

7.4 MERRI CREEK COMMUNITY SAFETY AUDIT REPORT

Director Community Development Arden Joseph

Community Wellbeing

Officer Recommendation

That Council:

1. Endorses the Merri Creek Community Safety Audit Report (2020) prepared by XYX Lab (Monash University) and publicises the report on the Council website.
2. Notes that an internal coordination committee will oversee the implementation of the findings and recommendations of this report.

REPORT

Executive Summary

Late in 2019, a sexual assault occurred on the Merri Creek along a popular walking trail just north of Harding Street, Coburg which received widespread media and public attention. This incident and others in the recent past, has highlighted community concerns regarding safety in general and the Merri Creek area in particular. In response to this incident, the Mayor at the time, Cr Tapinos, called for a safety audit on the Merri Creek corridor in Moreland.

Council officers engaged XYX Lab from Monash University to undertake a safety audit and large-scale and extensive community consultation. Their comprehensive report was finalised in September 2020, which included community engagement findings, expert analysis and recommendations.

The Report recommends actions that fall in to three distinct areas:

Building Communities - for example, co-designing any community-building infrastructure and forming support networks along the creek. The proposed Merri Creek Catchment visioning exercise which resulted from a Notice of Motion in February 2021 will recognise the involvement of the community in determining goals, objectives and priorities for the care, management and use of the Merri Creek catchment

Communication and engagement – for example, campaign(s) on the early outcomes of the Merri Creek Coburg Women’s Safety Survey, emphasising participation rates and developing mechanisms for encouraging feedback and experiences

Infrastructure and Maintenance - for example, improving paths, signage, lighting and general community infrastructure (benches, artwork).

This topic is relevant and connects with the work of a number of units within Council – open space and maintenance, communications, traffic, places, capital works, community development and urban planning. An internal coordination group will facilitate the communication, response and actioning of relevant recommendations in the report. Liaison will also be undertaken with Victoria Police as required.

Previous Council decisions

Merri Catchment Visioning - Response to Notice of Motion 56/20 – 10 February 2021

That Council:

1. *Endorses the proposed Merri Creek Catchment visioning exercise as proposed by partners via a codesign approach to commence in March-April 2021, including conducting a community workshop, mapping of resources and preparing a July Council report on outcomes that also identifies potential partnerships using a Collaborative Impact approach.*

2. *Approves a budget allocation of \$10,000 to the Community Wellbeing Branch current year budget, to be funded from savings identified from across the organisation, for an appropriately skilled consultant to be engaged to undertake the proposed Merri Catchment Visioning exercise.*

1. Policy Context

Key priority number 6 under Connected Communities in our Council Plan 2017-2021 states that Council will “help people feel safer in our neighbourhoods”.

This project also references the Gender Equality Commitment, Preventing Family Violence in Moreland Strategy 2016–2020, and Active Women and Girls Strategy.

2. Background

Late in 2019, a high profile sexual assault occurred on the Merri Creek along a popular walking trail just north of Harding Street, Coburg. This incident and multiple others in the recent past, has highlighted community concerns around safety in general and the Merri Creek area/corridor in particular. In response to this incident, which is the latest in a series of unrelated attacks on women in public spaces in Melbourne's northern suburbs, the Mayor of Moreland publicly called for a safety audit on the trail.

The Merri Creek trail in the Moreland City Council area is 21km long and is shared with Darebin and Yarra City Councils. For the purposes of this audit, the study area was limited to the creek area within Moreland LGA, between Moreland Road and Bell Street. Council engaged XYX Lab from Monash University in February 2020 to complete the audit which aimed to:

Address the complex challenges of safety for women in urban places;

Identify opportunities to increase the feeling of safety in the study area;

Reduce the opportunity for crime, specifically crimes against women to occur;

Increase community participation and foster local social capital; and align with other existing initiatives.

Merri Creek Visioning Exercise

In December 2020 Council officers held conversations regarding developing a shared vision to provide a framework within which relevant community collaborations can flourish.

Following a Notice of Motion presented by Cr Riley, a further Council report was presented in February 2021 endorsing a proposed Merri Creek Catchment visioning exercise. The report recognised the involvement of the community in determining goals, objectives and priorities for the care, management and use of the Merri Creek catchment. It was proposed that community consultation and engagement be modelled on the Collective Impact framework. The report also secured funds to engage an appropriately skilled consultant to conduct two community workshops, mapping of resources and preparing outcomes that identify potential partnerships and next steps of developing a longer term sustainable implementation plan. These are scheduled for late May and early June with a Council report being tabled for July on the outcomes and next steps.

The outcome of this process will be consistent with the implementation plan for the Merri Creek Community Safety Audit.

3. Issues

Community impact

The XYX Lab, Monash University report which includes community engagement findings and expert analysis and recommendations.

Key findings of the report include:

The Merri Creek is a highly valued space close to nature and a place for exercise;

People use it for leisure activities such as picnics, dog walking, playing and bird watching;

Many respondents enjoyed walking their dogs and meeting and chatting with other dog walkers in the Coburg Merri Creek area;

It's a way to avoid busy streets;

Joe's Garden near Harding Street is a very popular space and the events and activities held here are important to bring community;

It's important to you that the natural qualities of the area are protected;

People think community safety education across the community is important, particularly around attitudes and behaviour towards women; and

When it comes to feeling safe, it's important to people that Merri Creek feels welcoming and accommodating. This includes things like litter, responsible dog, wayfinding signage and connections to surrounding streets.

The Merri Creek Coburg Women's Safety Survey has strengthened women's agency with potential to impact council decisions that affect the policy and design of shared public spaces. The depth and breadth of survey responses demonstrate a nuanced understanding of potential safety measures. Included in responses are community building and engagement measures, as well as infrastructure upgrade measures.

Implementation Plan

The Report recommends actions that fall in to three distinct areas:

Building Communities

Building resilience through community initiatives. Facilitate and support existing and new local groups, for example co-designing any community-building infrastructure and forming support networks along the creek.

Current actions underway:

Council officers believes that the work underway with the Merri Creek Visioning exercise will lead to a sustainable vision for Merri Creek that can build on community aspirations including being involved in co-designing infrastructure and forming a supportive network.

Communication and engagement

Campaign(s) on the early outcomes of the Merri Creek Coburg Women's Safety Survey, emphasising participation rates and developing mechanisms for encouraging feedback and experiences.

Current Actions underway:

Moreland will continue to use the Conversations Moreland Platform for gathering stories. Moreland is currently a partner in the YourGround project . The YourGround interactive map allows people to drop a pin anonymously, tell a story or share an experience about their feelings of safety while using public space, whether for leisure, sport, exercise or play. When collated and analysed, the data will provide insights into where and how we can make Moreland parks and community spaces more accessible, inclusive and equitable.

Infrastructure and Maintenance

Nature is the key attraction of Merri Creek and any changes should be appropriate to the natural context of the Merri Creek corridor and in consultation with local women users including improving paths, signage, lighting and general community infrastructure (benches, artwork).

Current Actions underway

Council acknowledges that the above recommendations are important to women's safety. Harding St bridge was designed in the 19/20 financial year. It is expected to be delivered within the next two years. Vegetation maintenance continues to be a priority along the Merri Creek and catchment corridors, for instance ensuring vegetation doesn't intrude across designated footpaths and maintaining adequate height clearance with tree canopies. Council use 'CPTED' principles (Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design) with management of vegetation beside pedestrian paths. This in effect means Council can endeavour to maintain clear sight lines at least through the layers of vegetation and restrict hiding spots.

Given the spread of responsibility within Council for this topic, an internal officer group will coordinate the various action items as recommended by the XYX Lab report.

Legal and risk considerations

There are no legal or risk considerations in providing this report.

Human Rights Consideration and Gender considerations

The implications of this report have been considered in accordance with the requirements of the Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities specifically as it relates to the following sections:

S12 The right to freedom of movement;

S17 The right to Protection of families and children; and

S18 The right to taking part in public life.

The needs of all genders were considered as part of the planning and community consultation process and the recommendations are informed by the input from women and gender diverse community members.

The report considered women's experiences in public places and references gender-based violence, gender-based built environment and places. The report was based on a Women's Safety Audit - an internationally acknowledged method for gathering information on safety for women and was adapted for Moreland's purpose. Any action or implementation plan will consider a gendered lens and a gender impact assessment.

4. Community consultation and engagement

Non-Contact Audit and Engagement

The state of emergency provisions across metropolitan Melbourne in response to the Covid-19 pandemic came into force in March 2020. This resulted in the need to redesign the engagement process from a face to face process to an online survey.

Community Responses

Following internal discussions, a decision was made to provide a general feedback mechanism for safety along the Merri Creek (part A) and a more detailed survey for women and girls relating to six audit sites within the study area (part B). The survey was open between 15 June - 17 July 2020.

Across the two-part survey, there were a total of 1,120 respondents (part A = 224, part B = 896). The survey response rate is very high and demonstrates the interest and ownership of safety issues along the creek, specifically as they relate to the experiences of women and girls.

This fantastic response made it very clear that our community has a strong interest in working together to develop positive actions towards safety in public spaces just like Merri Creek. The Conversations Moreland webpage was updated with holding messages in October 2020, including a summary of findings and discussion of next steps including Council engagement. A further holding message in April 2021 was provided to update on the delay in reporting.

5. Officer Declaration of Conflict of Interest

Council officers involved in the preparation of this report have no conflict of interest in this matter.

6. Financial and Resources Implications

There are no direct financial implications to providing these reports. Actions aligned within the implementation plan may have an impact on relevant team budgets. Where relevant and if un-budgeted, these items will be referred to the 22/23 budget cycle.

7. Implementation

Following the endorsement of this report:

An internal coordination committee will oversee the implementation of the findings and recommendations of this report.

A communication plan will be developed to ensure all contributors to the XYX safety report are aware of the next steps and how they may be able to be involved.

The report will be published on Conversations Moreland

Attachment/s

- 1 Merri Creek Safety Report XYX Lab - Final - November 2020 D20/476116