recovery Program of \$4.2 million which builds on the \$2.8 million emergency relief package for 2019/20 and supports the strategies to ameliorate the effects of the pandemic for local businesses, such as rent relief, rate deferrals, waiving footpath trading fees etc.

Identifying a fund for responding to emerging social impacts as we move through different stages of the pandemic is also commendable, but the allocation of just \$200,000 seems woefully inadequate.

There are a number of programs/projects mentioned here that appear to have no budget allocation despite clearly having a cost in terms of officer time. In contrast, the Corporate volunteer program which allows staff to volunteer for up to 2 days per annum has a cost allocated of \$150,000, presumably to cover staff time/salary.

CAPP would like to understand the costs of all aspects of the Economic and Social Recovery Program so the Community can monitor the success or otherwise of these 'no budget allocation' projects.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. That Council review its allocation of funds for emerging social issues at the first quarterly review scheduled for February 2021, with a view to expanding the allocation of funds.
- b. That the Council is transparent on all the costs within the Economic and Social Recovery Program and provides guidance on how the Community can monitor the success or otherwise of these programs.

4. The Arts and Music

Arts and creative industries account for around 35 percent of the economic activity in our city and as a sector are the second largest employer in the City of Port Phillip.

CAPP notes that the Arts Rescue Package announced in May 2020 designed to support local artists, cultural organisations and creative businesses dealing with the pandemic was largely funded from savings in the 2019-2020 Creative Industries and Creative Prosperous City Strategy budget.

CAPP notes that the Draft Budget proposes no changes to the funding for the 2020/21 St Kilda Festival. As we enter deeper into the COVID 19 crisis it becomes clearer that gatherings of 200,000 plus are unlikely to be allowed in February 2021.

With the importance of the Arts to our local economy it would be appropriate that any further savings from the Arts budget, including from the St Kilda Festival not going ahead, be reallocated to activities in this sector, particularly to local activities and artists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. That Council makes a decision to cancel the St Kilda Festival for 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- b. That any savings from the creative industries budget, particularly from cancellation of the St Kilda Festival, be reallocated to arts activities in the City of Port Phillip involving local artists.

5. Housing

The Council Plan states that it “Builds on the successful partnership with HousingFirst as Trustee of the Port Phillip Housing Trust and maintains our longstanding leadership in affordable housing. This is central to our commitment to maintaining a diverse, inclusive and equitable city, especially for those who are disadvantaged and marginalised. Funding is for an annual cash contribution to an affordable housing reserve and the associated costs for implementing affordable housing projects.”

CAPP strongly supports this statement. It places the need to develop long term, secure, affordable housing for low income citizens at the forefront of Council’s housing policy. While other levels of government play a central role in funding the development of affordable housing, Council’s contribution in the form of land, buildings and annual monetary commitments, places our local housing associations in an advantaged position when applying for government funds to develop housing in Port Phillip. This partnership between State/Federal governments, Port Phillip Council and our Housing Associations must be maintained in order to grow social housing in this municipality. The Marlborough Street, St Kilda housing project to be developed by Housing First and the Emerald Street South Melbourne project to be developed by South Port Community Housing Group are current examples.

The 2020/21 Council Budget and projected budgets must reflect these commitments.

It is clear that Council intends to bring together housing projects aimed at tackling homelessness and projects designed to provide more secure low cost permanent social housing in Port Phillip particularly for those low income people currently in precarious private rental accommodation many of whom have lost jobs during the pandemic and those struggling to survive on social security benefits.

Three projects are identified in the budget which focus on providing housing and welfare supports for people experiencing homelessness. CAPP supports these initiatives:

- A. A temporary common ground facility – to lease former backpacker (Habitat HQ) accommodation in St Kilda to keep rough sleepers in supported housing: \$250,000
- B. A permanent common ground facility in partnership with DHHS to deliver permanent supported housing for persons from Council’s By-name list/ transitioning from the Habitat temporary accommodation to reduce rough sleeping: \$25,000
- C. Port Phillip Zero project funding to achieve a coordinated service response to homelessness (collective impact approach). Includes CoPP “By Name list” updated fortnightly. \$50,000

RECOMMENDATIONS

That:

- a. The existing Social Housing Fund (SHF), currently standing at \$2.5 million, be increased to provide for the added initiatives aimed at homelessness. It is proposed that an additional amount of \$200,000 be added to the current annual allocation of \$500,000 council provides.
- b. Council honor its commitment to provide grants from the SHF to any Registered Housing Agency applying to build and operate social housing in Port Philip. Housing First’s Marlborough St Project in St Kilda and South Port Community Housing Group (SPCHG) forthcoming project at Emerald St. South Melbourne are two such projects.
- c. Council, in conjunction with Housing First, allocate funds from the SHF to refurbish properties in the Port Phillip Housing Trust to improve standards in older properties and to expand, where possible, the number of units. A number of these properties are Rooming Houses which, if refurbished, would add to the number and quality of units aimed at addressing homelessness. State Government funds would also to be sought.
- d. The current pandemic warrants an injection of additional funds by Council to meet the costs of the three homelessness projects identified in the budget totalling \$325,000.

6. Climate Action and Sustainability

CAPP sees addressing Climate Change as integral to ensuring an equitable, inclusive and sustainable city. It also sees the need to respond to a future which is more uncertain and in need of greater Government intervention rather than less. The 2020 Local Government Act shifts the balance of Council responsibilities to require Councils to adopt policies and actions as follows:

- (a) priority is to be given to achieving the best outcomes for the municipal community, including future generations;

(b) the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the municipal district, including mitigation and planning for climate change risks, is to be promoted

Guidance is provided in the Act about how this is to be done including engaging the community in strategic planning, innovating and continuously improving, collaboration with other councils and compliance with good governance principles.

Over the past 4 years the Council has only partially completed actions related to its Sustainable Environment Strategy 2018-2028, Act and Adapt. The outcomes have been mixed partly because of the lack of clear policy direction, strategic plans development, the scatter gun approach to actions and failure in integrating actions between departments and across the Council.

The budget has a series of proposals which will have damaging effects on the Sustainability area including the following areas of budget reduction:

- Greening Port Phillip from the current budget of \$640,000 to \$440,000 (still not including any additional funding for parks and gardens and other public spaces across the city)
- The deferral of the release of the Public Spaces Strategy which could have had budget implications to redress historic imbalances in the provision of open space in the city.
- The WSUD reduction from \$600,000 to \$50,000.
- The deferral of work on assessing the urban heat island effect with the City overall having been assessed as having a temperature increase in many areas in the past 4 years.
- The uncertainty about action on water recycling, flood mitigation and other aspects of Integrated Water Management as the Plan remains incomplete.
- The reduction of funding for action on community emissions from \$300,000 to \$125,000.

The role of the Sustainability Department seems to have become residual in the last year, programs have been reduced and are not integrated, key reports are not being produced, and reporting on actions against baseline figures and targets has almost ceased.

We support strengthened and concerted action in two key areas. First, there has been minimal outcome in respect of community emissions reduction, with emissions running at the rate of approximately 2million tCO₂e annually. In the life of this current Council the City of Melbourne has been able to complete two Renewable Energy projects, in the first of which Port Phillip is a member. We believe that Council should commit to facilitating two such Power Purchase Agreements, one for the commercial sector and the other for residents, especially those in apartments and without other access to rooftop solar.

The second area where Council needs to make a new start is that of Green-Blue infrastructure. Over the past decade Council has developed or started Strategies and plans around Public Space, Stormwater Management, Urban Forest, Flood Mitigation, Urban Heat Island, Integrated Water Management and Biodiversity. All of them have been carried out in isolation, without any of the essential understanding of the integration necessary to make these projects successful. In 2017 DELWP produced a manual for Councils, *Planning a Green-Blue City*, from which this quotation is taken: *'The inherent multi functionality of natural systems requires an equally integrated approach to identify, prioritize and deliver initiatives that will create greener and more successful cities. The planning of green-blue infrastructure aims to do just that: to explore synergistic opportunities for integrated greening and water management outcomes and to create a framework for collaboration between Council departments and key industry and community groups to deliver a new blue print for cities and towns.*

Accordingly, a green-blue infrastructure action plan should be an integrative document that draws on documents and evidence already developed by the council, but should be embedded in the current council plan, strategic resource plan and the budget to enable integrated delivery of initiatives’

These two key priorities draw attention to the proposed restructure of Sustainability, involving the abolition of positions, including that of Sustainability Manager. Capacity within Sustainability needs to be substantially increased in terms of both expertise and authority if key projects are to be managed to completion. Council needs to increase, rather than reduce its capacity to respond to Environmental issues in general and the Climate Crisis in particular, and this represents the third of our priorities.

In addition to these priorities CAPP wishes to draw attention to three areas which it is necessary for Council to support as essential responses to the impacts of Climate Change.

1. Integrated Transport Strategy. Current strategies and policies do not promote lower car usage or increased use of bikes, walking or public transport. There is a heightened awareness and need for cycling as a result of COVID19, and thus Council can give attention to creating temporary bike lines consistent with those identified in the bicycle network or in State strategic routes.

2. Elsternwick Creek. Council should continue involvement with the Elsternwick Creek project. It is a major flood reduction program for Elwood, is a main sources of harvested storm water, will limit the flow of nitrogen pollutants into Pt Phillip Bay, and with continued support will expand the biodiversity in the park and waterway.

3. Ecocentre. The work of the Ecocentre is essential to local education, research and action. For its size, it operates an impressive range of activities. Council should continue to support and advocate for the rebuilding of the long out of date and inadequate building housing the Ecocentre.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That Council:

- a. Facilitate Power Purchase Agreements which involve the local commercial and industrial sectors and facilitate the linkage of apartments with houses;
- b. Review the Greening Port Phillip program to take account of canopy cover target and implement heat mapping;
- c. Complete the Integrated Water Management Plan;
- d. Continue involvement in the Elster Creek and Elsternwick Park Project;
- e. Create temporary bike lanes consistent with the state strategic routes; and
- f. Continue to support and advocate for the rebuilding of the Eco Centre.

7. Libraries

Council operates five libraries across Port Phillip as well as online and in-home library and information services with over 600,000 library visits in the last year. In 2018/19, 20,187 new books were added to the libraries. The Council normally spends \$800,000 on new purchases and is proposing to decrease this expenditure in the 2020/21 Budget by \$200,000.

The City of Port Phillip is already behind similar councils in its spending on new materials, having the lowest proportion of library resources less than five years old – 48.8% compared with 72.0% for similar councils (<https://knowyourcouncil.vic.gov.au/councils/port-phillip/reports/libraries>). The reduction of purchases in a time when the community is in greater need of these resources is disappointing and CAPP recommends that this decrease not be implemented.

CAPP also notes that over 5,000 Inter library loans occurred in 18/19 which was an increase from the previous year. The Budget proposed to increase the Inter Library Loan fee from \$2.10 to \$28.50. If the number of Inter Library loans remains the same (5,267) this increase in the fee provides revenue of \$150,190.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- a. That Council does not decrease the library purchases by \$200,000 in 2020/21.
- b. That an explanation be provided on the large increase in the Inter Library Loan fee.

Conclusion

CAPP appreciates the opportunity to comment and make recommendations on the City of Port Phillip Draft Council Plan and Budget 2020/21.

We would also like the opportunity to speak to our submission on August 5.

If Council has any questions or seeks clarification on any issue please contact

Ann Byrne
Secretary