



Kooyong Climate Change Alliance

Submission on City of Boroondara Proposed Budget 2021-22

May 2021

The Kooyong Climate Change Alliance is a group of community organisations based primarily in the City of Boroondara and working for urgent and effective climate action. Members of the alliance include Lighter Footprints, ACF Boroondara, StopAdani Kooyong and the Eastern Melbourne Climate Alliance.

1. Introduction

It is clear that we are facing a climate emergency. A dramatic reduction in greenhouse gas emissions is required over the next ten years if the Paris Agreement goal of limiting warming to 1.5°C is to be achieved. All levels of government need to contribute to the effort, including local government.

The results of the last Boroondara Council elections suggest the local community wants the Council to take more meaningful action on the climate. This was confirmed by the survey results from the first stage of consultation on Council's Climate Action Plan. The representative survey indicated that 89% of the Boroondara community support development of a CAP, with 67% expressing strong support. This support is based on 'the perception that climate change is an urgent issue and that action is required' (*Boroondara Climate Action Plan Research Report*, November 2020).

We congratulate the Council on undertaking the development of the CAP, and recognise that some important steps have been taken to reduce Council's own emissions, notably the Power Purchasing Agreement (PPA) with Procurement Australia. However, we believe that the Proposed Budget 2021-22 is a very inadequate response to the challenge of the climate emergency.

The funding for climate initiatives in the budget is disappointingly low given the urgent need and community support for strong action. There is no indication in the budget that the Council is increasing its ambition on the climate. The budget represents little more than a continuation of the policies of previous years. Of particular concern is the lack of any new programs to drive down community emissions in Boroondara.

The reduction in funding for key environmental initiatives (including climate initiatives) from \$4.04 million in 2020-21 to \$3.61 million is a telling indication of the failure to increase Council's efforts. The specific allowance for implementation of the CAP has been reduced by more than half, from \$985,000 to \$400,000.

We acknowledge that the Council has not yet finalised the CAP, and that it may therefore be difficult to identify the funding required for new climate programs. However, we note that the plan has been under development for well over a year, allowing ample time to identify and prepare budget estimates for uncontroversial items. Moreover, a substantial contingency amount could have been included in the budget for implementation of the plan, with details to be confirmed after it is adopted early in the new financial year.

The foreshadowed expenditure for implementation of the CAP in the years 2022-23 to 2024-25 is \$1 million per annum, up from \$400,000 in 2021-22. This modest increase only serves to reinforce the impression that the Council is not serious about providing real community leadership and stepping up its efforts to address the climate crisis.

2. Emissions from Council operations

Budgeted expenditure related to Council's own GHG emissions includes:

- \$400,000 of capital funding for CAP 'emissions reduction work', further described as 'LED lighting upgrades, heating and cooling upgrades to reduce Council's energy and greenhouse emissions and lowering of Council's use of gas and electricity to meet our climate related targets'.
- \$2.2 million 'to deliver a minimum 5 Star Green Star equivalent standard for all new buildings and applicable retrofits'. This may also assist in reducing Council's emissions, but we assume the impact will be relatively small, given the new PPA.
- \$220,000 of capital funding for solar lighting 'along 500 metres of Boroondara park paths'.

The forecast for 2021-22 emissions from Council operations is 'less than 22,000 tCO₂-e'.

Comments and Recommendations

- It is extremely disappointing that the forecast for Council emissions in 2021-22 is unchanged from the previous year. Reducing its own emissions to net zero (with minimal use of offsets) should be one of the Council's highest priorities. Council cannot afford to waste a year with no further movement towards zero emissions.
- If expenditure of \$400,000 will not produce a significant emissions reduction from Council facilities, increased (or better targeted) expenditure should be committed.
- There does not appear to be an allowance for further installation of solar panels on Council facilities. Despite Council's new PPA, PV panels should be installed on Council facilities wherever feasible in order to assist in shifting the State's power supply to renewables, particularly given that this is likely to be financially attractive. An appropriate allowance for additional panels should be included in the budget.
- The Council should commence the transition away from gas usage in its existing facilities during 2021-22. If this is not included in the \$400,000 budget allowance for emissions reductions, an additional amount should be included.
- We were dismayed to learn that the plans for the Kew Recreation Centre redevelopment include gas-fired pool heating rather than heat-pumps. The use of heat-pumps powered by Council's 100% green energy would reduce recurrent operating costs and eliminate carbon emissions, although we recognise that capital costs may be higher. We understand that the

decision to use gas heating is under review, and we urge Council to adopt the heat-pump option and include an amount in the budget to cover any increase in capital cost.

- Funding to facilitate transition of Council's fleet to electric vehicles should be included. This should cover preparation of a transition plan and commencement of the transition (perhaps initially with the purchase or leasing of hybrid passenger vehicles).
- The current 'Small Market' electrical supply should be switched to a renewable supply when the current Origin contract expires on 1 July 2021. Any funding required to facilitate the change should be included in the budget.
- Council should purchase off-sets to cover any emissions which it cannot realistically address directly in the short term. We accept that Council may not target a net zero result in 2021-22, but it should be moving much closer to zero than the current forecast indicates. Expenditure to directly eliminate Council's emissions is clearly preferable to purchase of off-sets, but the budget should include an allowance for off-sets for any emissions which Council considers cannot be dealt with rapidly. This recurring expenditure would obviously reduce as the more intractable emissions are addressed.

3. Community emissions - energy

The budget does not appear to include any new initiatives specifically designed to reduce community emissions related to energy use. It is assumed that the existing very limited energy advice services will continue.

There is a welcome allowance (\$60,500) to 'establish a dedicated Environmental Sustainable Design Officer role ... to facilitate sustainable design outcomes' in the community which may make some contribution to emissions reduction.

Comments and Recommendations

- The lack of substantial funding for new initiatives to promote reductions in community emissions is the major deficiency in the budget.
- The Council should engage at least one new staff member (whether on contract or permanent) to develop and manage the implementation community emissions reduction programs. Additional staff with the necessary expertise are needed to do the detailed design work required and must also have sufficient authority in the organisation to drive implementation. Responsibilities could extend beyond community emissions to the full range of CAP initiatives.
- The current community energy audit scheme provided by the Australian Energy Foundation should be expanded to cover comprehensive audits, with (conditional) financial support for implementation of recommended improvements.
- Funding should be included to design and commence implementation of a program to increase the installation of solar panels by residents, landlords and businesses. The program should include provision of finance (possibly via Environmental Upgrade Finance), a bulk buy and/or preferred supplier scheme (possibly via Solar Savers and/or Australian Energy Foundation), and additional financial support for low income households.

- An allowance should be included to design a program to promote community transition from gas (similar to the proposed solar program), with a view to commencing implementation late in the year or early in 2022-23.
- Funding should also be included to engage a small team of ‘outreach climate champions’ who would actively engage with the community to promote Council emissions reduction programs and provide initial advice about how community members can reduce their carbon footprint. It is recognised that significant lead time will be required for program preparation prior to commencing outreach work.

4. Community emissions – transport

Budgeted expenditure related to active transport and public transport includes:

- \$1,771,783 for advocacy related to ‘public and active transport, open space, urban design and environmental opportunities associated with the North East Link and Union Road Level Crossing Removal projects’. This expenditure is covered by State Government grants.
- \$50,000 for advocacy related to ‘Public Transport improvements for disability access and network linkages’.
- \$160,000 for advocacy for ‘the Box Hill to City cycling corridor project’.
- \$274,600 to complete the review of the Bicycle Strategy to ensure ‘appropriate opportunities for on and off road cycling and improvements to Boroondara’s bicycle network’.
- \$45,000 to design ‘improvements to the shared paths networks ... to facilitate increased pedestrian and cyclist access and usability’.
- \$120,000 of capital expenditure for design and construction for pedestrian priority and accessibility on shared paths.
- \$200,000 of capital expenditure for safe on-road bike lanes.

Comments and Recommendations

- We welcome these active and public transport budget measures. However, excluding the State Government grants, the budgeted expenditure is relatively modest. A mode shift to active and public transport is critical to reducing transport emissions, and has new urgency in view of the pandemic induced increase in car usage. We believe there is significant scope for additional effective initiatives to encourage this shift, given the relatively high proportion of short trips in Boroondara, the poor public transport connections in many locations and the gaps in the safe cycling network.
- In this context, Council should allocate funds to commission (or at least advocate for) a mode shift transport study to establish baselines and identify drivers to promote a mode shift from cars to active and public transport.
- Mode shift to cycling needs personnel to encourage, support and drive it, so we urge Council to return to employing two Sustainable Transport Officers in 2021-22, with one dedicated to the promotion of cycling. An initial priority should be the development of partnerships to encourage more active transport to and from school.
- Additional budget funding for active transport infrastructure should be provided for:

- Installation of pop-up protected bike lanes in appropriate locations to encourage greater bike use as more people return to commuting; if successful, these would be made permanent in the medium term.
- Upgrading shared path street crossings to give shared path users priority wherever feasible.
- Constructing a linking path from Mont Albert Road to the Anniversary Trail in Canterbury; it may be possible to obtain State Government support for this project.
- Constructing connecting routes and supplementary infrastructure for the Hawthorn to Box Hill Trail (in addition to the advocacy for the trail already funded in the budget).
- The State government funded initiatives related to the impacts of the North East Link and Union Road Crossing Removal are clearly of major significance. The loss of open space and mature trees as a result of the construction of the NEL and the future traffic impacts on the municipality and beyond are a major concern. Every effort must be taken to devise and advocate for strategies to minimise and offset these impacts and to ensure the existing shared path networks affected by the project are replaced or maintained. Advocacy for improved public transport services should also be a priority.
- Council's Integrated Transport Strategy is now out of date and development of a new strategy should be a priority, particularly in view of the impact of the NEL on the municipality. Preparation of the new strategy should be linked to the review of the Bicycle Strategy, and also include a strong focus on walking and public transport. Strategies to support the take-up of electric vehicles in the community (e.g. provision of accessible charging points) should also be an important consideration. Suitable funding for strategy preparation should be included in the budget.

5. Urban forest and tree canopy cover

Budgeted expenditure for initiatives to maintain and increase tree canopy coverage includes:

- \$420,000 to 'proactively manage and renew our ageing street and park trees by implementing year four of the Tree Strategy'.
- \$240,000 for 'a targeted program to increase the planting of trees on local streets to 1,000 per annum'.

Comments and Recommendations

- Expanding the urban forest in Boroondara should be a major priority for the Council, given its role in offsetting the heat island effect and contribution to GHG drawdown. We acknowledge that the budgeted expenditure contributes to this objective, but it is disappointing that the amount for management/renewal is somewhat less than in the previous year (Agenda Item 3.1 Special Council Meeting 20 July 2020, p 383) and that the new planting initiative is confined to street trees. New plantings in 2021-22 should be increased and expanded to (at least) Council-managed open space, with an appropriate increase in the budget allowance.
- The Tree Strategy 2017 should be reviewed during 2021-22 and replaced by an Urban Forest Strategy, which (unlike the current strategy) addresses private as well as public land. The

strategy should set ambitious targets for tree canopy cover, possibly drawn from the CAP. Mitigation of and adaptation to climate change should be key objectives, with a clear focus on dramatically expanding Boroondara's urban forest and reversing the loss of tree canopy on private land. Community engagement in supporting urban forest expansion should be a major theme. The budget should include a suitable amount to undertake this review.

- Council should urgently develop strategies to improve enforcement of tree removal laws. This could include advocacy for increased penalties and an increase in relevant Council staff. Appropriate funding should be included in the budget.

6. Planning Scheme

Planning Scheme provisions can have a significant effect on community emissions and adaptation to climate change. The only initiative related to the Planning Scheme identified in the budget is for submission of an amendment associated with the Heritage Gap Study.

Comments and Recommendations

- Council should join Council Alliance for a Sustainable Built Environment (CASBE) and advocate for the State Government to change the Planning Scheme to mandate net zero emissions in all new buildings and developments and to strengthen provisions to improve adaptation to climate change (e.g. related to hard surfaces and vegetation).

7. Budget development process

The current budget process is not conducive to meaningful input from the community, although we recognise that it satisfies the legal requirements for community involvement.

Comments and Recommendations

- The community only has the opportunity to provide input after months of deliberation by Council officers and Councillors and the preparation of a very detailed document. The complexity of the proposed budget and the timeline for approval means that the scope for the community to have real influence is extremely limited in practice.
- The document is forbiddingly difficult for the non-expert to penetrate. It includes a high level of detail, yet the scope of particular initiatives is often unclear. Multiple representations of the same information are common, which can be very confusing for the uninitiated.
- We urge the Council to allow more meaningful community participation in the budget process by:
 1. Providing an additional opportunity for public input much earlier in the process, when options are still under consideration. This could include a public briefing on key budget issues, with opportunities for members of the public to ask questions.
 2. Providing appropriate explanatory material to assist community members to interpret the proposed budget document. A briefing forum, a hotline for queries and assistance with preparing submissions should also be considered.

8. Conclusion

The proposed budget fails to meet the challenge of the climate emergency. Funding for environmental initiatives is less than in the previous year and the allowance for the Climate Action Plan has been reduced by more than half (from \$985,000 to \$400,000).

It is true that there are other initiatives with a positive climate impact, but however climate related spending in the budget is calculated, the total is clearly inadequate. The proposed climate funding is disproportionately small in a total budget of \$260 million plus capital spending of \$99 million, particularly in the context of the major expenditure devoted to initiatives such as the Transforming Boroondara project and the Kew Recreational Centre (worthy though these projects may be in their own right).

The lack of climate ambition in the budget is starkly evident in the forecast for Council's own GHG emissions, which is unchanged from 2020-21. Even more telling is the complete absence of any new spending for initiatives to assist in driving down community emissions.

We urge the Council to demonstrate that it is serious about making a real contribution to tackling the climate crisis by substantially increasing funding for climate action in 2021-22 and the foreshadowed climate expenditure in following years.