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Essential Services Commission  
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Mon 8 Feb 2021

**Re: Submission to Melbourne Water's 2016 Price Review – Drainage & Waterway Charges**

The Werribee River Association (WRA) wishes to support the Melbourne Water Price Submission 2022 to the Essential Services Commission.

**Werribee River Association**

WRA benefits the Werribee River catchment and surrounds by advancing the natural environment.

Our purposes are:

- Protecting water quality in the Werribee River, other local waterways and wetlands flowing to the coastline and into Port Phillip Bay
- Promoting the re-establishment of natural habitat for wildlife in the Werribee River catchment
- Providing attractive natural places for people to access and enjoy
- Providing educational programs about environmentally sustainable practices, educating a growing and diverse population living in the west of Melbourne

We speak up for waterways, wildlife and habitat, carry out research, conduct practical activity and work with the community.

The history of the organisation is rooted in advocacy and volunteerism for the environment and human health. In recent years, the organisation has grown substantially, now with 3 part-time staff, 400+ volunteers, and is well on its way to becoming the leading community-led, vibrant environmental agency in the Werribee catchment and surrounds.

**Werribee Riverkeeper**

Acting as the voice of the organisation, the Werribee Riverkeeper John Forrester has provided communities living on the waterways of the west of Melbourne with inspirational leadership since 1993, and was awarded a Premier's Volunteer Champion Award for Leadership in 2019. John is a former school teacher and principal, now working part-time as the Werribee Riverkeeper & acting as WRA's voluntary executive officer. John has educational, social science and restoration ecology qualifications, and has broad experience in the waterway sector in the west of Melbourne, having served on a range of management, advisory committees and boards, including the chair role for the Melbourne Water Waterways and Drainage Customer Council during 2019-2020.



## Legacy Issues and Waterways Out West

There has been a rapid change in the waterways of the west of Melbourne since the 1970s, and it was not until 2005 that a waterway manager was in place. In those thirty years, much urban and other development took place, leaving Melbourne Water many challenges when it assumed responsibility in 2005 for the former gap areas in the Werribee and Maribyrnong catchments. Not only did it have to meet the needs of a volcanic plains landscape with different soil types, different vegetation, and lower and less regular rainfall, but it faced a back log of issues with urban development which caused damage to waterways. For example, parts of Lollipop Creek in Wyndham Vale were transformed into widened permanent lakes, killing many large, old river red gums. That work cost much community anguish and funding to rectify matters.

Legacy issues were noted in the State Government Waterways of the West Discussion Paper 2019 key directions numbers 2 and 5 p. 54:

*No. 2 “Water quality and waterway health are on a declining trajectory... driven by legacy issues from historic land and waterway use, regular pollution events and... increased urban development, stormwater discharge and climate change.”*

*No. 5 “...the unique qualities and beauty of this landscape are not well understood, valued and protected.”*

## Challenges for the Waterways

As urban expansion continues with new migrant communities settling in the two catchments, with very little knowledge of living in harmony with their new land and waterways, there is a need for new initiatives and engagement with new communities.

A major engagement strategy by Melbourne Water was its lighthouse co-design project, Melbourne Water’s Healthy Waterways Strategy 2018 which says on p.94:

*“The Werribee catchment is earmarked for significant future urban development, presenting challenges for managing waterway health, but also opportunities for waterway protection.”*

Melbourne Water’s Healthy Waterways Strategy 2018 strategic priorities were; improving water flows, habitat for invertebrates, birds, frogs, fish, and platypus, while reducing predatory fish, stock access, and litter.

*“These strategic priorities will require ongoing investment over the next 20 years and beyond...”*

## Platypus now Threatened

Platypus numbers have plummeted in the Werribee River Werribee CBD area since first data was gathered in 1998 by WRA, due to lack of vegetation, poor levels of invertebrate populations, poor stormwater quality and a lack of sufficient environmental flows, prevalence of litter, and poor management of public access to riparian strips and waterways.

From WRA reports it can be seen 16 individual animals were micro-chipped in the CBD area in 1998 (Australian Platypus Conservancy 1998), 9 in 2000 (Australian Platypus Conservancy 2000), and lower levels in the millennium drought years as shown by netting and eDNA surveys (Melbourne Water), with seven killed by persons unknown in one illegal net in 2018 (Fisheries and Wildlife 2018).

WRA’s most recent observations conclude that the population in the Werribee CBD is now almost non-existent with just a small number hanging on in the Werribee Zoo precinct.

These observations are further underlined by the news that Platypus have had their level of threat increased to threatened in Victoria, and this is likely to worsen as climate change impacts further.

## The Pandemic

The pandemic is a new challenge, with very obvious major increases in usage of waterways for release from community lockdown times.

The pandemic also reinforces the need to provide substantial funding for these waterways in order to protect the physical, psychological and social health of the people.

If the waterways decline further in social value by lack of improvement or maintenance then we risk harming human health as well as that of the waterways themselves.

## Waterways and Drainage Investment Plan July 2021 – June 2026

Melbourne Water customers survey, as shown in the Waterways and Drainage Investment Plan July 2021 – June 2026 on p.3, says:

*“The customer research (customer preference and willingness to pay survey) found that the majority of customers would prefer to pay a higher charge for increased services (up to \$8 for metropolitan residential customers) in relation to stormwater management (pollution removal and stormwater harvesting), waterway management, flood risk management, access to land and water, and community education and involvement programs.”*

The finding provides a direction in which to move. The community’s awareness of waterways and their benefits to the community have grown in the pandemic, and our economic recovery is looking much better than at first feared.

## Opportunity for the Essential Services Commission

The ESC can enhance the future environmental and human health-giving benefits of the waterways of Melbourne, by taking this opportunity to consider an appropriate increase not only in this time period but into the future as well.

There needs to be recognition for the lack of a waterway manager in the past out west, for current challenges as described and for the need for long-term measures to protect social, cultural, economic, environmental and human health-giving benefits of the waterways in all of Melbourne.

If it is the aim of the ESC to:

*“...promote the long-term interests of Victorian consumers in relation to the price, quality and reliability of essential services.”*

... then WRA believes that a substantial increase over the next five years should be approved, and a further allowance and suitable arrangements into the future should be considered, in order to meet the long-term needs of this growing city.



John Forrester

Werribee Riverkeeper

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