

Amendment C241WSEA, Whittlesea Planning Scheme  
PRECINCT STRUCTURE PLAN  
SHENSTONE PARK

SUBMISSION TO VICTORIAN PLANNING AUTHORITY

SUBMISSION BY THE MERRI CREEK MANAGEMENT  
COMMITTEE



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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

This submission is made by the Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC).

MCMC has reviewed Amendment C241WSEA to the Whittlesea Planning Scheme, in particular the Precinct Structure Plan (PSP) for the Shenstone Park precinct. The western part of the precinct drains to a tributary of the Merri Creek and the central part to Curly Sedge Creek, also a tributary of Merri Creek and thus of particular interest to MCMC. The eastern part falls within Darebin Creek catchment. In addition to the waterways, MCMC recognises the importance of the remnant native vegetation and other significant environmental values in the precinct area, and the cultural heritage and the visual amenity values of the precinct. These natural and cultural heritage values are integral to the values of the basalt plains landscape of the upper Merri (and upper Darebin).

Our submission contains three main elements:

1. an overview of the MCMC's role and functions;
2. a discussion of general matters in the PSP and support for key initiatives; and

## **2.0 MERRI CREEK MANAGEMENT COMMITTEE INC**

### **2.1 Background**

The Merri Creek Management Committee (MCMC) is an environmental coordination and management agency formed in 1989 to achieve the shared vision for the Creek held by the stakeholders in the Merri Creek catchment.

MCMC is an incorporated association whose members include all of the municipalities in the catchment, namely: the Darebin, Hume, Moreland, Whittlesea and Yarra City Councils plus Mitchell Shire Council; and the Friends of Merri Creek and the Wallan Environment Group. Representatives of these member groups form a Committee of Management which guides the Committee's activities.

The primary purpose of the Merri Creek Management Committee is:

*"...to ensure the preservation of natural and cultural heritage, and the ecologically sensitive restoration, development and maintenance of the Merri Creek and tributaries, their corridors and associated ecological communities"*

The key activities of the MCMC include:

- Coordinating the policies, works and activities of member groups.
- Carrying out revegetation and remnant vegetation restoration works at more than 80 sites along the Creek and its tributaries between Wallan and the Yarra.
- Providing environmental planning advice to member Councils and developers.
- Involving the community in managing the Creek and its parklands.
- Educating the community about environmental issues.
- Seeking funds and grants to support Merri Creek programs.
- Negotiating with government on key issues.

MCMC has an annual budget of approximately \$1.3 million and employs 14 full time and 6 part time staff.

## **2.2 Merri Creek and Environs Strategy**

A key policy document for the MCMC is the 'Merri Creek and Environs Strategy 2009-2014'. The Merri Creek and Environs Strategy is a document intended to give direction to managers of the waterway corridors of the Merri catchment. As the title indicates, it has a strategic intent; however it also captures some important, often site-specific actions, which underpin its strategic direction.

All six Councils in the Merri catchment have formally adopted/endorsed the Merri Creek and Environs Strategy at Council meetings.

The vision in the Strategy for the Merri catchment waterway corridors is

*"To achieve healthy living streams flowing through attractive environments which provide habitat for native animals and are valued by the community as peaceful, passive open space havens. To protect the natural and cultural features of the Merri catchment waterway corridors through sensitive management which will provide a lasting benefit for the community."*

The Strategy also commits to maintaining the diversity of indigenous habitats and species and improving biodiversity connectivity across the catchment, and identifies the importance of conserving aboriginal heritage, post-contact non-Aboriginal heritage and visual character.

## **2.3 Familiarity with the PSP area**

MCMC is familiar with the Merri Creek catchment, the Merri Creek and its major tributaries, and its key natural values. MCMC's knowledge includes specific experience of management of on-ground biodiversity and natural areas, experience in strategic planning for waterway and biodiversity values, a comprehensive understanding of the impacts of urban development on biodiversity and waterway values, and a clear understanding of the benefits of waterways and open space to urban communities.

MCMC does not have specific on-ground knowledge of the Shenstone Park PSP area; however we are very familiar with similar landscapes elsewhere in the Merri Creek catchment and with issues related to development on soils in the upper catchment .

## **3.0 COMMENTS**

### **3.1 Background Information**

We appreciate the detailed information provided for the development of the PSP and the way in which this information has been used to inform the PSP planning for the protection and integration of key environmental values, particularly the reports on:

- Shenstone Park Precinct Structure Plan - Aboriginal cultural heritage assessment (Biosis, Oct 2017);
- Shenstone Park PSP Assessment - Hydrologic regime report (Alluvium, Feb 2018);
- Shenstone Park PSP assessments – Geomorphology and vegetation values assessment (Alluvium and Eco Logical, Feb 2018)
- Shenstone Park Visual Character Assessment (City of Whittlesea, Nov 2017).

### 3.2 Soils Analysis

We are concerned with the brevity of the soils analysis summarised on p.7 of the Geomorphology and vegetation values assessment Report.

A recent specialist presentation on soils of the Upper Merri highlighted the critical importance of undertaking soils mapping and analyses, particularly of the sodicity, slaking and dispersivity characteristics. This information is needed in order to inform drainage strategies, stormwater treatment strategies, construction erosion controls, integrated water management plans and other aspects of PSP planning (Dr Robert van de Graaff, Upper Merri Soils Presentation 29 Oct 2019).

This level of soil analysis does not appear to have been undertaken for the PSP. Nevertheless, the statement that “*Soils across the site are dominated by Brown Sodosols characterised by a **sodic** B2 horizon .....and Black Vertosols .....*” [emphasis added] demonstrates that problematic sodic soils are widespread in the PSP.

The identification of sodic soils in the PSP brings into question the assumption that best practice integrated stormwater management can be achieved.

Likewise the achievement of the objective stated in the Explanatory Report that ‘..existing waterways will be retained and **improved** ..’ is questionable unless soils information is considered when designing constructed waterways and determining how to achieve functional stormwater treatment and retarding basin assets.

In the nearby Mickleham area a constructed waterway has failed because its design is not appropriate for the sodic, dispersive soil type; sediment basins are not achieving settlement of sediment pollution because of the dispersive soil type; the design of a constructed waterway - the green open space centre for a new area - is facing major problems and may need to be piped because of the sodic soil; and the question of how to achieve functional stormwater wetlands in areas of sodic, dispersive soils is yet to be answered.

Elsewhere in the Merri catchment, recently constructed waterway corridors are experiencing salinity problems because of the exposure of saline soils. It will now be very difficult to establish stabilising and shading vegetation for what is intended to be an attractive part of the open space network.

The management of erosion risks for subdivision and building construction on sodic soils needs specialised approaches, if excessive levels of sediment pollution are to be mitigated.

A different approach to ‘business as usual’ is needed where sodic dispersive soils are present, depending on the severity, depth and distribution of these soils. Standard approaches don’t work and this is why it is vital to understand the extent and severity of the problem and identify alternative approaches before the PSP is finalised.

The consequences for not getting this right go beyond water quality and waterway health; there are implications for liveability and the provision of effective green open space.

**MCMC recommends that a detailed investigation of the soil sodicity and dispersiveness be undertaken in order to fully inform the Shenstone Park PSP and to identify the approaches needed to effectively manage the associated risk. We believe this information is needed at the PSP stage.**