

The Recreational Trail Question

Summary:

State Government policy strongly supports outdoor exercise. This is reflected in regional trail strategies that propose extending the Main Yarra Trail to Warrandyte along Heidelberg–Warrandyte Road. While the objective is widely supported, our report questions the justification for the route proposed by Manningham Council.

Successful recreational trails are typically flat, yet much of the proposed extension is steep, with gradients exceeding levels suitable for recreational cyclists. We undertook a local usage survey of the completed section between Beasley’s and Pound Road and found very low recreational use, with most cyclists choosing the road instead. Our report concludes that the proposed Yarra Trail extension from Pound Road to Taroona Avenue, adjacent to Heidelberg-Warrandyte Road is unlikely to meet its aims. The report recommends the separation of bike and walking/ running trails and specifically prioritising footpaths to better serve walkers and runners and directing cyclists to the quieter residential streets for this section of the Trail.

Report

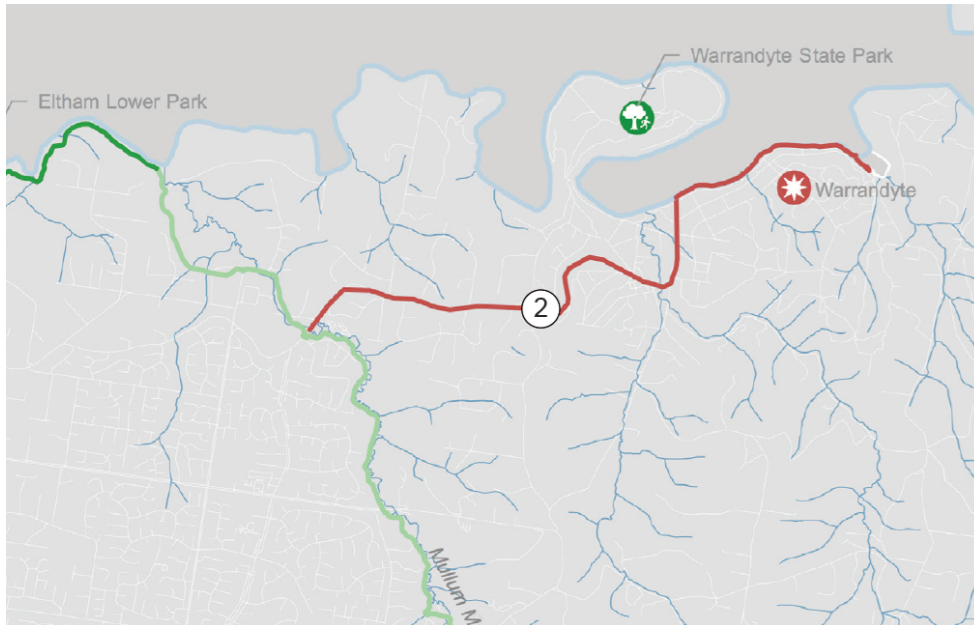
Government policy at all levels supports healthy outdoor exercise. This policy gets turned into action through costly bureaucratic processes and the production of official documents, often by consultants and with the word ‘strategy’ in their title. Examples are the ‘Northern Regional Trails Strategy’, involving local government areas to the north and east of Melbourne, including Nillumbik, and the Eastern Regional Trails Strategy, involving councils to the east of Melbourne, including Manningham. Current versions of both were prepared by the same consultants.

There can be little disagreement with the broad policy objective, but that’s not always the case in relation to specific proposals included in the ‘strategies’, which are best characterized as aspirational plans.

The ‘Eastern Regional Trails Strategy’ (ERTS), the multi-council plan to which Manningham Council subscribes, contains this ‘Action Item’:

2. Extend the Main Yarra Trail east by creating a shared trail along Heidelberg-Warrandyte Road to connect to Warrandyte

Here is the map:



Since this 'strategy' was published in 2018 the western part of the planned extension, from below Beasley's nursery to Pound Road, has been completed and currently Manningham Council is comparing route alternatives for the continuation to the Warrandyte township.

But there is a problem. There's a plan, but no justification for the action items.

The ERTS is concerned with

'shared trails that accommodate multiple potential user groups (particularly pedestrians and cyclists).'

In the document there is general discussion of trail purposes, e.g. recreation, exercise, commuting ('active transport'), tourism, but there is no development of these purposes into trail characteristics that might be successful in terms of user demand.

What are the characteristics of a successful multi-use trail? The ERTS does contain a clue: it maps the existing trails – which have evolved along waterways, defunct railways and coastlines. A consistent characteristic of all of them is that they are relatively flat.

Gradient is a significant ride parameter for keen cyclists. Around Melbourne they ride hills all the time. Gradient shows up on their bike computers. The climb from The Basin to Sassafra up Mountain Highway in The Dandenongs is known as the '1 in 20', after its average gradient of approximately 5%. Recreational cyclists, the cyclists who use trails, don't use bike computers, don't ride up the 1 in 20, and don't think about gradient – because they only ride on flattish trails. Recreational cyclists think that the 'climb' from the east to Mt Evelyn along the Warburton rail trail is hard work, and the gradient tops out at 3.1%.

Incredibly, despite the importance of gradient to cyclists, the ERTS contains no discussion of it. It considers trail width, trail surface and associated facilities like seats and toilets – but not gradient, despite gradient being a critical trail feature. Too steep and recreational cyclists will not use the trail.

The well-established and well-used Main Yarra Trail departs the Yarra River at Mullum Mullum Creek, changing its name to the Mullum Mullum Creek Trail before crossing the Heidelberg-Warrandyte Road at Beasley's. All flattish riding, walking and running.

The action item, however, is not along a waterway, and not flattish. It runs beside the Heidelberg Warrandyte Road – over a kilometre from the river. And it is hilly. Of the first 3 kms, 2.2 kms is made up of climbs with an average gradient exceeding 6%, with maximums exceeding 10% - far above what can be handled by recreational cyclists, the intended user. It surely follows that this proposed trail will be a failure.

As it happens, the first 1.8 kms, from Beasley's to Pound Road, has already been constructed and commissioned. Is anyone using it? In the apparent absence of any post-auditing of the new trail by Manningham Council, we conducted our own survey. For three hours one fine Sunday morning, which surely should have seen hordes of recreational cyclists and walkers, we counted all walkers, runners and cyclists, including cyclists on the adjacent road.

Most traffic was serious cyclists, men or women on lightweight road bikes riding at speed, a total of 26 over three hours. Of the 26, 12 chose to ride on the road rather than the trail – noting that above Beasley's the trail actually occupies the road verge, so it's a reasonable choice for a habitual road rider – but it doesn't add significantly to the experience for this class of rider.

Recreational usage consisted of 2 walkers, 2 runners, 2 children, 3 mountain bikes, 1 e-scooter and 1 e-Bike, a total of 11 in three hours, less than four per hour – and no family groups.

Based on these results, at this stage the trail, constructed as a two-lane cycle path catering for recreational users, is a failure.

To complete our survey, we conducted a count for two hours early one fine weekday morning in two locations, one above and the other below the High School, to check on commuters, particularly high school traffic. We found hardly any cyclists, but near pound road, 10 walkers and 1 runner passed by, one every 11 minutes.

Our first conclusion is that the plan to extend a multi-use , recreational trail from Beasley's to Warrandyte is not justified. It fails because of the terrain, and this failure is manifest in the low usage of the completed section, from Beasley's to Pound Road.

But our second conclusion is that what would be beneficial are footpaths. Recent years have seen a footpath created from the Bridge up KG Road, and this is well-used. And, as we observed in our week morning count, foot traffic on the trail near Pound Road was significant.

The current plan should be strategically reviewed – because it will not achieve its objectives as a recreational trail. What should be considered is the construction of a footpath, enabling walkers and runners to safely exercise or run errands on foot.

Width, path and surface requirements will be less stringent. With no requirement to accommodate recreational cyclists, gradients are less critical, hairpin bends are no problem, and off-road goat tracks are more likely to be a useful starting point. Any bridgeworks required to cross gullies will be less expensive.