

## RIDGES AND RIVERS UPDATE

---

Report Author: Manager Recreation Projects & Parks  
Responsible Officer: Director Environment and 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

Ridges and Rivers encompass three main projects funded by all Government tiers and takes a strategic approach to expand the Yarra Ranges network of cultural and recreational experiences. These are the Warburton Mountain Bike Destination, RidgeWalk and Yarra Valley Trail. Together, when combined with the existing Lilydale to Warburton Rail Trail, the trails provide a unified and unique cultural, recreational and educational experience in multiple locations servicing various audiences.

It is anticipated that the projects will deliver 910,000 visitors per annum, create 597 jobs and inject \$103 million in economic spend to the region.

Yarra Ranges has developed and achieved funding for the projects to a value of \$29.6 million, with \$22.4 million coming from external funding sources.

The Warburton Mountain Bike Destination has recently been through an Environmental Effects Statement (EES). Once completed, along with the adoption of a Warburton Master Plan by Council, the project is ready to proceed pending the required EES outcomes.

The RidgeWalk Master Plan was endorsed by Council in September 2020. Varying sections are now undergoing detailed design, with construction having commenced on some sections. The creative arts component of the project is also progressing well.

Yarra Valley Trail has completed Stage 1A Lilydale to Yering and is preparing further construction of Stage 1B Yering to Yarra Glen. A Planning Permit has recently been received for this stage, however, an objection has been lodged with VCAT by an adjacent landowner, with a hearing scheduled for February 2023.

Funding for Stage 2A, Yarra Glen to Tarrawarra, was received through a Labor Party Federal election commitment while the Northern Tourist Loop around Yarra Glen was funded through a previous State Government commitment.

Planning for unfunded Stages 2B and 3, Yarra Glen to Healesville and Healesville to Woori Yallock respectively, continues.

The intent of this paper is to provide an update on the progress of all three projects.

## RECOMMENDATION

***That Council notes the current progress of all three Ridges & Rivers projects.***

## RELATED COUNCIL DECISIONS

March 2021 Update to Forum

7 September 2021 Update to Forum

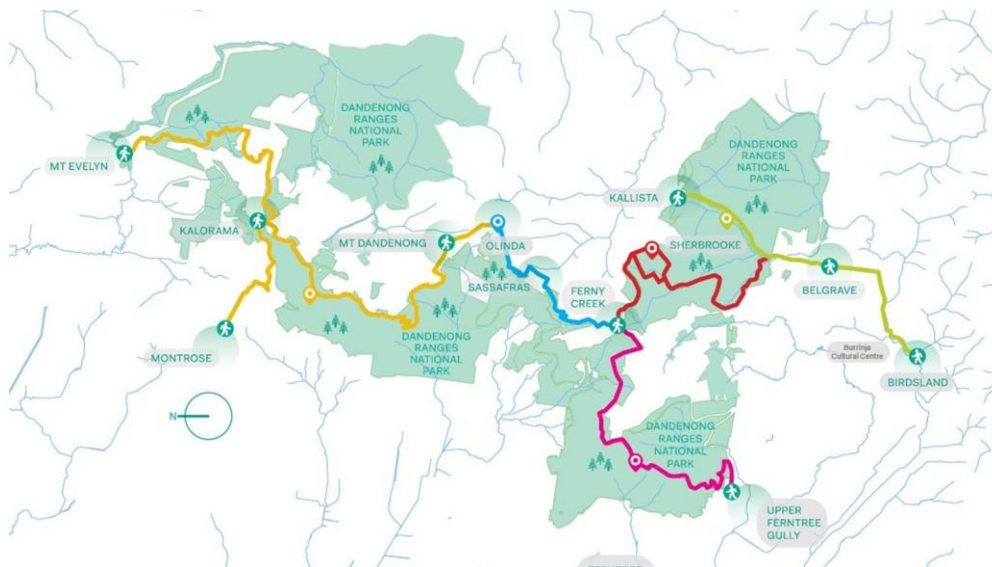
28 September 2021 Update at Council

6 September 2022 Update to Forum

## DISCUSSION

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

### ***RidgeWalk***



The Stage 1 Trail upgrade Tender package was released in September 2022. This includes upgrades for 8.1km of trail in the areas of Kalorama, Ferny Creek, Sherbrooke Forest and One Tree Hill. Confirmation has been received from Council's Planning Department that a planning permit is not required for Stage 1 works.

Stage 2 trail works are expected to be tendered in late 2022. Section 27 Consent to Public Authority will need to be updated to include Stage 2 and put through the approval process with Parks Victoria.

The Olinda to Sassafras section of the RidgeWalk trail is now complete, with an upgrade of the existing trail between Mason Grove, Sassafras and Range Road, Olinda connecting the two townships. The existing trail was steep and scrubby, choked with fallen timber from the June 2021 storms. The new trail includes switchbacks and a series of rest points, making for a much more enjoyable 'linear park' experience as pedestrians make their way between the two villages.

Bird themed temporary artworks have also been installed. 'Tawny Frogmouth' by Renate Crow is a large-scale model of the local species which sits upon a log salvaged from the June 2020 storm and invites people to sit within its belly. 'Pathmarker Birds' by Peter McIlwain appears all the way up the new trail, where markers, like the local birds, offer small bursts of colour along the way. The art installations were supported by the Victorian Government's Outdoor Activation Fund and a well-attended Community Activation event was held on 10th July 2022.



Tenders are also pending for the Kalorama Land Art piece.

Traffic Engineering works continue at a number of sites including 5-ways in Kalorama. Pedestrian crossing concept designs have been completed by Council's traffic engineers and have been submitted to the Department of Transport for approval. Final car park designs now have incorporated officer comments as well as the arborists' tree ratings and downsizing the car parking yield from the first issue of designs.

### Writing RidgeWalk

As part of the RidgeWalk creative program, the project is commissioning established and local writers to respond to place and comprise a living anthology of the Dandenong's. Later this year the anthology will come to life as an immersive experience along the track, allowing you to experience the Dandenong's through the writers' words. After a call-out to the local community, five local writers were selected for participation in the program:

- Marian Spires;
- Cameron Semmens;
- Leslie Almborg;
- Katelin Farnsworth; and
- Jessica Pritchard

The selection was conducted by a panel including community representatives and literary professionals, who anonymously reviewed the submissions. The writers joined the project team at Karwarra Gardens in April to film and record their work for use in the project.

### Nodes

A scoping analysis of the five node sites was completed earlier in the year to brief the future design of the nodes. Quotations have been sought for the design and project management of all five nodes, with a strong emphasis on Indigenous Design Principles and a First Nations lead process. The selection process is now underway.

The five node themes are:

- Light, Form & Colour;
- Community;
- Resilience;
- Activism; and
- Country

### Interpretation

The strategic framework for interpretive signage and digital interpretive material has been completed, in consultation with local historical societies and the Indigenous Advisory network. The next stage is development of interpretation content, which will be a collaboration with the Indigenous Project Advisory Network and through consultation the Mt Dandenong and District, Sherbrooke Foothills and Southern Sherbrooke historical societies. This will be followed by the design and construction of interpretation and wayfinding signage. GML Heritage has been contracted to deliver the content development component and have commenced work in September.

### Digital Platform

A partnership has been developed with RMIT to develop a digital platform that will link with a website and deliver a digital art experience to complement the on-site art and interpretation experiences. This will provide flexibility in the programming and operation of the trail as an eco-tourism product and allow for the development and communication of content in a flexible, highly accessible way without physically or visually impacting the environment.

Milestones stages that are planned to be achieved through this project partnership:

- Digital platform Co-creation, design and research: September 2022;

- Development of vertical slice: November 2022; and
- Finalisation and launch of digital platform: May 2023

The RidgeWalk Project Reference Group met on August 2, 2022 and made several key recommendations based on a project SWOT analysis led by Council's Strategy and Transformation team, in conjunction with the project team, to ensure the successful delivery of the project:

These included:

- Extension of delivery deadline to December 2023;
- De-scope and map to next phase some Parks Victoria car park upgrades to a stage 2 of the project; and
- De-scope and map to next phase the trail from Mt Evelyn Recreation Reserve to Karwarra Gardens to avoid a complex Childs Road crossing and conflicts with the construction timeline of the Melbourne Water Filtration plant, and related CHMP amendment activities.

The Project Reference Group also recommended the proposed use of a Woi Wurrung name – **ngurrak barring** (noo-rak bah-ring - mountain paths) for the experience once launched. The name will undergo a branding process which will include considering an amalgamated Woi Wurrung / English name and/or a clear tagline expressing location and type of experience.

The endorsed RidgeWalk Masterplan has a strong stated focus on 'a significant wayfinding experience reflective of First Nations history and culture'. This sentiment has been further developed within the Interpretation Framework which frames the experience as one of two cultures intertwined. Art and storytelling will convey historical information from multiple perspectives and voices, with First Nations perspectives leading the experience.

During the planning phase engagement occurred in a Cultural Values Assessment (CVA) with Wurundjeri Elders. This process considers Aboriginal stories, culture and history outside of archaeological artefacts, and allows Elders to visit Country to reflect on its significance. It is increasingly a standard part of any robust cultural heritage process and has been a key pillar of the relationship with Wurundjeri Council, as they had not previously had an opportunity to engage with the Dandenong Ranges and its deep Aboriginal history and to document this.

During this process Wurundjeri Elders expressed the strong and unique potential of the project to become a flagship project due to its natural environment, in which visitors might be encouraged to Care for Country and to broach truth-telling in a sensitive way. Within this consultation phase, Elders recommended the use of a Woi-Wurrung name for the finished project. This also aligns with market trends which identify Indigenous cultural experience as key to both domestic and international tourism markets.

## Yarra Valley Trail



### Stage 1B Yering to Yarra Glen

A Notice of Decision to Grant a Permit for Stage 1B was issued in May. There was subsequent notification that an appeal has been lodged by a local landowner.

The Statement of Grounds for the appeal is:

*“the proposed use and development is incompatible with the existing use of the land bordering both sides of the Subject Land for farming” by “interfere with the passage of stock to and from the Neighbouring Land, and thereby interfere with the lawful existing farming use at the Neighbouring Land” and “fail to separate stock at the Neighbouring Land with users of the Subject Land, both during and after the proposed works are due to be carried out”.*

Council Officers meet regularly with the local landowner. The trail dissects their land on the elevated rail corridor. The main concerns to date have been regarding continued right of passage for stock from one side of his property to the other, across the rail corridor.

Officers are working with Council’s planning team and planning lawyers on Council’s response.

A conference is scheduled for 1 December 2022, while the hearing is currently scheduled for 3 to 8 February 2023. If a resolution cannot be achieved outside of VCAT, this will result in a significant delay to the project timeline. An application to have the matter struck out is pending with VCAT. A decision on that will be known before the scheduled conference on December 1.

## Stage 2A- Yarra Glen to Tarrawarra Station

Yarra Valley Trail Stage 2A was a fully funded election commitment valued at \$4.9M from the Labor government in the recent Federal election with funding to be confirmed in the October Federal Budget. Route finalisation, detailed design and agency discussions are currently underway.

Yarra Valley Railway (YVR) is currently dealing with ongoing concerns from landowners adjoining the railway over the proposed railway maintenance shed at Tarrawarra Station. There is a possibility that the proposed trail may be associated with concerns over the railway development. The project will have a long planning and design phase given the cultural heritage and environmental values and flooding potential.

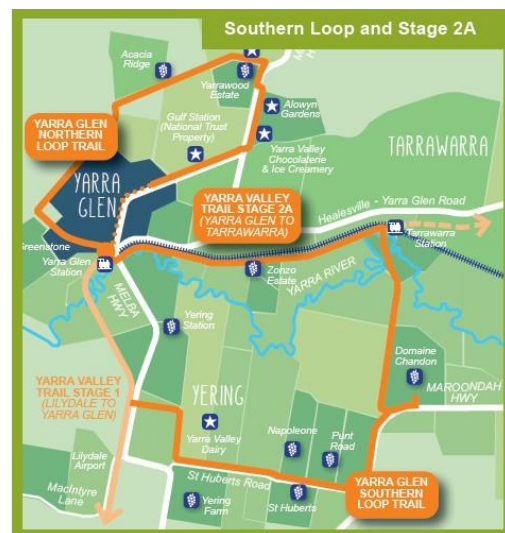
### Yarra Valley Trail- Stage 2A

Stage 2A of the YVT will connect Yarra Glen township and Tarrawarra Road.

The trail will run parallel to the railway, offering connections to key tourism destinations.

This proposed trail extension will contribute to the health and wellbeing of the community, enable stronger connections to the natural environment and increase business opportunities for Yarra Glen and surrounds.

The precise route and design of both Stage 2A and the Yarra Glen Southern Loop are yet to be finalised and are currently unfunded.

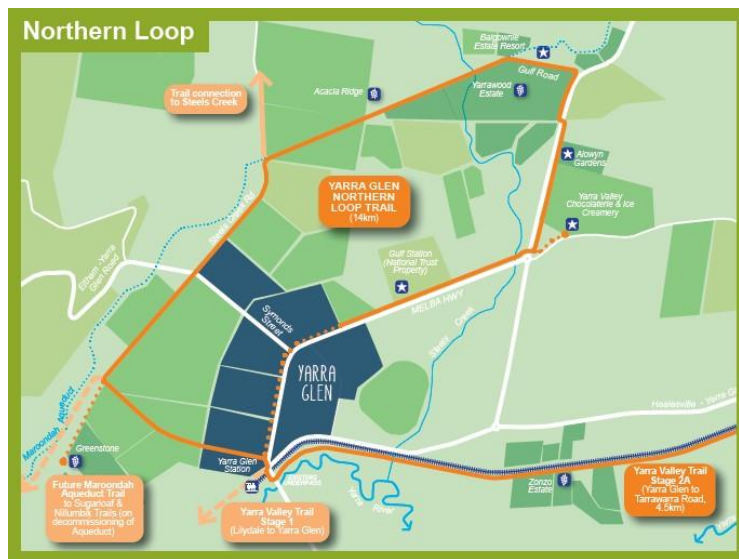


## Northern Loop

The Northern Loop of the YVT was fully funded by the State Government. Steels Creek Trail upgrade works are underway and detailed design of other sections continues.

Some residents and businesses nearby the proposed alignment through a Melbourne Water pipe track have raised some concerns. On-site and on-line meetings have been held and an assessment of an alternative route along Steels Creek and Gibbs Road is being developed and costed to bring to Council for decision.

Negotiations with Department of Transport are continuing regarding the Melba Highway crossing near the roundabout to the north of Yarra Glen township.



## Yarra Glen - Northern Loop

The northern loop trail creates a 14km journey north and east from Yarra Glen Railway Station.

This trail will be delivered in four sections, with different delivery timeframes and contracts. Where possible, existing paths and trails will be upgraded. Fencing, furniture and signage will be part of the trail.

This loop has been funded by the State Government under the Regional Tourism Infrastructure Fund – Stimulus Round Projects.

## Warburton Mountain Bike Destination

Council received confirmation on 20 July 2022 that the Independent Advisory Committee (IAC) report is now with the Minister for Planning and DELWP Independent Assessment Unit (IAU). DELWP IAU will now prepare their report for the Minister along with the draft of the Minister’s Assessment.

Recent Ministerial portfolio changes in the Victorian Government may increase the risk of a delayed EES decision. Should a delay run into the caretaker period for the 2022 State Election it, would be likely that a decision would not be known until early 2023. This would likely have significant impacts on delivery scheduling and lead to challenges with funding partners.

If the decision of the Minister supports the trail development, Stage 1, which is 110km of trails in the State Forest, will begin construction in February/March 2023 and continue for 18 to 24 months, conditions permitting.

In anticipation of a favourable EES outcome for Stage 1 (trails in the State Forest), planning and preparation for delivery of Stage 1 continues, including:

- Finalisation of the Master Plan;
- Finalisation of Cultural Heritage Management Plan;
- Detailed design of trail head works at Wesburn Park;
- Detailed design of Stage 1 bridges;
- Preparation and execution of construction phase of World Trail Early Contractor Involvement Contract; and
- Securing tenure agreements for Crown and private land as required for Stage 1



Native Vegetation Offset is a critical component of the project. In applying the project's Native Vegetation Offset Strategy, Council has identified an offset site on crown land (Woi Wurrung State Forest) as the preferred solution. This option allows Council to secure offsets for all stages of the project in one arrangement. Ongoing management arrangements will need to be negotiated with DELWP. DELWP Region could manage the site (preferred) or Council could assume responsibility and manage as Committee of Management.

Detailed work on the operating model is currently underway, with analysis and recommendation expected in September.

## FINANCIAL ANALYSIS

Over the past four years, each project has been planned, developed and funded.

The table below shows Council's \$7.2 million investment is leveraged to achieve a further \$22.4 million and realise a total of \$29.6 million investment across all projects.

<b>Ridges &amp; Rivers Projects</b>	<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>Federal Government</b>	<b>State Government</b>	<b>Council Contribution</b>	<b>Other</b>
Warburton Mountain Bike Destination (Stage 1)	\$11,300,000	\$5,300,000	\$3,000,000	\$2,700,000	\$300,000 (Upper Yarra Community Enterprise)
Yarra Valley Trail (Section 1)	\$8,500,000	\$2,500,000	\$3,500,000	\$2,500,000	
RidgeWalk	\$9,800,000	5,800,000	\$2,000,000	\$2,000,000	
<b>Totals</b>	<b>29,600,000</b>	<b>\$13,600,000</b>	<b>\$8,500,000</b>	<b>\$7,200,000</b>	<b>\$300,000</b>

Many aspects of each project are still subject to tender.

The last twelve months has been subject to significant material cost increases due to a combination of a flooded market, labour shortages, pandemic disruptions, and material supply chain issues. Cost escalations are likely for each project. The main impact for each project will be in the cost of bridges and other infrastructure which require steel and concrete. Yarra Valley Trail 1B is the most exposed with four bridges of significance.

As per previous advice to Council, the EES approvals for the Warburton Mountain Bike Project exceeded initial cost estimations by approximately \$2M due to:

- Minister's Scoping Requirements for the EES were far more comprehensive than anticipated;
- Additional technical study works required by the State led Technical Reference Group (TRG) throughout the EES development process; and
- Previously unknown Inquiry costs that were not provided to Council until early 2022, and which escalated post this advice due to the unusually high number of public submissions and complexity of submissions (in particular government agencies and the Victorian National Parks Association).

Once the outcome of the Minister's decision is known, it is considered that Council will be in a stronger position to argue for all EES costs to be covered by the collective budget, rather than Council only funding. At this stage there is uncertainty as to what will be approved and in the absence of any statements made with the decision, it is difficult to have a strategic and effective conversation with the State and Federal administrators of the funding programs.

Based on a favourable outcome of the EES, negotiations will occur to determine the proportion of costs for the EES that are essentially design and investigation costs (arguably aligned with the funding agreements) and press for these costs to be met by all funders with Council's allocation covering any administrative costs not aligned with funding agreements.

## **APPLICABLE PLANS AND POLICIES**

This report contributes to the following strategic objective(s) in the Council Plan. Ridges and Rivers have significant strategic links across Yarra Ranges. The projects collectively deliver on Council's aspirations for Connected and Healthy Communities, Quality Infrastructure and Liveable Places, Protected and Enhanced Natural

Environment and Vibrant Economic, Agriculture and Tourism. With their significant investment in the outdoor, open and accessible activity, they promote increased tourism, health & wellbeing, sustainable economic growth and job creation.

Project officers have been working closely with colleagues to ensure consistency and links with many of Council's strategies including;

- Council Plan 2017-2021;
- Recreation and Open Space Strategy 2013-2023;
- Creative Communities Strategy 2019-2029;
- Reconciliation Framework for Action 2013-2023;
- Equity Access and Inclusion Strategy 2013-2023;
- Integrated Transportation Strategy, 2020 -2040;
- Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2017-2021;
- Environment Strategy 2015-2025;
- Economic Development Strategy 2012-2022; and
- Council's Vision 2020.

## **RELEVANT LAW**

A Gender impact Assessment is being completed for the Warburton Mountain Bike Destination Project. The training involved is being completed by broader members of the Recreation & Active Living team and learnings from this will help inform other projects.

Tendering for the works associated with the projects has and will occur in accordance with requirements of Council's Procurement Policy, which is a requirement of the Local Government Act 2020.

## **SUSTAINABILITY IMPLICATIONS**

The Ridges and Rivers projects are considered an Eco-tourism product which will help immerse users in the environment and use the experience to further enhance education and awareness of areas in Yarra Ranges of environmental significance.

## **COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT**

Each project has involved significant engagement with the community throughout their development. As the delivery phase is reached, more localised consultation is occurring for those residents and communities more directly related to the current aspect of the project.

The EES process for the Warburton Mountain Bike Destination Project has involved some of the most thorough community engagement ever completed for a recreation project, with in excess of 2,700 submissions received from the public during the process.

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

Elements of each project involve significant collaboration with internal Council stakeholders including Planning, Parks & Bushlands, Design & Place, Finance and Economic Development.

Externally each project also involves significant collaboration with government agencies including Wurundjeri, Parks Victoria, Department of Land, Water & Planning, Melbourne Water, Department of Transport, SES and the CFA, many of whom are represented on individual Project Control and Project Working Groups.

## **RISK ASSESSMENT**

Major risks have been identified in project updates. All risks are being managed at present within constraints of each project. In summary:

### ***RidgeWalk***

- Tender price responses; and
- Inclement weather or another storm event

### ***Yarra Valley Trail***

- VCAT hearing;
- Continued wet weather; and
- Cost escalations for bridges for stage 1B

### ***Warburton Mountain Bike Destination***

- Delay in Minister's EES decision;
- EES cost recovery

## **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**

Nil