

## DRAFT PATHS AND TRAILS PLAN 2025-2035 RELEASE FOR COMMUNITY CONSULTATION

---

Report Author: Executive Officer Recreation & Sport  
Responsible Officer: Director Built Environment & Infrastructure  
Ward(s) affected: (All Wards);

---

*The author(s) of this report and the Responsible Officer consider that the report complies with the overarching governance principles and supporting principles set out in the Local Government Act 2020.*

### CONFIDENTIALITY

This item is to be considered at a Council meeting that is open to the public.

### SUMMARY

The Draft Paths and Trails Plan 2025-2035 (Attachment 1) provides guidance for the development of the network of paths and trails in Yarra Ranges with a particular focus on improving health, wellbeing and community connectivity. The Plan considers and builds on the existing Hike and Bike Strategy (2005).

The Draft Paths and Trails Plan 2025-2035 aims to:

- Identify levels of service for Shared Use and Walking Trails to define construction and maintenance standards.
- Identify and map Shared Trails and Council owned or maintained Walking Trails in the Yarra Ranges.
- Identify action areas relating to the future of the paths and trails network.
- Identify priority of works including upgrades to sections of existing trails, new/improved crossings and addressing missing link to paths and trails.

This report provides Councillors with a summary of the consultation which took place in 2024, an update of the changes made to the draft plan and seeks Council support to release the plan for final community consultation.

### RECOMMENDATION

***That Council endorse the release of the Draft Paths and Trails Plan 2025-2035 for Community Consultation.***

## RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

- Adopted the *Hike & Bike Strategy 2005* which outlined a network of paths and trails across the municipality to improve connections and promote tourism.
- September 2018 - Adopted the *Eastern Regional Trail Strategy 2018* which provided the strategic direction required to allow local government and other land management authorities to work together towards an interconnected and well-used trail network over the next decade.
- Adopted ‘*Connected*’ the *Integrated Transport Strategy 2020*, which creates the framework and direction to align transport investment and policy decisions with the aspirations the community hold for the Yarra Ranges of the future.

## DISCUSSION

### ***Purpose and Background***

This report has been prepared to provide Council with an update on the consultation that occurred in 2024 subsequent changes to the Draft Paths and Trails Plan and seek approval to undertake the final round of consultation before consideration of adoption in October 2025. The plan has been part-funded through a Sport and Recreation Victoria “*Community Facility Funding Planning Grant*”.

The plan provides the strategic intent regarding the Paths and Trails network in Yarra Ranges. It identifies categories of trails, levels of service, and expectations regarding supporting infrastructure. A key role of the plan is to catalogue the existing network, identify any gaps and establish a proposed program of works for the next 10 plus years which, subject to funding, will improve and enhance the existing network.

The Priority Trails Program was developed using a specifically designed set of twelve weighted evaluation criteria as a priority matrix to assess each priority trail and determine a “total priority score”, to a maximum of 100 for each project.

These weighted criteria cover all aspects of trail use in relation to:

- Access and social cohesion
- Health and wellbeing
- Trail network connectivity
- Visitation and activity

Updates to the draft plan following preliminary consultation in 2024 have included:

- The addition of plan objectives in the Introduction section,
- Changes to wording and formatting throughout the document, particularly in the Conclusion section,
- Additional context on how Council’s Capital Works Program is implemented,
- Providing greater clarity regarding Trail Classifications (i.e. Level 1 Trail, Level 2 Trail, etc.),
- Updating names of trails as needed to match official trail title,

- Inclusion of trail projects in maps and priority lists that have been suggested by residents and supported after officer review, and,
- Expansion of the Community Consultation section of the draft plan to include most recent community consultation findings (July-August 2024).

### ***Options considered***

During the consultation in July 2024, we received 145 suggestions for new/upgraded paths and trails. Of those suggestions 33 were already included in our project priorities and an additional 13 were assessed as feasible and have been added into the draft plan for consideration as future trail projects.

When assessing paths and trails suggestions, and to determine project priority, the following criteria was used:

- Improve access to regional open space & community facilities
- Improve access to natural landscapes
- Enables active trips long enough to generate user health benefits
- Improves access to train station or bus stops
- Improves network connectivity
- Connecting town centres/ activity centres/ industrial precincts
- Improves access to primary/ secondary/ tertiary education
- Improves access to cultural heritage
- Provides service to disadvantaged residents
- Inclusive of all abilities
- Size of population catchment within 1km of path
- Generates visitors from outside the municipality

### ***Recommended option and justification***

Note the feedback received from consultation and subsequent changes to the draft Paths and Trails Plan.

Support the release of the Draft Paths and Trails Plan for Community Consultation.

## **FINANCIAL ANALYSIS**

Full implementation of the plan is estimated to cost approximately \$55 million. This includes upgrades to existing trails, crossings and new trails that fill gaps in the network. Cost per metre from similar trail projects have been used to calculate estimated costings, with finalised budgets to be determined through detailed design.

The projects will be assessed to identify opportunities for upcoming grants and capital funding allocation from the capital investment assessment process. It is not expected that the plan will be fully implemented within the 10-year period. Any trails that have not been constructed will roll over into the next Paths and Trails Plan. A

mid-term review of priorities will be undertaken to ensure the plan remain relevant, while an annual review to assess projects suitable for consideration in Council's capital works program will also occur.

The estimated costs for the \$55M implementation programs includes:

- Upgrades - \$10M
- Crossings - \$5M
- New/Missing links - approximately \$39.9M

In addition to the initial capital cost to build trails, operational budget needs to be allocated to maintain new and increased levels of service within our paths and trail network. As part of capital works planning, projects should have an operational plan and budget before commencement.

## **Funding**

Potential avenues to seek development funding for trails include federal, state and local government, regulatory bodies, community organisations / partners, grant funding, commercial sponsorship, commercial ventures and philanthropic donations.

Trails have close links with the health, tourism and natural environment, and therefore funding opportunities from federal and state governments are becoming more frequent.

In addition to the weighted criteria specifically designed for trail assessment, the Capital Investment Planning Team has developed a weighted criteria that is used to assess capital projects to develop a capital pipeline for project delivery. New trail and upgrades to existing trail projects will be assessed as part of this process.

## **APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES**

The Council Plan 2021-25 highlighted the importance of paths and trails to the community. The strategic objective of Quality Infrastructure and Liveable Places referencing that 'Our townships are designed to improve liveability and support health and wellbeing through improved footpaths, trails, lighting and infrastructure.'

This is reinforced with the inclusion of the following major initiative that is to "Become a world class trails and eco-tourism destination through project development, delivery, advocacy and partnerships, including the delivery of the Ridges and Rivers projects."

The draft Paths and Trails Plan contributes to the following strategic objective in the Council Plan: Quality Infrastructure and Liveable Places

- Quality facilities and infrastructure meets current and future needs. Places are well planned and are hubs of activity that foster wellbeing, creativity and innovation.

The Draft Paths and Trails Plan 2025-2035 contributes to the following strategic objective in the 2021-2025 Health and Wellbeing Plan:

- Priority 4: 'increase active living'.
- This goal aims to ensure people in Yarra Ranges have capacity to walk and be physically active through accessible footpaths, trails, parks, play spaces and an inclusive culture that supports participation in all forms of physical activity.

The Eastern Regional Trails Strategy (ERTS) 2018 noted the vision of Yarra Ranges Council to create world class trails-based tourism destinations in the Yarra Ranges. Currently there are seven regional trails (existing and proposed) in the Eastern Regional Trails Strategy that are either entirely or partially located within Yarra Ranges. The Yarra Valley Trail is the highest ranked new trail in the Strategy. The other priority regional trails are:

- Box Hill to Ringwood Rail Trail (extension to Lilydale)
- Heathmont to Belgrave (Belgrave Rail Trail)
- O'Shannassy Aqueduct Trail
- Tarralla Creek Trail (Carrum Warburton Trail)
- Lilydale Warburton Rail Trail
- Yarra River Paddle Trail

Yarra Ranges Council's *Integrated Transport Strategy: 'Connected'* closely aligns with the principles and priorities of the Paths and Trails plan. As part of 'Connected' a comprehensive framework tailored for the development of bicycle paths, particularly within the road reserve is being established. This framework is designed with a broader scope, enabling the identification and prioritisation of linkages outside of the scope of this project. Connected also made the following recommendations:

- Expand the footpath network across Yarra Ranges, using a prioritisation framework,
- Capitalise on large infrastructure projects which may include installing safer crossing and wider footpaths,
- Continue the footpath building program – to provide a complete network of footpaths in the built-up areas of Yarra Ranges and connect into the trail network, using the Footpath Prioritisation, and,
- Footpath Framework prepared as part of 'Connected'.

There are a wide range of outdoor exercise equipment options available that may be appropriate supporting infrastructure to Level 1 trails. The determination of these trails, along with the location and type of equipment, should be considered as per the Active Recreation Plan (2023-2033).

## **RELEVANT LAW**

A Draft Gender Impact Assessment has commenced. The GIA will be reviewed following the consultation and options and recommendations considered. These will then be applied to the plan where appropriate prior to adoption.

## **SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

### ***Economic Implications***

Implementation of the draft Plan has the potential to provide economic benefit to local communities and businesses. Research has shown that people walking or cycling to destinations are more likely to shop locally, visit more frequently and spend longer visiting local businesses.

This plan encourages active modes of transport to destinations by making them easily accessible to residents of Yarra Ranges.

The improvement to and/or provision of facilities is also expected to contribute to the local economy through employment opportunities and as a source of materials and equipment.

Improving overall health through physical activity has an economic benefit through preventative health outcomes that can lessen the burden on health facilities.

### ***Social Implications***

There are strong links to social and community impacts resulting from the development and improvement of active recreation spaces such as paths and trails, which include:

- Enhanced community access to infrastructure that encourages alternative health and wellbeing outcomes,
- Revitalisation of local communities; and,
- Reduction of social isolation.

The Health and Wellbeing Strategy identifies high levels of obesity, dementia, and poor mental health as significant issues for our community. Provision of safe and accessible active recreation opportunities, as well as other diverse social active recreation opportunities are important contributors to improved health.

### ***Environmental Implications***

A highly valued aspect of the Yarra Ranges municipality is its unique nature and natural setting. The landscape provides the opportunity to walk, exercise, sit and take in the view, and/or watch children play or cycle on one of our many trails. A consistent message through the consultation was that this unique connection and access to nature is what sets the area apart and why a lot of people choose to live in the Yarra Ranges.

The preservation, enhancement, and accessibility for people of all ages and abilities is a key driver for improvement underpinning recommendations. It is also vital that throughout this, proper care and environmental consideration is taken wherever any upgrades or facility installations are implemented, to ensure sustainable materials are sourced and that the natural habit and connection to nature and the environment is maintained.

## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Council has provided opportunities for the community to engage with and be involved in assisting the determination of priorities for paths and trails within the municipality over a 5-year period.

This has included specific consultation of paths and trails users through online and intercept surveys as well as the utilisation of consultation undertaken for related projects such as the Recreation and Open Space Strategy and the Integrated Transport Plan.

The most recent consultation occurred between 5 July 2024 and 2 August 2024, using a range of different communications and engagement methods to make sure that the entire community had the means, and notice, to provide feedback if they wished.

A summary of the consultation undertaken includes:

- Social media posts
  - 11,300+ post reach
  - 34 comments
  - 140+ link clicks through to engagement page
- 580+ link clicks from newsletters to engagement page
- 145 people completed the online survey via the Shaping Yarra Ranges
  - Of these 145 new/upgraded paths and trails suggestions:
    - 33 were already included
    - 13 were deemed feasible and added into the draft
    - 99 were assessed and did not meet requirements/could not be delivered feasibly. E.g. Not on Council owned land.

During this consultation we asked community to provide feedback on the vision and principles of the plan as well as gave them the opportunity to let us know if we have missed any key paths and trails that may needs upgrading or any missing links in the network. The below table summarises key feedback received and the changes that were made to the plan to address this.

Feedback Received	Changes Made
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Walking/cycling trails are the most frequently visited open spaces on a daily occurrence within the municipality.</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Reference to 'Connected' - the Integrated Transport Strategy, to ensure a unified approach on the establishment and maintenance of trails and bike lanes.</li></ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Challenges to accessing the trails include network gaps, terrain, and conflicting needs of different trail users.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Work completed to identify gaps within the network includes highlighting missing crossing/footpath connections. The plan also includes a commitment to work with the relevant teams within Council to ensure development/delivery of these missing connections.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Community expectations include better connections, amenities, safety measures, and targeted local initiatives that have shown improvements.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Clearly outlined levels of services for the different categories of paths and trails as well as the trail infrastructure that can be expected.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Walking to services/townships is too hard because the distances are too great and gradients too steep.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Action areas specifically relating to activation of existing trails. Including identifying local walking circuits to and around townships. This also includes provisions for upgrading/additional paths/trails to complete these circuits.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Wayfinding is poor and more information/education along the trails is required.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Action area relating to improved signage and wayfinding on key routes/circuits.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Information about paths and trails needs to be easier to find (i.e. promoted on Yarra Ranges Website).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Commitment to updating website information/providing printable maps to improve promotion of paths and trails.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Vegetation management throughout the network should be prioritised to enhance the user experience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Inclusion of action item to continue to provide operation budget for maintenance along trails</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>145 suggestions for new/upgraded trails</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>All suggestions were assessed against the prioritisation criteria and 13 feasible paths &amp; trails were added to the plan</li> </ul>

The Recreation team presented at the June Disability Advisory Committee meeting where a discussion was held around the importance of the accessibility of paths and trails to gain an understanding of how these assets can be improved.

This report seeks support for the final round of community engagement following finalisation of the draft. The purpose of this engagement will be to ensure that the plan meets community expectations and gaps and priorities have been successfully identified. Feedback obtained will be considered in the context of broad community benefit. This will confirm the validity of proposed improvements and may result in modifications, deletions, or additional recommendations for Council's consideration in the revised draft Paths and Trails Plan.

## **COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT**

A recommendation within the plan relates specifically to agency cooperation and commits to investigating opportunities for paths and trails across multiple land tenures and management bodies. This will result in collaboration and generate opportunities for innovation through delivery of projects and builds on the work identified within the Eastern Trails Strategy.

## **RISK ASSESSMENT**

The plan aims to reduce risks associated with the paths and trails network by determining the priority works for new/missing trails as well as upgrades to existing network that propose a risk to users in their current state. Individual risk assessments will be completed for individual projects as they commence.

This plan needs to be finalised to avoid further reputational risk to Council from funding partners and risk to future grant opportunities.

## **CONFLICTS OF INTEREST**

No officers and/or delegates acting on behalf of the Council through the Instrument of Delegation and involved in the preparation and/or authorisation of this report have any general or material conflict of interest as defined within the *Local Government Act 2020*.

## **ATTACHMENTS TO THE REPORT**

1. Draft Paths and Trails Plan 2025-2035