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Park Services,  
City of Port Phillip,  
Private Bag No. 3,  
St Kilda PO VIC 3182

To whom it may concern

## **AILA Response to City of Port Phillip Draft Nature Strip Guidelines**

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects (AILA) Victorian Chapter welcomes the opportunity to offer feedback on the City of Port Phillip's draft nature strip guidelines. AILA is the peak body for the landscape architecture profession in Australia. Representing over 3500 members, we champion quality design for public open spaces, stronger communities, and greater environmental stewardship.

Our membership covers a diverse range of professional and creative services including strategic planning, urban design, open space design and natural resource management, working across all levels of government and within the private sector. AILA's Charter stresses that urban and rural landscapes contribute to the Australian quality of life and that the condition of the landscape influences the economic, social, and environmental health of the nation. It strongly endorses urban greening as a strategy to combat climate change and to build sustainable and resilient cities. Nature strips are an important site within a city for this greening to occur.

Nature strips are one of three major components of the local streetscape. The others are the road itself and the footpath. Such streetscapes in Victoria generally account for 20 - 25% of a residential neighbourhood (Wissing, 2021, in press). The amount of road easement green space, which includes the privately managed nature strip, within the street corridor is around 7% of land area in Melbourne and accounts for 36.7% of public green space, although this varies greatly according to the date of estate establishment (Marshall et al, 2019b, 1). This is similar to the average amount of privately managed nature strip in four urban design eras from 1835 to today in Geelong of 28% (with roads and footpath accounting for 64% and street trees at 9%) (Wissing, 2021, in press). Further, almost a quarter of privately managed nature strips in Melbourne contain resident verge gardening (Marshall et al, 2019a, 1).

The City of Port Phillip is to be commended for offering its residents the opportunity to collaborate on the design of their nature strips. In a Geelong study, interviews conducted with 22 residents in 2018 revealed that all would be willing to be actively involved in the redesign of



their streetscape if the local Council approached them (Wissing, 2021, in press). Of the desired streetscape design features, 82% wanted to grow vegetables, 77% wanted a place for children to play, and 68% wanted places to sit, places to gather and the installation of rain gardens (Wissing, 2021, in press). Further, preliminary analysis from a national survey undertaken in 2021 and 2022 by Macquarie University, to understand how Australians used their backyards, local streets and local parks during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that 76% of respondents across Australia visited their local street at least weekly, with 68% seeing the street as highly important or important. This compared with 53% visiting their local recreation park weekly, which 60% identified as highly important or important (Wissing, pers. comm, 2022).

In municipalities such as the City of Port Phillip, with very small land areas and predominantly characterised by pre-World War II residential subdivision, the proportion of public open space that nature strips comprise, and thus their importance, is even greater. In the City of Port Phillip, the proportion of public open space (POS) of Council area is 19.5%, double the metropolitan Melbourne average of 9.3%. However, the per person average of POS in the municipality is 38.4 m<sup>2</sup> compared to a metropolitan average of 57.7 m<sup>2</sup> (Victorian Planning Authority, 2017). Further, the City of Port Phillip is generally characterised by comparatively very small residential lot sizes. For example, in 2016, South Melbourne had an average block size of 120 - 140 m<sup>2</sup><sup>1</sup>, compared to a national average of 735 m<sup>2</sup>. For mostly financial reasons, the opportunity to create new parks in such areas is almost impossible. This makes the local streetscape outside residential properties a particularly attractive option for redesign.

Historically, the City of Port Phillip and its predecessors have been at the vanguard of nature strip development in Melbourne. Early photographs of Melbourne's residential streets, including Carlisle Street, Balaclava, in the City of Port Phillip in 1862, show either grass or a combination of grass and footpath on the side of the road (Butler-Bowden & Couchman, 2005, 504). Likewise, Melbourne's earliest planned nature strips were probably at Port Melbourne's Garden City housing development in the 1920s (Butler-Bowden & Couchman, 2005, 504).

Since the late 19th century, grey infrastructure such as electricity, telecommunications, water, sewerage, and gas has increasingly been included in such street corridors. As early as 1906, complaints were made in Melbourne regarding the poor management of street trees in response to above-ground electricity and telephone wires (Brown-May, 2005b, 691).

A century later, such street corridors are increasingly recognised as being vital places to increase green and blue infrastructure, which provides a range of ecosystem services essential for human health, such as thermal comfort, stormwater management, carbon sequestration and pollination, and mitigating key impacts arising from Australian urban living such as the Urban Heat Island effect, the Urban Stream Syndrome (stormwater runoff) and poor soil health.

Today, the City of Port Phillip's own documents, including reports that inform the Act and Adapt: Sustainable Environment Strategy 2018-28 (City of Port Phillip, undated i) recognise it as a leader in the development of sustainable environments. Unfortunately, the current draft nature strip guidelines updating the 2013 version released for comment by the City of Port Phillip do not appear to be consistent with the directions identified in various Council documents including

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<sup>1</sup><https://chartingtransport.com/2016/05/22/are-melbourne-suburbs-full-of-quarter-acre-blocks/>, accessed 21 January 2022



the Move Connect Live Integrated Transport Strategy 2018-2028 (City of Port Phillip, undated ii) or the very recent Places for People: Public Space Strategy 2022-32 (City of Port Phillip, undated iii). Further, the draft Nature Strip Guidelines do not appear to be consistent with tree protection zones outlined in AS4970 (2009). Elevated planting boxes also do not enable the capture and treatment of urban stormwater.

The City of Port Phillip's request for comments on the draft guidelines provides an excellent opportunity to reinforce the need for high-quality collaborative design to achieve the objectives identified in Council's Sustainable Environment Strategy, Integrated Transport Strategy and Public Space Strategy. We see these guidelines as standard defensive rules to be used only in cases of dispute or damage to existing trees or public risk. The City of Port Phillip needs to produce best-practice streetscapes that are attuned to increased sustainability under the pressure of a climate emergency.

The guidelines should be used with discretion as necessary with the overall aim of enhanced urban biodiversity and resident participation in the care and maintenance of their local street. Nature strip guidelines should facilitate urban gardening by all its residents.

Such guidelines should not be too prescriptive as this can result in inequitable access to gardening nature strips. Prescriptive setbacks in narrow streets are likely to preclude the establishment of a nature strip garden. We suggest that guidelines should not specify setbacks from assets but make it clear that access to assets might result in damage or destruction of the garden and that costs of reinstatement are the responsibility of the resident. Similarly, issues of liability can be clearly addressed. We recommend that these nature strip guidelines be edited to increase discretion on setbacks and then used in the short term to provide general guidance.

The role of landscape design is particularly important. Considered, early design of the street landscape is critical: while good design typically costs around 10% of a project, it locks in over 80% of the impacts, good, bad, or otherwise. These guidelines don't address change to street design apart from possible addition of raised planters and changes of treatment from grass (or gravel) and resident-planted shrubs.

Ideally, nature strips should be designed as one component of the road reserve. AILA commends the City of Port Phillip for developing its public space strategy Places for People: a Public Space Strategy, 2022-2032 (City of Port Phillip, undated iii). Roads and streets should be designed for both movement and place (Department of Transport 2019).

Nature strips, medians and canopy trees contribute strongly to a sense of place. Consequently, the preferences of the residents, whose place it is, must be given priority in the design of their streetscapes. We strongly recommend that the City of Port Phillip review their objective in developing nature strip guidelines and instead implement their strategy Places for People, including the development of landscape masterplans in a co-design process with residents.



We encourage the City of Port Phillip to commence a precinct-based process of street masterplanning and design that reconsiders the future of each street with the aim of detailing future works that meet the objectives of council's sustainability, transport, public space and WSUD guidelines.

This should be a collaborative, all-of-council, process led by landscape architects, but also involving traffic, services and WSUD engineers, horticulturalists, arborists, and communication and community engagement staff.

The plans should identify and cost all works that will develop the streets in line with new council policies. These works could be prioritised and staged, with the work being also available for grant applications to State and Federal government.

The aim of each precinct plan should be to reduce the percentage of hard pavement dedicated to vehicle movement and parking and increase space allocated to safe active transport and urban greening. Water retention in each precinct should be increased through changes to surfaces and WSUD techniques. Space given over to gardens in medians and nature strips should be maximised. Undergrounding of overhead services should be explored with priority given in heritage areas and where they limit the healthy development of existing or planned canopy trees.

City of Melbourne maintains a running record of street design projects that recover road space in this way. AILA envisages that money invested by council in refitting their streets in this way to enhance their liveability will eventually produce a financial return through rate revenue resulting from enhanced property values.

## Recommendations

In conclusion, AILA (Vic) makes the following recommendations in reviewing the City of Port Phillip's draft nature strip guidelines:

1. The draft nature strip guidelines should be edited to increase discretion on setbacks and used only in the short term to encourage streetscape gardening, by interested residents, that enhances urban biodiversity.
2. The draft nature strip guidelines should provide commentary and evaluation on the benefits of nature strips in urban cooling and meeting council's targets for Urban Heat Island reduction and urban tree canopy increase (%).



3. The City of Port Phillip should commence a precinct-based process of street master planning and design that reconsiders the future of each street with the aim of detailing future works that meet the Council's objectives for sustainability, transport, green infrastructure and public space and WSUD guidelines. The nature strip should be designed as part of the entire street. Residents should be involved in this design process, and nature strip gardening should be facilitated.
4. The City of Port Phillip should consider how the draft nature strip guidelines can assist in the understanding and assessment of landscape performance. This may consider sustainability metrics, economic evaluation and broader understanding of urban ecologies within the municipality.

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this issue with you further.

Yours Faithfully

Regards,

**Matt York**

AILA President Victoria

Australian Institute of Landscape Architects

*This submission has been prepared by a working group of AILA Victoria, co-ordinated by Dr Meredith Dobbie, Environment Committee Chair.*



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