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# Box Hill Brickworks Parkland

## **WHITEHORSE OPEN SPACE STRATEGY 2024 – SUBMISSION**

29 August 2024

Thank you for the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Open Space Strategy.

Our comments mainly relate to Box Hill where the Suburban Rail Loop Authority (SRLA) is undertaking precinct planning.

### **INTRODUCTION**

We note the strategy does not take into account the SRLA population forecasts for Box Hill or the Victorian government draft housing targets for an additional 79,000 dwellings in Whitehorse.

The anticipated growth and urban renewal of Box Hill is well known and the need for open space for the emerging population clearly established.

Compared to other areas in Whitehorse, the Box Hill precinct will see a more pronounced transition to high-rise housing and apartment living and this will create a big demand for green open space, so essential for community health and wellbeing and the environment.

In our view the draft strategy is therefore incomplete, especially considering the status of Box Hill as a metropolitan activity centre and multi functional centre within Whitehorse.

We believe the strategy should clearly spell out Council's vision and ambitions for open space in Box Hill, allowing for government projections.

### **OVERALL DIRECTIONS**

The overall directions of the Open Space Strategy, set out at pages 10-11, provide a good framework around open space planning:

The key points appear to be

- Improving existing open space
- Providing diversity in open space offerings
- Safe and easy walking access to open space
- Expanding linear open space links
- Providing additional open space and expanding existing spaces to increase visibility and accessibility
- Nature conservation and planting indigenous vegetation
- Providing well distributed green open space across the municipality with a focus on medium and high density precincts – especially with large spreading canopy trees that assist with urban cooling.

## **BOX HILL BRICKWORKS SITE**

As noted, the big question the Open Space Strategy leaves unanswered is how to accommodate high density living in Box Hill and provide the necessary green space relief and ‘sense of being in nature’ that must be planned for and provided for current and future residents.

This need also applies to workers and students across the growing commercial, health and education sectors in Box Hill.

The Box Hill Brickworks site, the last green expanse in the heart of Box Hill, must be a key part of this future. This site can become the green lungs of the Box Hill CBD and, with appropriate planning, a cultural and social meeting place for everyone.

The Brickworks site also offers a unique opportunity to link with Surrey Dive and enhance the quality of that reserve and accessibility for the community, noting that expanding existing spaces is a key overall direction of the Open Space Strategy. The Brickworks site benefits from a long frontage to Surrey Drive and access points from both Federation Street and the eastern end of Mont Albert Road.

A broad concept plan would be needed to cement the overall vision. It would be expected to be led by the State Government and Council and involve input from the community. Some ideas for the parkland have already been expressed by community members that include:

- Passive recreation with trees and linked open green spaces
- Re-imagining the industrial heritage of the site
- Celebrating the multicultural character of the Box Hill community
- Recognising First Nations people and their connections to the land
- Creating a Global Garden of Peace
- Appreciating Box Hill’s history with the Heidelberg School of Artists
- Possible use of existing buildings for community arts and gallery space, with café
- Sculpture walk in the park
- Wildlife and bird corridor
- Botanic gardens, walking trails, picnic areas, native and deciduous trees and green space
- Play spaces for all age groups, all abilities and cultures
- Seamless connection and integration with the adjacent Surrey Dive
- Connection with adjacent E-W and N-S cycling corridors

## **URBAN FOREST**

We believe the Open Space Strategy could make a stronger connection with Council’s Urban Forest Strategy 2021-2031 to reinforce the role played by public land (often parkland / public open space reserves) in expanding tree canopy cover, enhancing biodiversity and adapting to changes in climate.

For example, while Box Hill loses approximately 25% of Box Hill Gardens for the best part of a decade (and possibly more if SRL-North proceeds) it is the loss of large canopy trees from the Gardens as well as from the Whitehorse Road median strip that significantly diminishes the canopy cover in Box Hill.

We note a key aim of the Urban Forest strategy is to increase tree canopy cover in Whitehorse to 30% by 2050. As the strategy states: *Trees and vegetation provide a visual relief from the built form. They provide habitat for wildlife, a sense of seasonality and the opportunity to connect with nature in our suburbs.*

The draft Open Space Strategy draws on the notion of urban civic open space in central Box Hill with landscaped and paved pedestrian areas around the retail and station forecourts.

There is no substitute, however, for green parkland and trees which offer far more opportunity to increase canopy cover and biodiversity as well as offering the quality of open space the people need to connect with nature and for passive outdoor enjoyment, especially in a dense urban environment.

### **WALKABLE CONNECTIONS**

An important aspect of the open space strategy is the attention to walkable distances from home with distances between 400 metres (5 minute walk) and up to 1000 metres (10-12 minute walk) being a generally accepted benchmark.

The densification of Box Hill and the forecast population growth means there will be unprecedented demand on open space that is central to Box Hill. This will be keenly felt by residents in high density and high-rise housing.

The Box Hill Brickworks site is well within the above benchmarks for walkable access to open space.

### **QUANTITY OF OPEN SPACE RELATIVE TO POPULATION DENSITY**

We note the ‘Technical Report’ February 2024, that accompanies the Open Space Strategy, states (in Table 3f) that the proportion of open space per person in Box Hill has declined from 49 square metres in 2006 to 29 square metres in 2021.

This figure will decline more rapidly given the projected population growth and with little additional open space proposed. Council’s own published material forecasts that the amount of open space could reduce to as low as 7.15 square metres per person if no additional open space is provided in Box Hill based on the government’s 2021 population forecasts.

### **GREEN LINKS AND PEDESTRAIN/CYCLING CONNECTIONS**

We strongly support further improving linear open space connections and wildlife corridors.

As noted above, the Brickworks site represents a great opportunity to add significantly to Surrey Dive and bring passive open space and a treed environment closer to the centre of Box Hill.

Vicinity Centres Pty Ltd recently obtained approval to construct seven high-rise towers on a large site in central Box Hill. This approval sets aside land to facilitate a pedestrian/cycle link over the railway line between Nelson Road and Thurston Street.

This would provide an important link to many amenities in Box Hill on both the north and south sides of the railway corridor including to parkland at the Box Hill Brickworks site where E-W and N-S pedestrian and cycling pathways could traverse.

### **REGIONAL OPEN SPACE**

The technical report accompanying the strategy dissects the composition of open space in each of the 16 suburb localities within Whitehorse.

Only Box Hill, Mont Albert, Surrey Hills and Blackburn South are listed with ‘zero’ regional open space.

Suburbs are obviously not ‘islands’ and Surrey Hills, for example, has a southern abuttal to Wattle Park; one of Melbourne’s original large suburban regional parks.

However, Box Hill and the adjacent Mont Albert are notable in not having close access to a large nature park or regional open space, as other localities in Whitehorse do have.

This further highlights the opportunity and importance of the Box Hill Brickworks site as a potential regional attraction.

A pedestrian/cycle bridge over Elgar Road could remove a strong physical barrier to new parkland at the Brickworks site and be mutually beneficial to the communities of both Mont Albert and Box Hill. A lesser but effective option could involve an ‘at grade pedestrian crossing’ in Elgar Road.

### **FORMER QUARRIES/LANDFILL SITES AROUND MELBOURNE**

The Box Hill Brickworks ceased production in 1988 and the landfill closed 25 years ago, in 1999. Subsequent environmental audits have deemed the site suitable for recreational open space.

It is noted that Council’s 2007 Open Space Strategy flagged the potential for future open space at the Box Hill Brickworks site.

In Recommendation 5.4.3.1 (page 58) of the 2007 strategy, under the heading 5.4.3 Box Hill - Former Standard Brickworks site, it was recommended as follows:

*In the longer term, investigate options for future open space provision in the vicinity of the historic buildings and connect to Surrey Dive open space reserve, pending the resolution of environmental issues.*

The longer term was expressed as 15 years meaning this recommendation intended that further investigation would occur around 2022.

There are many examples around Melbourne that have seen Councils and governments working together to convert former quarry/landfill sites into public open space. The following list is of just a few of them that are, or are becoming, much loved community parkland.

1. *All Nations Park, Northcote (Map 30 G-8)* Contemporary 13ha regional park created on the site of the former Northcote Regional Tip. The park opened in February 2002
2. *Darebin Parklands, Alphington (Map 31 D-9)* 33ha, once a tip site
3. *Fritsch Holzer Park, Hawthorn (Map 45 G-12)* Former Brickworks and Tip site, Rose Street, Hawthorn
4. *Bayview Park, Narre Warren (Map 108 J-12)*
5. *City of Casey, 1001 steps park*, former landfill site in Quarry Road, Narre Warren
6. *Karkarook Park, Heatherton (Map 78 E-7)*
7. *Sunshine Energy Park, 570A Ballarat Road, Albion (Map 26 E-9)* Former City of Sunshine Tip
8. *Newport Lakes Parkland (Map 55 G-3)* Former quarry and landfill
9. *Truemans Road ‘Nepean Miniature Aerosport Assoc’, Rosebud West (Map 169 F-6)* Former Shire of Flinders Central Tip
10. *Farnsworth Avenue parkland, Footscray (Map 42 B-2)* Former City of Footscray Tip
11. *Victory Road, Clarinda (Map 79 A-10)* Former landfill site, 31ha converted into a community park
12. *Elder Street South, Clarinda (Map 78 J-9)* Former landfill being converted to nature park
13. *Quarries Park, Ramsden Street, Clifton Hill (Map 44 G-2)* Quarry from the 1850s and landfill through the 1960-1970 period

## CONCLUSION

We continue to advocate for the vision and opportunity offered by the Box Hill Brickworks site for new parkland in central Box Hill - and for this to be identified in the 2024 Whitehorse Open Space Strategy. To summarise:

- The Brickworks site is the only greenfield expanse remaining in central Box Hill
- The government estimates that by 2056 the number of people living in the Box Hill precinct could increase from 29,000 to 77,500, an increase of 167%, and the number of jobs from 23,500 to 48,500, an increase of 106%
- Brick production ceased in 1988 and the landfill was closed 25 years ago
- Environmental audits deem the site suitable for open space
- Residents, especially in high density housing, need green open space for community connections and health and well being
- The site has unlimited potential as a passive recreation space and nature reserve for Box Hill, to meet the diverse interests of people of all ages and cultures
- The site has regional possibilities with potential for strong E-W and N-S pedestrian and cycling links to adjacent suburbs
- Surrey Dive provides an asset, an ambience and natural setting to merge with the Brickworks site
- Existing heritage buildings offer potential for complementary community/commercial uses such as an arts/cultural centre and cafe
- Transforming the site to open space could be significant for the environment and biodiversity and a strong response to Council's Urban Forest Strategy
- Creation of such a central park, within one of Melbourne's most densely settled metropolitan activity centres, is a generational opportunity that could be civic defining for Box Hill and the City of Whitehorse.

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