

MMHN Opportunity 8

Single Responsible Authority for Melbourne’s Waterways

MMHN Special Advisory Groups: Commerce & Industry and Infrastructure
and MMHN Special Advisory Groups: Tourism and Museums & Heritage

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Multi-layered bureaucratic control is impeding optimum activation and economic development of Melbourne’s waterways. For example - prior to holding a water-based event, currently there are potentially 17 responsible authorities to be consulted. This is not a nimble system. Bureaucratic internal agendas drive process and entrenched demarcation overrides collaboration. It is a system, which is compliance driven and risk-averse. As a consequence, the development of Melbourne’s waterways assets has stalled. To exacerbate matters further, the generalised has ‘amnesia’ around maritime matters in Melbourne has resulted in an erosion of any sense of the significance that Melbourne was, and is, a major port city. The sheer economic clout of major marine industry and the privatisation of the Port sector seem to have prevailed. However, unless a new, single responsible authority with adequate resources and authority to address and simplify systemic problems encountered by lower level commercial operators and the wider public in Melbourne will continue to experience frustration and unnecessary constraints. Should the status quo persist, development waterways assets will languish, potential will never be realised. The restructure of the management and operational framework controlling Melbourne’s waterways is the key determinant.

City of Melbourne

Cities comparable to Melbourne located on major waterways systems have control of their waterways because it is well recognised that this control is potentially a strong economic driver in urban economies. Successive state governments have failed to acknowledge this in Melbourne. Given that Victoria’s state capital city, a major national port, is situated on the extensive urban reaches of the Yarra River, it is obvious that waterways are indeed significant economic assets - environmental, aesthetic, cultural, recreational and tourism assets.

The Association of Bayside Municipalities estimates that the recreational activity of tourists and locals results in approximately \$320 million in annual revenue for the Port Phillip Bay region. See <https://abm.org.au>. However, the City of Melbourne has control of just 4 per cent of the total river frontage in Melbourne (Yarra and Maribyrnong Rivers), which comprises 36kms of navigable waterways (72kms of waterfront), 7kms of waterfront at Docklands, 12kms within the Port of Melbourne. Clearly this minimal control has an adverse impact on the City of Melbourne.

The plethora of government bureaucracies and agencies who do control Melbourne's waterways appear over the past seven years to have wrested control away from the City of Melbourne. CoM engagement has been marginalised by Parks Victoria, an agency which focuses primarily upon land-based public space, environmental issues and alleviating public risk and, to a lesser extent, Melbourne Water, an agency focussed on water issues - supply, pollution, etc. Neither state agency has as a priority optimising economic development of waterways.

Evidence of governance deficiencies

- The Municipal Association of Victoria submission (October 2016) to government representing many municipalities re problems with the *Marine and Coastal Act* referred to “*Confusion within the community and sometimes within agencies about respective roles and responsibilities...*” Noting an *Absence of direction...*” and “*lack of interest.*” Commissioned by the Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change it identifies the absence of a shared comprehensive ‘*vision*’ in relation to Melbourne’s waterways “*Layered with complicated governance*”.
- The City of Melbourne shares control of its waterways with Parks Victoria, adjacent Councils, Port Authorities, and the Port of Melbourne Corporation. The state government, through DELWP and Melbourne Water (a statutory authority), controls various drains and outlets.
- The Lower Yarra River Management Advisory Committee Report (2018) has proved to be ineffectual.

Signs of improvement – collaboration and connectivity

- **The state government 2019-2020 Annual Budget** recognizes the inadequate management of the major public asset (i.e. the Yarra River) in allocating \$5.1 million to protect waterways, citing specifically the need to continue to improve management of the Yarra River.
- **Melbourne Water** in collaboration with the **City of Moreland** have developed the **Chain of Ponds - Moonee Ponds Creek Plan** to *provide innovative, collaborative and inspirational planning and management that will improve the ecological health of the Moonee Ponds Creek, while supporting a happy, active and healthy community and protect the creek from inappropriate urban development.* In June 2020, the state government announced a \$5 million contribution towards the project. Moreland City Council will continue to work closely with Moonee Valley City Council, the Friends of Moonee Ponds Creek and the state government (DELWP) through the Chain of Ponds *See <https://www.moreland.vic.gov.au/globalassets/areas/open-space/chain-of-ponds/mpc-chapter-00-executive-summary-spread.pdf>* The plan extends to the mouth of the Moonee Ponds Creek where it enters the Yarra River near the Ron Barassi Senior Park in the City of Melbourne. Areas of the plan require access to waterfront and access to the confluence of both which are under the control Port of Melbourne which controls BOTH the banks and actual water of the creek. The Moonee Ponds Creek flows into the Yarra and pathways along the Creek will ideally and eventually connect with the Maritime Trail along North bank.
- **Melbourne Water**, charged with development of the 2020 Yarra Strategic Plan currently before the Minister, appears to have taken the need to consult key stakeholders. Should the Minister choose to charge Melbourne Water with implantation of the strategy, positive change may occur.

Note: In July and August 2021 MMHN met with Melbourne Water and the office of the Minister for Water to advocate that, based on its consultation process, Melbourne Water should be charged with implanting the policies identified in the strategy.