

PATHS AND TRAILS PLAN 2025-2035 - CONSIDERATION FOR ADOPTION

Report Author: Manager Recreation Parks & Facilities
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 Paths and Trails Plan 2025-2035 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 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 links to paths and trails.

The draft plan was available for community consultation 25 June 2025 to 8 August 2025. 70% of contributors expressed support for the vision outlined in the plan, highlighting strong community alignment with its goals. The remaining 30% of respondents indicated lower satisfaction, citing concerns such as missing links and level crossings, safety issues, and limited walkability within townships.

The development of the Plan is being partially funded through a grant received from Sport and Recreation Victoria in 2015-16.

Implementation of the plan is currently unfunded and estimated to cost \$55M over ten years. All projects in the plan are subject to grant opportunities and annual budget processes. The plan provides a priority order for project consideration and the assessment matrix developed as part of the plan allows new projects and requests to be assessed against an agreed criteria during this time.

RECOMMENDATION

That Councillors endorse the Paths and Trails Plan 2025–2035.

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.
- 24 June 2025 – Council Meeting - Draft Paths and Trails Plan 2025-2035 Release for Community Consultation

DISCUSSION

Purpose and Background

This report has been prepared to provide Council with an update on the consultation that occurred, subsequent changes to the Paths and Trails Plan. 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 "level 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).

Council's Youth Advisory Committee, Positive Aging Reference Group, and Disability Advisory Committee have been consulted during the development of the Plan. Their advice and feedback have been incorporated into the Plan.

Community Engagement

Following the development of the plan we sought feedback from the community about whether we had missed anything. The community was encouraged to view the plan and submit their feedback. Between 25 June 2025 and 8 August 2025, Council used a range of different communications and engagement methods to make sure the community was able to provide feedback if they wished.

Council communicated and promoted the engagement via the following methods:

- Digital
 - Shaping Yarra Ranges (1060 visits and 56 contributions)
 - Social media (Facebook, Instagram and Yarra Ranges Youth Facebook and Instagram pages) (7184 interactions)
 - Yarra Ranges Local e-Newsletter (203 interactions).

A full summary of the consultation period can be found in Attachment 2.

- Advisory Group Feedback

- The draft report was distributed to the Positive Ageing Reference Group, Disability Advisory Group, Indigenous Advisory Committee and Yarra Ranges Environment Advisory Committee via email with the link to the shaping page. An update was also presented at the July Disability Advisory Group meeting.
- Hard copies of the plan were available for review and feedback at our links and libraries during the community engagement period.
 - Signs promoting the shaping page were displayed along key trails.

The results saw 70% of contributors support the vision with 73% supporting the principles. Common themes within the responses centred around safety, connectivity and budget allocation against other priorities.

Options considered

The Plan considers the current and future demographics of the area, community feedback, feedback from advisory committees, and internal recommendations during the development of the Plan.

Following the most recent round of community consultation, minor updates have been incorporated into the trail planning documentation. These include:

- New Road Crossings Added
 - A crossing has been added at Cambridge Road Trail
 - A crossing has been added at Carrum Warburton Trail
- Mapping Corrections
 - Two mapping errors associated with the Little Yarra River Trail (Pipe Track section) have been corrected
- Alignment and Connectivity Enhancements
 - The full indicative trail alignment now includes a connection to the Lilydale Warburton Rail Trail via Wesburn Recreation Reserve and Station Road, Wesburn
 - A road crossing at Warburton Highway, Wesburn has been incorporated into the alignment
- Cultural Heritage Considerations
 - A reference has been added to highlight that the trail network presents opportunities to strengthen cultural heritage connections. This aspect should be considered in the planning and delivery of future projects.

Recommended option and justification

The Plan has been updated to reflect the outcomes of the community consultation and is recommended for adoption by Council.

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. 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 (LOS) within our paths and trail network. As part of capital works planning, projects should have an operational plan and budget before commencement.

Revisions to level of service classifications were undertaken to better distinguish between designated shared use paths—defined under road rules and AustRoads Guide 6A and lesser mixed-use trails. Designated shared paths are now classified as LOS 1 and 2, while mixed-use trails fall under LOS 3 and 4. This update also acknowledges that some existing trails, such as the Belgrave Rail Trail, do not currently meet the standards expected of strategic cycling corridors. Additionally, inconsistencies in quality across certain trails—such as sections of the Lilydale Warburton Rail Trail—highlight the need for targeted upgrades to ensure uniform service levels throughout the network. The change to level of service will have minimal impact to operations financially as changes simply recognise current use/maintenance requirements.

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 available.

APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES

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

- 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 2018 (ERTS) 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 crossings 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 Gender Impact Assessment (GIA) has been completed as part of this project.

SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS

Economic Implications

Implementation of the Plan has the potential to provide economic benefits 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 contributor to improved health.

To ensure these benefits are maximised, a focus will be placed on monitoring and evaluating the use of our paths and trails, helping to inform future planning.

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 habitat 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 25 June 2025 and 8 August 2025, 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.

The community was engaged through the 'shaping Yarra Ranges Page'. The consultation for the plan was advertised through social media and our living local newsletter and through the Community Development Officer newsletters as well as signs along key trails. Copies for comment were also made available at our links with hard copy surveys available on request. A summary of the community engagement can be found in attachment 2.

COLLABORATION, INNOVATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Internal collaboration has been ongoing throughout the research and development phases of the draft Plan through an internal project reference group. Additional comment was sought from the Disability Advisory Committee to help shape the early concept design, refine the content and layout of the design and initiatives included in the Plan. A copy of the Plan and summary document was emailed to the Youth Advisory Group, the Positive Ageing Reference Group and Indigenous Advisory Committee, Health and Wellbeing Committee and the Yarra Ranges Environment Advisory Committee for comment.

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.

There was some risk to Council reputation if the community misinterpret how Council can deliver the actions within the plan. However, a disclaimer was included in the Plan and on all consultation, material stating the project delivery is subject to grant opportunities and allocation of capital budget.

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. Paths and Trails Plan 2025-2035
2. Consultation Summary