

Briefing document re the Punt Road Acquisition Overlay

Background

The State Government made an election commitment in 2014 to establish an independent Advisory Committee to review and report on the future of the Punt Road Public Acquisition Overlay (PAO). On 17 February 2015, the Minister for Planning approved the Terms of Reference for the Punt Road PAO Advisory Committee.

The Terms of Reference are:

“The purpose of the Advisory Committee is to review the future of the Public Acquisition Overlay (overlay) affecting properties within the City of Stonnington on the east side of Punt Road along the 2.6 kilometres between Alexandra Avenue, South Yarra and Union Street, Windsor by seeking input from affected landowners, stakeholders and agencies and to recommend to the Minister for Planning whether to retain, modify or remove the overlay.”

Historical context

The PAO was introduced in the 1950's and, up until the 1970's, VicRoads purchased properties as they became available. The State, through Vic Roads, currently owns 22 of the ~140 properties on the east side of Punt Road, many of which are now rundown and derelict. VicRoads continues to use the PAO to prevent owners of properties from making much needed improvements and from maintaining their properties to safe standards. After an unconscionable 60 years, the ongoing uncertainty continues to impact on local residences including, importantly, 40 properties of significant historical importance to Melbourne.

Nearly a decade ago, local residents formed a Punt Road community group (Drop Punt) to lobby to have the PAO removed. Despite its constant lobbying of both major parties during their respective years in government, Drop Punt has been unable to secure the removal of the PAO. VicRoads has been the consistent stumbling block, stating that whilst there is no intention to widen Punt Road, the PAO should be retained on a 'just in case' basis. For obvious reasons, this has created ongoing and increased uncertainty for the local community.

In response, the State Government has established an Advisory Committee to the Planning Panel specifically to hear submissions from VicRoads and other stakeholders. VicRoads has held community forums, both online and in-person, as part of the required process. However, prior to the forums, VicRoads produced a background document proposing that Punt Road be widened to a six or eight lane freeway. This week, VicRoads made public the ARIAG Report (modelling contracted by VicRoads) and the Options Review. Although the numbers don't stack up, the Options Review still states VicRoads' preference for a six, growing eight lane freeway. (See summary below.)

Issues with retaining the PAO and widening Punt Road

The Drop Punt group is compiling a comprehensive submission to present to the Advisory Committee opposing the widening of Punt Road and proposing the removal of the PAO for the following reasons:

- The health and safety of the thousands of school children who attend schools adjacent to or near Punt Road, hailing from all over Melbourne and overseas;
- The preservation of Melbourne's most treasured, public green spaces, including the Royal Botanic Gardens, Yarra River precinct, the envy of other cities around the world;
- The preservation of 40 of Melbourne's historically important properties;
- The evidence from traffic and town planning experts who have produced local and international studies on 'Induced Traffic' (more roads leads to more cars which leads to more congestion). Professor Graham Currie, Chair of Public Transport, Monash University claims that widening Punt Road will only be effective for three years and will be at capacity within 10 years. He believes it is a band-aid measure and Punt Road needs to be narrowed, not widened;

- All major roads built in Melbourne have needed to be widened within 10 years of construction because of induced traffic, including the Monash, the Tullamarine, the Eastern and the Ring Road;
- VicRoads' own statistics reveal an almost 18% decrease in traffic on Punt Road in the last 10 year study;
- International statistics demonstrate road widening on roads with pedestrian crossings actually slows traffic down because pedestrians have more lanes to cross and therefore the 'walk green light' cycle needs to be longer;
- South Yarra has a rapidly growing pedestrian population due to the dramatic increase in new apartment complexes, many of which are being constructed without car parks. It is understood that up to 20,000 further new apartments are planned for construction in the Stonnington area in the next two-five years;
- There is not enough parking in Melbourne to encourage more of the population to travel by vehicle. According to VicRoads, the city is already beyond capacity;
- Widening the Punt Road on the south side of the Yarra will only create greater congestion on the north side - Hoddle Street has already been widened and is still congested; and
- The inner city congestion is caused by insufficient public transport in the outer-suburbs. Major cities throughout the world are building public transport infrastructure in favour of, what they consider, antiquated road widening.

Particular issues of greatest concern to residents include:

Visual Impact on the Precinct: An ugly freeway through vibrant inner-city suburbs of Windsor, Prahran and South Yarra will destroy the ambiance of Melbourne. **It will define Melbourne as a car habitat, not a people friendly place.**

Health of the Community: Stonnington has the second lowest amount of public open space per capita of all Victorian Councils. Residents on the east side of Punt Road need Fawkner Park and the Royal Botanic Garden and Yarra River precinct for their mental and physical wellbeing.

Social & Environmental Impact: A six or eight lane freeway will have a detrimental effect on Melbourne's prized green & open spaces including: the Royal Botanic Gardens, the Shrine of Remembrance, the Sidney Myer Music Bowl, the Tan; Fawkner Park, Como Park and the Yarra River, bank and trails.

The Botanic Gardens / Yarra River precinct will be desecrated by traffic noise and air pollution. The Yarra River will be heavily polluted by freeway run-off and debris, including motor oil, chemicals from tyres, petrol and diesel fuel leakage from the extra freeway lanes on Hoddle and Swan Street Bridges.

This area is home to arguably the best natural, outdoor sport and recreation arena in the world and it will be destroyed. Imagine participating in these hugely popular activities amongst the traffic smog and noise, and wearing surgical masks:

- Running or walking around the tan or participating in fun runs;
- Rowing on the Yarra, including our Olympians who use it as their training course. Cycling, running, walking along the Yarra trail. Or families/friends barbequing or picnicking on the Yarra bank.

Every part of this peaceful sanctuary will be effected:

- Attending performances of Shakespeare or Moonlight Cinema in the Botanic Gardens or the Carols by Candlelight at Myer Music Bowl, while contending with major traffic noise;
- Or seeking peaceful reflection in the Gardens or at the Shrine, with car horns blasting and traffic rumbling past.

These public spaces were gifted to us by our forbearers and we are the current custodians. We need to ensure the sustainability, of these beloved Melbourne public spaces, for future generations to enjoy.

Safety: The greatest concern is for the safety of the thousands of children on Punt Road every school day. **This small area draws the highest concentration of school children in Victoria.** Two schools have campuses on both sides of Punt Road – Wesley College and Melbourne Girls Grammar. South Yarra Primary and Christ Church Grammar are also located on Punt Road. The children walk, ride, scooter, skateboard and jump on and off buses on Punt Road. Significant numbers of boys travel on foot from South Yarra Station across Punt Road to Melbourne Grammar. Girls step out from South Yarra station to catch trams on Toorak Road to travel west to Mac.Robertson Girls’ High School, or east to Loreto, Lauriston and St Catherine’s. Boys from Melbourne High walk from the Domain Interchange, South Yarra station and the bus stops on Punt Road and children attending the Victorian College for the Deaf walk to and from Prahran Station, crossing Punt Road at High Street.

These schools constantly take groups of students back and forth across Punt Road to utilise local amenities and share facilities, including the Tan, the boat sheds on the Yarra and the sports grounds at Fawkner Park and Como Oval. Punt Road, the west end of Toorak Road and Alexandra Avenue are populated with school children. These schools aren’t going anywhere - they have made major investments in their campuses, so there will always be 40km school zones on Punt Road. VicRoads has identified Punt Road as a high accident incident zone, so increasing the road traffic will place the lives of these children at greater risk. **It is unfathomable to prioritise cars over the safety of kids.**

The Arup Report

In accordance with Stage 1 of the Terms of Reference, VicRoads was requested to prepare a background report which was prepared and made publicly available in August 2015. As part of Stage 2 of the Terms of Reference, VicRoads was requested to prepare an Options Report to “expand upon the Background Report by including traffic modelling and projections for various future options along Punt Road”. Arup was engaged by VicRoads on 21 July 2015 to prepare this report which provides input into VicRoads response to Stage 2. The Arup report was made public on 21 October.

The report provides some very useful content, and quotes, to assist efforts to have the PAO removed and the idea of road expansion killed off. Specific comments stemming from the report are as follows:

Exec Summary: “Punt Road is currently an impediment...” This is not the case 24/7 and should not be assumed to be so;

2.2 Heritage: There are properties of A1 Heritage significance that are covered by the PAO – this fact is not referenced in the report;

2.3 Environment: There are protected trees at the northern end of Punt Road – this fact has not been referenced in the report;

2.4 Traffic: The report makes a clear statement that the congestion issue felt along the length of Punt Road stems predominantly from the Hoddle St section and the Alexander Avenue intersection and not Punt Rd itself south of the river;

6.1 (cross reference with 7.1): The introduction of 24 hour clearways would have a positive impact on weekend traffic travelling to the sports/entertainment precinct – this is not acknowledged in the report;

6.4-6.7: The report claims that there will be no biodiversity impacts resulting from the implementation of the various concept options. This statement appears without substantiation and is highly questionable;

7.1: The beneficial impact of concepts 1-3 on weekend traffic is not referenced;

7.2: The following quote is potentially extremely useful: “**the six lane concepts accommodate a significantly higher travel demand...with a marginally reduced level of performance along Punt Road when compared to the four lane concepts.**” ie more congestion, slower traffic;

7.2: The statement: “the nature of traffic demand...” is the only reference to the effect of ‘induced traffic’ which research tells us is an inevitable consequence of road expansion;

P29 Tables 4-6: These tables indicate that there would be no meaningful improvement in travel times under concepts 5-7 – indeed, they suggest a deterioration;

P32 Tables 8 & 9: These tables indicate that improvements stemming from changes to intersection arrangements will be mixed;

7.4: The report rates the merits of each of the seven Concepts proposed by VicRoads. Following is a subjective assessment of the best and worst option under each of the categories listed at this part of the report:

Category	Best Option	Worst Option
Cost	Concept 1, then concept 2	6 & 7
Journey times	2 & 3	4, then 1
Reliability	1-3 & 5-7 which appear similar	4
MV operating cost	1-3	5-7 (note the statement there will be an increase in length of trips)
Road safety	1-3 & 5-7 which the report suggests will be similar (the logic of this is baffling given the known safety implications stemming from > vehicle volumes);	4
Pedestrian access	4	7
Cycling access	6	1 & 7 (note the suggestion that cyclists could use the dedicated bus lanes!!!)
Dislocation & land acquisition	1, then 2 & 3	6 & 7
Climate change	1-3	4, then 5-7
Visual amenity	1-2	7, then 5 & 6
Noise	1-3	4-7
Biodiversity	1	2-7 (see comment above re biodiversity impact)
Heritage	1-3	5-7

An objective assessment of the merit of each of the seven concepts as outlined at 7.4 is that **the best option is Concept 2**, whilst **the worst options are Concepts 6-7**, particularly as the report indicates marginal or negative improvement in traffic movements from these three (with Concept 5) road widening options.

There is a logic flow that can be read into the report, but which the authors haven’t stated implicitly, being that: if the road is widened, more vehicles will use it; pedestrians (and cyclists, both groups of which will face greater danger from the increased vehicle volumes) will take longer to cross the road; which, in turn, will require longer crossing time allowance at intersections; thereby slowing traffic even further. The report is also silent on the fact there are 40km school zones on Punt Road, so traffic cannot travel any faster than is currently the case.

8 Way Forward: **“The outcomes of this appraisal indicate that there are concepts that improve the operation of Punt Road that can almost entirely be contained within the existing road reserve.”** This is a definitive and defining statement in relation to the merit of widening Punt Road.

Federal investment

Any Victorian Government application for federal funding should be steered to public transport infrastructure rather than creating an inner-city Los Angeles style freeway. This has been raised with the Assistant Treasurer & Member for Higgins, Kelly O’Dwyer.

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