



Friends of Steele Creek

Essential Service Commission
Level 8/570 Bourke St
Melbourne
Vic 3000

Dear Commissioners.

Friends of Steele Creek wishes to support the Melbourne Water Price Submission 2022 and in particular the increased Waterways and Drainage Charge. We support the recommended increase, fully realising that is still insufficient to meet the current crisis faced by our waterways. Nor can it fulfil Melbourne Waters legal obligation under the Water Act 1989(Vic) to improve waterway health!

Our Maribyrnong waterways lost 90% of vegetation, especially the critically needed riparian vegetation, during colonisation. Extraction licenses were granted in the Maribyrnong's upper attachment to the detriment of our groundwater dependent ecosystems. The upper catchment condition is crucial to the down stream river health urban populations receive. We have been waiting for five years to get an environmental flow for the Maribyrnong that on paper we are entitled to but Melbourne Water has still not delivered.

Post war industrialisation saw our waterways being used as drains for polluted industrial waste. Today's planning authorities are generally ignorant of the unique characteristic of the Volcanic Plains waterways in the west of Melbourne. We are much drier and we rely on rain infiltration to provide groundwater flows to keep our creeks and rivers flowing in summer. Today's rainfall is rushed into creeks as soon as it falls and whether or not we can sustain the in-stream life in our creeks in dry summers is a constant worry. The current high volume and velocity of flows continues to wipe out our little remaining habitat. In many reaches of our western creeks, there is no slow flowing, warm water where macro-invertebrates and tadpoles can develop. So how do our local children ever get to see the life cycle of a frog in their local creeks?

It was this kind of abuse that galvanized many communities to establish Friends and Landcare groups to stand up for our waterways. We see our waterways as worthy of protection, and that it is our responsibility to at least prevent their further decline. Without our on ground efforts there would be far less for the current generation to enjoy. FOSC's revegetation projects have seen our local native bird population increase from 4 to 41 native species over a 25-year period. We continue to see fewer and fewer frogs and dragonflies etc. And now we face climate change and further urban expansion.

Our community group has been active for 25 years in advocating for greater protection in both planning and environment law for our waterway. We've also sustained strong advocacy to state government agencies, Melbourne Water, Environment Protection Authority Victoria, Hume, Brimbank and Mooney Valley councils. Vicroads has stormwater from three freeways feeding directly into Steele Creek and we keep trying to negotiate with them also. We also advocate to VICTRACK to replace their existing degraded culvert in the rail embankment that crosses our creek in Airport West. Because we have two airports in our catchment we have endeavoured to work with Melbourne and Essendon Airports and the Commonwealth government, to achieve improved stormwater quality controls from those facilities also.

Additionally we have offered volunteering and educational opportunities for residents in our catchment. Our most recent 5-year revegetation project was Caring for Country Together on a sensitive Wurundjeri Cultural Heritage site on a neglected Parks Victoria site.

We have held a traditional Cool Burn on a restored grassland in Spring Gully Reserve, Keilor East. We have an on going collaboration with Wurundjeri Woi wurrung Narrap Rangers, as we seek to reintroduce seasonal wetlands within our catchment. We know the restoration of the riparian revegetation is the key to improving water quality and in stream habitat, but that kind expertise we do not have. Nor will MW allow community groups to run the risk of working in the riparian zone.

Our projects have been funded through financial support from Melbourne Water, Port Phillip and Western Port Catchment Management Authority, EPA Victoria Mooney Valley and Brimbank councils. We always give an equal amount of in kind support for funded projects. We know the value of such grants in building community attachment to sites. Equally we know that rate capped councils cannot financially support the many co-contribution schemes required to simply address the abundance of unhealthy stormwater impacting our waterways

This is the background knowledge I brought to the Melbourne Water consultation on refreshing the Maribyrnong River Health Strategy and also to the Melbourne Water Customer Council Consultation. I appreciated the time and effort that Melbourne water went to ensure both those processes provided all participants with the scientific background to understand the current situation of our waterways. Those experts left us in no doubt that as we face up to the twin threats of climate change and urban growth a business as usual approach will only see a further downward trajectory for waterway health, particularly in the west of Melbourne.

And that came as no surprise to those of us who have been actively monitoring our creeks for 25 years. In that time we have seen Melbourne Water, with decreasing staff (leading to a loss of corporate history and skills) and decreasing budgets, run fewer projects in their own name and do far less maintenance on the waterways. And this coincided with an expansion of Melbourne Waters responsibility to include the Werribee catchment and the Mornington Peninsula. At no time have we seen industry accountable for the damage they continue to cause !

Additionally, during the Customer Council process Melbourne Water ensured that we understood their capital and operating expenditures. Given what we understood what was required to simply just stop a further decline of waterway health, it was a sobering experience. We also spent a long time considering the Simalco process. It was essential to also get input from citizens not directly involved in advocating for protection of waterways. During the process, we also had an opportunity to observe the forums, where in-depth discussions were held in each catchment. We also reviewed the results of the online survey. The more in-depth forums showed that, the more people understood about the broad range of Melbourne Water's responsibilities, the bigger the increase they supported. The online survey similarly supported a rise in charges. When people are consulted and have their input ignored, it not only demoralising and insulting, it further undermines community trust in democratic consultations. There is enough scepticism already that about consultations that are "simply a tick the box process" without adding this one to them.

Because I can see the depth of the crisis facing our waterways I believed a 2% increase per annum plus CPI was needed. Given the current economic circumstance I believe 1% plus CPI would be a good start. Besides that recovery projects are extremely expensive and deliver poorer environmental outcomes. It would simply be a false economy to save now and make the future costs far more expensive.

I'm also hoping that when the Victorian government releases its response to the Ministerial Advisory Committee Waterways of the West's report and recommendations, they will offer substantial financial assistance and that the Yarra Strategic Plan will also get additional funding.

Without such efforts our western, groundwater dependent waterways, will truly become lifeless drains and our iconic platypus will continue to disappear from all of Melbourne's catchments. And how can that even be contemplated, when the true task before us is to seek genuine reconciliation with the Traditional Custodians of the waters and lands on which we are so lucky to live!

We have an obligation to Care for Country Together now, so that future generations can:

- Enjoy the physical and well being benefits these precious community assets can offer.
- See our iconic waterway wildlife
- Fish in healthy streams.
- Traditional Custodians can continue their aquatic cultural practices.
- Continue to have wonderful potable water.
- Inherit sewage treatment facilities do not hasten the decline of the health of our rivers, creeks and bays.

Yours sincerely
Helen van den berg
Spokesperson
Friends of Steele Creek