



Climate Action Merri-bek
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Submission on Moving around Merri-bek: Discussion Paper on new Transport Strategy

Dear Merri-bek Council,

We appreciate this opportunity to put in a submission on the Discussion Paper for Council's new Transport Strategy.

To address the climate and other environmental crises, we need to urgently shift to more sustainable forms of transport - principally public transport and active transport. Merri-bek Council has long been regarded as a leading Council in sustainability. We trust that in the sustainable transport space, Merri-bek will continue to play a leading role in setting the standard for other Councils to follow.

In our submission, we address some of our thoughts on this discussion paper, and look forward to providing a detailed submission on the draft Transport Strategy.

John Englart
Convenor
submitted on behalf of Climate Action Merri-bek

An Engaged Community

The Merri-bek Community is highly engaged in the area of active transport. Indeed, in the current Parliamentary Inquiry into the impact of road safety behaviours on vulnerable road users, there were so many groups and individuals from Merri-bek (including Climate Action Merri-bek) wishing to present on safe active transport that one of the five hearing days was held at Coburg Town Hall. Moreover, Merri-bek has a large number of campaign groups advocating for safe walking and cycling and for accessible public transport.

A recent engagement report on [Making Walking and Cycling Safer in Moreland](#) found “Strong support for improvements to cycling and walking infrastructure, particularly safety initiatives”. The [JWS Research Report](#) found that 83% of respondents ranked “working towards a future where people use more sustainable forms of transport” as important.

[Vote Compass in 2022](#) found that the electorate of Wills (which includes nearly all of Merri-bek) was the fifth most concerned electorate about climate change in the whole country.

This high level of engagement puts Merri-bek in a good position to be planning for strong measures that can set an example to other Councils. We believe the discussion paper does not adequately reflect the role that Merri-bek can (and should) take in driving change. We hope that the draft Transport Strategy will be much stronger.

“Mode Shift” not just “Increasing Transport Choice”

The MITS 2019 was framed in terms of mode shift. It planned to “Facilitate a demonstrable mode shift to more sustainable modes of transport that also targets a long-term reduction in car use.” The discussion paper, however, has its vision framed in terms of giving community members “greater choice in how they move around Merri-bek”.

Of course removing barriers to sustainable transport is important. Many people can’t choose sustainable transport due to safety and accessibility issues, and may be locked into relying on expensive motor vehicles. But we do not want people to be choosing to make more use of motor vehicles. Council may be wanting to provide more of a carrot rather than a stick in shifting people’s transport modes. That is understandable. However, using the word “choice” does not convey the idea that we must move towards a more sustainable transport system.

We suggest that the Transport Strategy be much clearer on this. We suggest that instead of this non-specific “choice” framing, it be more about making it easier for people to choose sustainable transport.

People’s specific circumstances can shape their abilities to make more sustainable choices. However, there are some low-hanging fruit. For example [VISTA data](#) shows that a private vehicle is used for about one-third of trips under 1 km. For trips 1 to 2 km, about two-thirds are done by private vehicle. These trips are very suitable for walking or cycling for most people. How then does Council make it more likely that people will do so?

Note that this paper seems to be assuming that people fall into different categories of transport users. It assumes we are pitted against each other. We submit that this is an incorrect assumption. Most residents use multiple modes of transport, as the JWS report makes clear. And nearly everybody walks (as discussed below - the JWS report misrepresents this.) We suggest that Council change the way it discusses tensions. Tensions that have emerged are actually about space - how do we make the best use of the limited space to ensure that we can all get around safely and more sustainably.

The paper also states “We will ensure the strategy addresses the needs of all transport users and takes a people-centred approach”. Perhaps it could also refer to future generations?

Transport policies should not be based on irrational fears

We call for a transport policy that is based on evidence and the desire to shape a more sustainable and inclusive future.

We note that some opposition to active transport infrastructure seems to be based on fear of change rather than rational analysis. For example, traders on Sydney Road Coburg have long been opposed to bike lanes and would rather preserve on-street parking. However, their own traders’ association acknowledges that this stance is not in their customers’ interests. In its presentation to the Inquiry into the Impact of Road Safety Behaviour on Vulnerable Road Users (9 August 2023), Central Coburg Business Association stated:

[P]eople are talking about having a bike lane on Sydney Road. ... [W]e did a survey, which was interesting. All the local businesses were against having a bike lane because it would take away car parks. Well, our customers were really quite happy to have a bike lane because it would make it easier for them.

In other words, bike lanes would help the traders’ businesses as their customers want it. Yet road authorities continue to pay excessive heed to these irrational fears.

Another example is how elderly people have been used in the backlash against protected bike lanes. Residents opposed to protected bike lanes have claimed they make elderly people anxious. Yet protected bike lanes ensure that people are not cycling on footpaths. We know that one of the main concerns of elderly people is having to share footpaths with bicycles.

[Victoria Walks](#) noted:

In a survey of 1,128 Victorians aged 60 or over, better cyclist behaviour on shared paths and reduced cycling speed on shared paths were the top two responses for action that would make walking feel safer.

In its presentation to the Inquiry into the Impact of Road Safety Behaviour on Vulnerable Road Users (8 August 2023), Ben Rossiter from Victoria Walks stated:

for seniors, we know that falls in the street are a really big issue Five thousand Victorians a year end up in hospitals in emergency departments from falls. Concern about something startling or being hit by a bike puts them off walking, because if you fall and do your hip, you have got an up to 40% chance you are dead in 12 months.“

So the consequences of not having protected bike lanes is that our footpaths become more hazardous. Yet the arguments used against bike lanes seem to irrationally assume that if bike lanes were not there, people riding bikes would disappear. But instead many would ride on footpaths.

We submit that the Council needs to play a much greater role educating people about these issues rather than acquiesce to irrational arguments.

Integrating Land Use and Transport Planning

This section does not reflect what the Transport Integration Act and the Merri-bek Planning Scheme actually say.

The Transport Integration Act (2010) Section 64B clearly states that it wants to *increase* the share of public transport, walking and cycling, as an alternative to the motor car.

In late 2021, the Victorian Government introduced amendment VC204 to the Victorian Planning Provisions. This was a substantial re-write of clause 18 on Transport.

Clause 18.01-1S states

Design neighbourhoods to:

- *Better support active living.*
- *Increase the share of trips made using sustainable transport modes.*
- *Respond to the safety needs of all users.*

Clause 18.01-3S (Safe and sustainable transport) includes statements:

- *Prioritise the use of sustainable personal transport.*
- *Protect, conserve and improve the natural environment by supporting forms of transport, energy use and transport technologies that have the least environmental impact*
- *Separating pedestrians, bicycles and motor vehicles, where practicable.*
- *Reducing the need for cyclists to mix with other road users.*
- *Support forms of transport and energy use that have the greatest benefit for, and least negative impact on, health and wellbeing*
- *Design development to promote walking, cycling and the use of public transport, in that order, and minimise car dependency*

There are new strongly worded clauses for Walking (Clause 18.02-1S) and Cycling (Clause 18.02-2S). These clauses have promoted walking and cycling in the hierarchy. Meanwhile, car parking has been demoted - it previously had its own section, but has now been folded into the discussion of roads.

In 2022, Merri-bek introduced amendment C212more into the Merri-bek Planning Scheme. Clause 02.03-07 includes statements such as:

- *Reduces local vehicle traffic and safeguards the wellbeing of the community*
- *Achieves a shift towards sustainable modes of travel, including a transition to active transport or zero-emissions transport.*

It includes a clear road user hierarchy, with “people who are walking” being the highest priority, followed by “people who are cycling”, followed by “people who are using public transport”. At the very bottom are “people who are driving”.

These substantial changes provide clear support for a mode shift towards sustainable transport, and a hierarchy with walking and cycling being the highest priority. Yet these are not reflected in the discussion paper. We submit that they should be.

The question of how people access local services also needs clarification. The Planning Scheme clearly supports 20 minute neighbourhoods accessible by walking and cycling. This is not making these “more easily and safely accessible via a wide variety of transport options” as the discussion paper suggests. It is about making them more accessible by walking and cycling.

Section 18.01-3R Sustainable and safe transport - Metropolitan Melbourne states:
Improve local travel options for walking and cycling to support 20 minute neighbourhoods

Section 18.02-2R Cycling - Metropolitan Melbourne states:
Develop local cycling networks and new cycling facilities that support the development of 20-minute neighbourhoods and that link to and complement the metropolitan-wide network of bicycle routes - the Principal Bicycle Network

Electric Transport Growth

We submit that the paper should not place so much emphasis on zero-emission vehicles, but rather on smaller modes of electric mobility. Zero emission vehicles may be preferable to fossil fuel vehicles, but they are not sustainable. Moreover, Council needs to consider the space requirements for the charging of electric vehicles. We are concerned about residents currently charging their electric vehicles from the street, taking space that could be used for other transport users. Council needs to provide plentiful charging stations to ensure that electric vehicles do not monopolise the edge of the roads.

Walking as transport mode is significantly under-reported

We note that the JWS Research Report found that 24% of Merri-bek residents walked at least once per month. We believe that this figure is far too low, and possibly reflects issues in how the question was posed. Other surveys have found rates in excess of 80%,

In the Victorian Government Road Safety Partners Submission to the Inquiry into the Impact of Road Safety Behaviour on Vulnerable Road Users (18 July 2023), it was noted:

Each month DTP surveys a representative sample of the Victorian population about travel behaviours, perceptions and sentiment towards transport. This involves an online survey and a representative (i.e. age, gender, region) sample size of 1,600. The following data is relevant as it shows how Victorians are reporting they are travelling post-COVID-19. The most recent quarter of data (Jan-Mar 2023) in Figure 4 shows: • Car travel and walking are the most common modes of transport - 89 per cent of Victorians drove a car at least weekly and 84 per cent walked at least weekly.

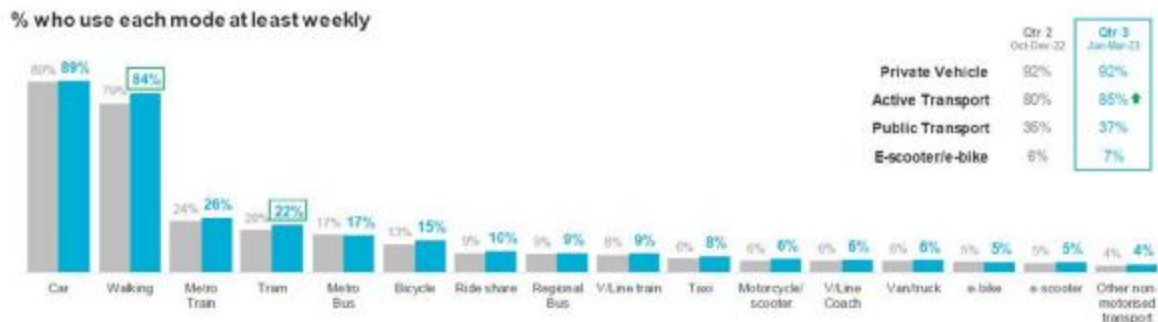


Figure 4. Overview transport usage – Weekly use mode (Jan-Mar 2023).

Transport and Cost of Living

Regarding this statement: “Affordability can be a huge barrier towards transport choice, and our strategy must consider creating more diverse, reliable and affordable transport options in an effort to help people reduce their transport costs”.

It seems that this statement is implying that sustainable transport may not be affordable, particularly as it was preceded by comments on the price of a Myki ticket. Generally, sustainable transport - walking, cycling and public transport - is cheaper than running a motor vehicle. If Council has specific concerns in this regard, then we suggest that they be spelled out. For example, there is a case to be made for reducing the cost of Myki passes, particularly for monthly and longer, and for family tickets to be made cheaper. Some specifics on what the Council could lobby for would be helpful. But in the main, affordability is a big attraction of sustainable transport.

The Six Themes

We question whether these themes are of equal status. We are facing a climate emergency. This year, climate impacts have accelerated, and other environmental problems are also increasing. It is urgent that we make our transport system sustainable. Sustainability is not just a “nice to have”. It is essential. It should probably be an overarching theme.

The safety theme needs to be unpicked. There are different safety concerns, and they need to be addressed in different ways.

- Road safety is a barrier for some people to use active transport, particularly cycling. It can hinder people walking particularly if they need to cross arterial roads without crossings. We believe the transport strategy should be clearer when it refers to “safe” speeds. Council could be making more of the safety benefits of 30 kph. And Council needs to be advocating for safer speeds on arterial roads.
- Feeling unsafe at night and in deserted streets due to the fear of violence can be addressed in part by good design, and by creating more of a walking culture. Much of this is within Council’s control.
- Footpath safety is an issue particularly for the elderly and those with mobility challenges. This also crosses over into the accessibility theme. This is an area that is almost completely the responsibility of Council. There is much that Council can do to ensure that footpaths are clear of obstructions, including vehicles. Repairing uneven footpaths is a budgetary matter. And Councils can ensure that footpaths are only used by pedestrians by building protecting bike lanes.

Given that safety is such a key concern of residents, more could be made of the safety theme. It may resonate more than the “choice” framing used in the discussion paper.

In terms of health, reducing the urban heat island effect should be an important consideration. A [recent study](#) found that 2% of deaths in Australia were associated with heatwaves. A major contributor to the urban heat island effect are bitumen roads and car parks.