

Community Engagement Policy



Prepared by: Streets Alive Yarra

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Foreword

Streets Alive Yarra is a non-profit, volunteer, resident and ratepayer action group with a [vision](#) for more trees, wider footpaths and vibrant businesses in thriving [neighbourhoods](#). We see our streets being used by people from [8 to 80 years old](#), irrespective of whether they choose to walk, cycle, use public transport or drive. Residents and shoppers are able to move safely, comfortably, and conveniently around Yarra; and can easily find a park near shops.



Image credit: OCULUS Landscape Architecture and Urban Design

Streets Alive Yarra was founded in 2017 and now has over 2,000 likes on Facebook, increasing by 10-20 per week. A network of local champions develops concepts and proposals for how to improve their local street or precinct. Streets Alive Yarra is also Yarra's Walkability Action Group (WAG) representative for Victoria Walks.

Further information is available at:

- www.streets-alive-yarra.org
- facebook.com/streetsaliveyarra/

Overview

Streets Alive Yarra welcomes the opportunity to offer feedback on how the City of Yarra conducts community engagement and what elements could be included in a community engagement policy.

Our feedback consists of the following topics, detailed in further pages:

- Observation
- Measurement
- Definition of scope
- Advisory Committees
- Resident groups
- Proactive visits to schools
- Interaction using smartphone apps
- Custom smartphone app
- Enabling interaction
- Resolution using citizen juries
- Survey
- Feedback from Strong Towns

Observation

Community engagement with the least burden on residents occurs when Council simply observes people's behaviour. The book *Copenhagenize* describes an example of developing sensible solutions based on simple, affordable observation:

People were taking a little shortcut to escape the rush hour, yes, but also to circumnavigate the city centre and head over to Orestad. For a century this had never happened before at this location, but a new mobility pattern had emerged. The City observed and respected this behaviour and made a temporary bike lane across the sidewalk to see if it would work. It did. Less than a year later, permanent infrastructure was put in. By legitimising the behaviour of a handful of citizens, the City carved out a new route that has proven to be incredibly popular. No time-consuming survey or long meetings, just human observation leading to improved facilities.

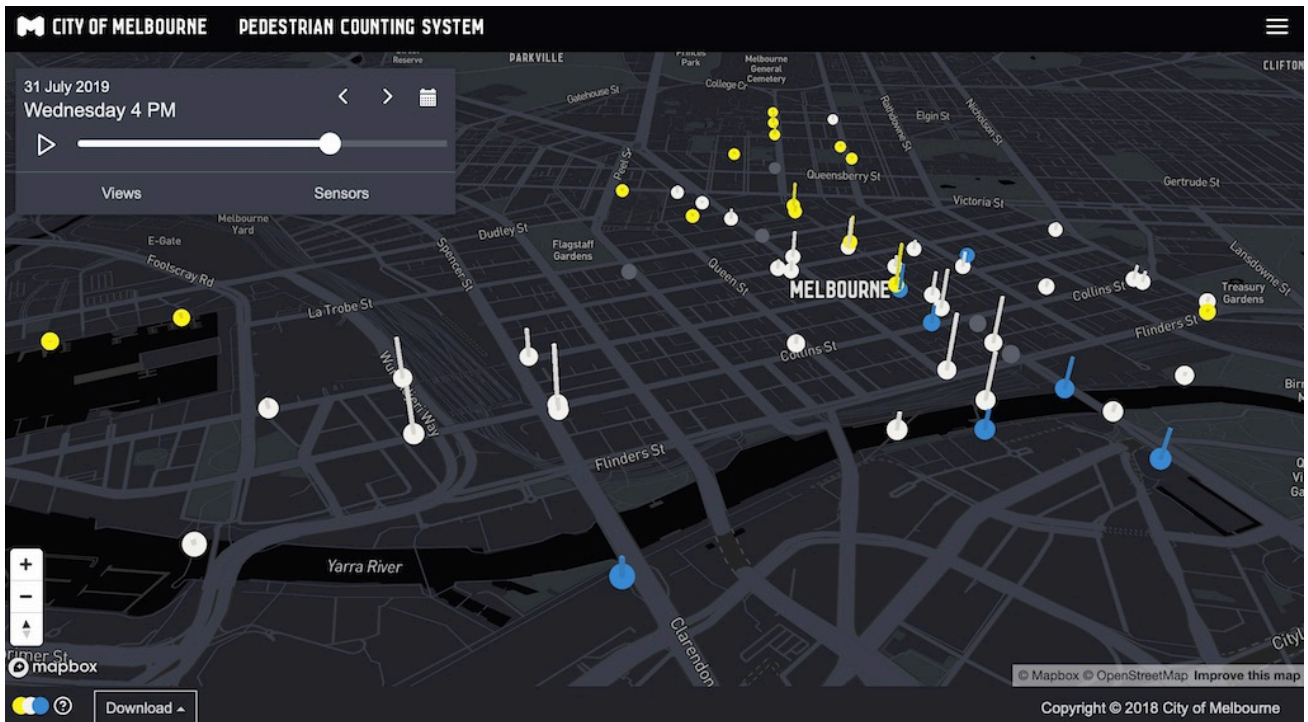
Copenhagenize by Mikael Colville-Andersen

Applied to the City of Yarra, Council can observe where footpaths are congested or where people are attempting to cycle (despite the threat of dooring) and then invest in improved infrastructure in those locations.

Measurement

Good community engagement provides information that is quantified and can be directly used to guide Council decisions. One way to do this is to invest in pedestrian & cyclist counters, installed where street space is contested, such as on shopping streets and highly trafficked intersections.

This would provide real data to guide transport policy and the allocation of street space to various modes.



Pedestrian counting system in the City of Melbourne. Image credit: <http://www.pedestrian.melbourne.vic.gov.au>

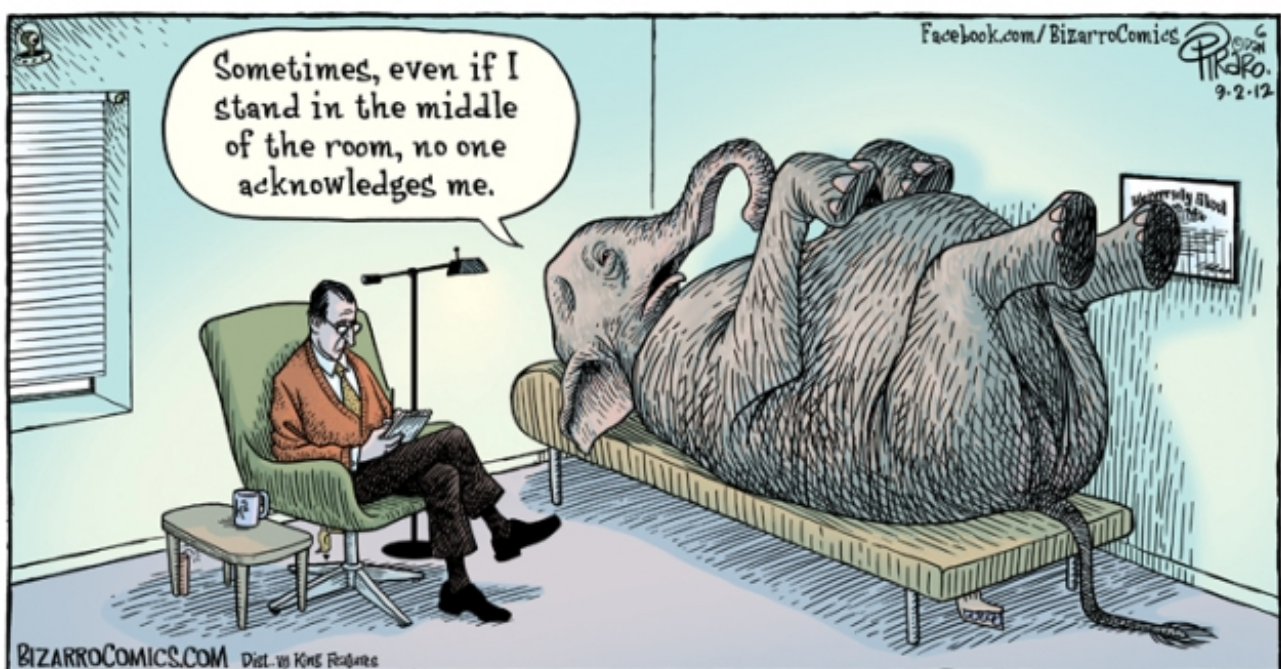
Definition of scope

Council defines the range or scope of the issue upon which they ask for feedback. At times this works well because the scope is broad, such as for Local Area Place Making (LAPM) reviews. At other times this works less well because the scope is restricted, such as for the Brunswick Street Streetscape Masterplan. In that project the issues of on-street parking and bicycle lanes were explicitly excluded from the scope, without informing the community of:

- Who decided to exclude those issues from the scope
- When it was decided to exclude those issues from the scope
- Why it was decided to exclude those issues from the scope

By failing to inform the community, Council risks community speculation, which can lead to a loss of trust in the community consultation process. The example of the Brunswick Street Streetscape Masterplan is particularly egregious because:

- Objective 6 of the Council Plan commits Council to creating a city to support a fulfilling life without the need for a car, and encouraging the use of public transport, walking or cycling as the first choice of transport
- The Council Safe Travel Strategy and Bicycle Strategy commits Council to supporting infrastructure for safer walking and cycling
- Council has declared a climate emergency, and re-allocation of space from parking to bicycle lanes would help decrease carbon pollution
- Brunswick Street is 100% Council controlled, so there is no 'VicRoads' excuse that would prevent Council from addressing this issue
- The issue of on-street parking vs bicycle lanes is clearly present in the community, so excluding it suggests that Council is wilfully 'ignoring the elephant in the room'.



Advisory Committees

Council uses advisory committees to provide feedback, which can work well. One problem is that the present set of advisory committees don't cover all topics. This means that Council has a direct path to feedback on some issues but not on others. For example, Yarra has a Bicycle Advisory Committee (BAC) but not a:

- Walking Advisory Committee,
- Public Transport Advisory Committee,
- Driving Advisory Committee,
- Parking Advisory Committee,
- Street Greening Advisory Committee, or
- Place Making Advisory Committee.

One solution is to reconstitute the Bicycle Advisory Committee as a:

- Transport Advisory Committee, a
- Street Space Advisory Committee, or a
- LAPM Advisory Committee.

The name is less important than the purpose, which should be to provide feedback on how to:

- build a beautiful city,
- allocate space to different uses,
- maximise amenity,
- protect the public, and
- avoid gridlock.

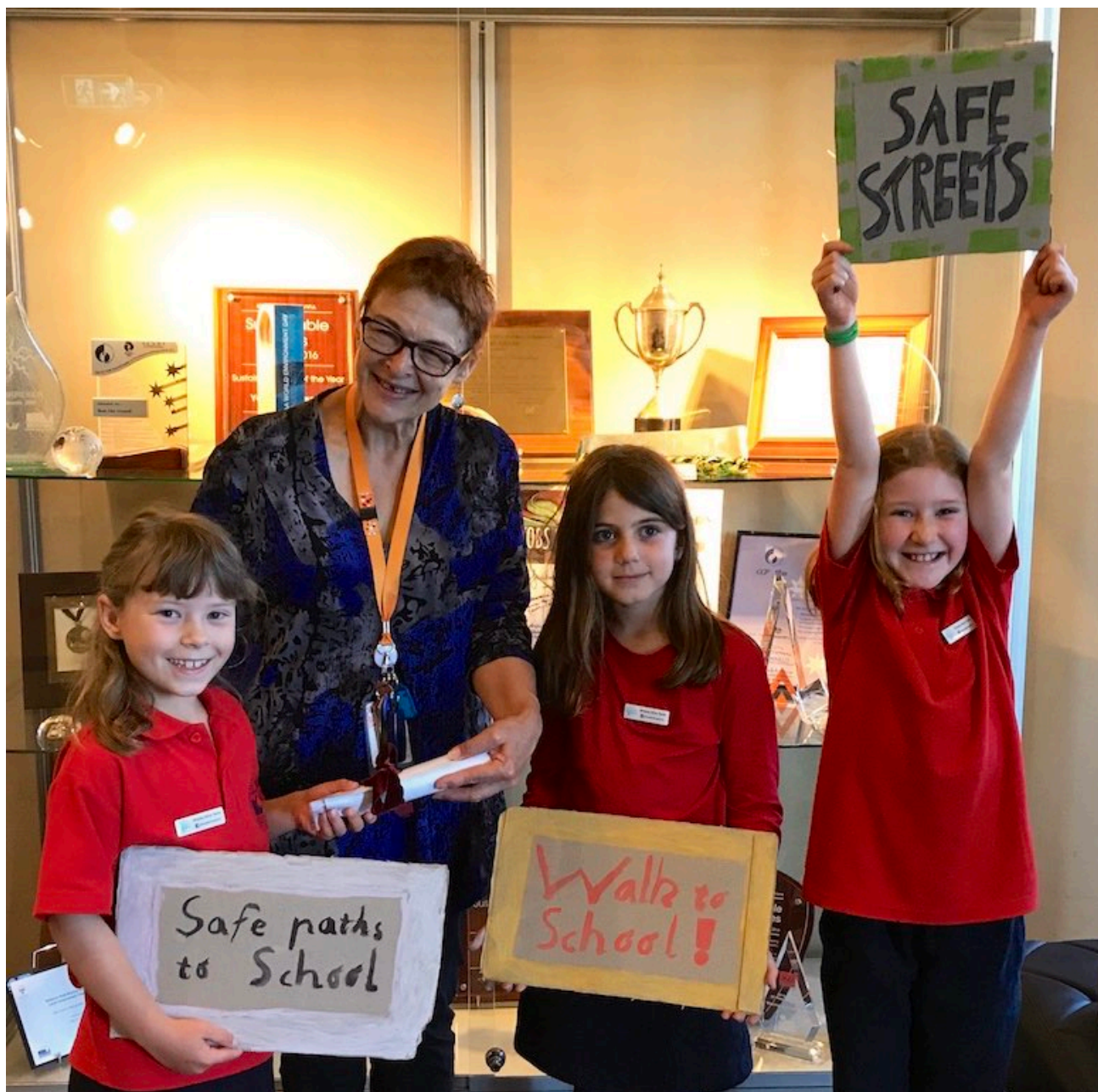
Resident groups

When residents feel that they are not being heard by Council, they tend to form groups as a means of amplifying their voice. Council can leverage the existence of resident groups to simplify the effort required for community engagement. For example, Council could proactively meet and discuss issues with resident groups. Frequency of meetings could be guided by the size of the resident group, as defined by likes on Facebook or published testimonials of support. For example, Streets Alive Yarra has over 2,000 likes on Facebook and 29 testimonials of support.



Proactive visits to schools

Yarra is home to 22 primary schools and 9 secondary schools, which offers Council an opportunity for obtaining feedback. When conducting community engagement on a topic that affects children, such as Local Area Place Making (LAPM) studies, Council could speak to the school assembly at each affected school, and set up a desk at school drop-off and pick-up times, making it easy for students and their parents to offer feedback.

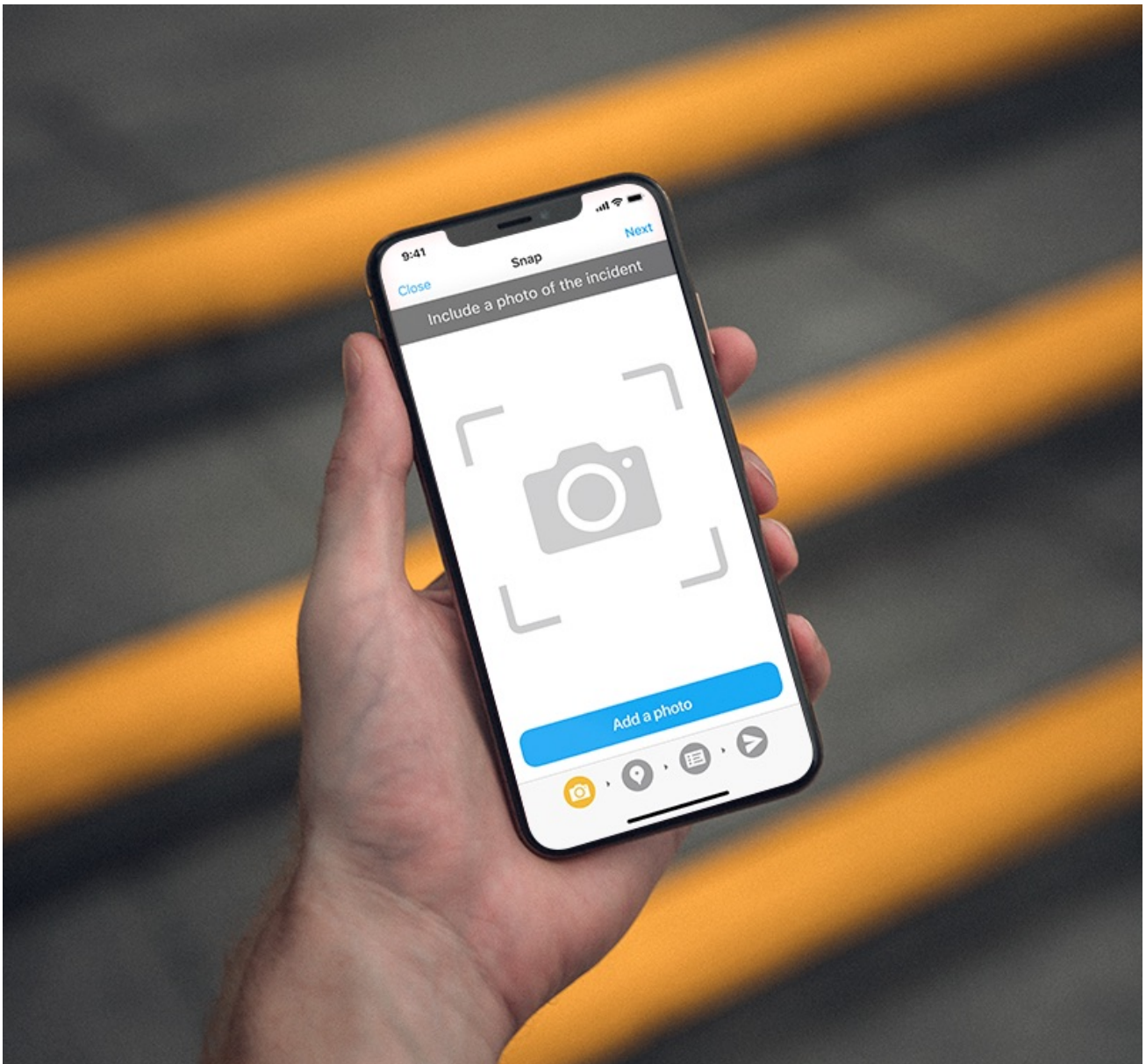


Students delivering a petition to Council, requesting safe routes to school. Image credit: Streets Alive Yarra

Interaction using smartphone apps

Most residents and ratepayers own and use smartphones, which can operate commercial apps such as Snap Send Solve. The beauty of these apps is their ease and speed of use. Residents and ratepayers don't have to wait on the phone or type an email. They can simply snap a photo, select a few attributes, then tap to send.

The main deficiency with Snap Send Solve is the lack of feedback (in the app) from Council. Council could support these apps by sending data back to them, such as the Council ticket (or case) number and the outcome. Users would be informed by a notification, directly on the screen of their smartphone.



Screenshot of Snap Send Solve app

Custom smartphone app

In addition, Council could develop their own custom app, for example titled 'Your Say Yarra'. It could use notifications to notify ratepayers of new community engagements, and prompt responses. It could enable residents to submit ideas on any issue at any time, as well as participate in formal surveys. An example is provided in the book *Copenhagenize*:

On a similar note, the City uses its data tradition to hand influence to our citizens in the form of a website and an app called "Giv et praj" (or "Give us a shout" in English) that lets citizens report issues live from the front lines of the urban jungle. Maybe there is a garbage can that hasn't been emptied, a pothole in a cycle track, or a sign that is broken or missing. You can pin it on the map, and the City is exceptional at keeping you updated about the status of your request. If they deem it worth of attention, they have a good track record of sending out people to fix it within a reasonable time frame.

Copenhagenize by Mikael Colville-Andersen

Enabling interaction

Councils existing community engagement portal (Your Say Yarra) offers a great feature for collecting feedback, where people can place 'markers' on a map to offer suggestions for improvement. Even better would be to enable residents to:

- include a photo with their comment,
- upvote suggestions from other people, or
- offer comment on markers from other people.



Screenshot of Your Say Yarra mapping feature

Resolution using citizen juries

Council does need to occasionally address contentious issues, such as removing on-street parking and reallocating the space to active transport. One approach, which was implemented by Infrastructure Victoria for the issue of transport pricing, is to use a citizen jury. The advantages of this process include:

- Members of the jury are selected to ensure balanced representation from a wide demographic
- Participants have the time to ask detailed questions of experts and work through the consequences of their initially stated preferences.



Citizen jury in deliberation. Image credit: Infrastructure Victoria

Further information is available at:

- <http://www.infrastructurevictoria.com.au/2016/05/17/citizen-juries-making-their-voice-heard/>
- <http://www.infrastructurevictoria.com.au/2019/03/05/community-panel-delivers-report-on-transport-network-pricing/>

Survey

Council uses surveys as part of community engagement. If surveys are representative, i.e. if they are properly designed, conducted and assessed, then they are a great method of engaging with the community. If self-selection bias (on behalf of the community) or researcher bias (on behalf of Council) is permitted to occur, then surveys are less helpful.

Example #1

Council should not issue surveys that artificially “frame the debate”. Instead, Council should issue surveys that genuinely attempt to identify the preferences of the community. For example, the recent community engagement on car sharing offered only two choices for a target in the growth of the car sharing fleet - to either 231 or 283 vehicles. A better approach would have been to present a wider variety of targets (with a summary of the justification for each), such as:

- Zero growth (unable to displace more private vehicles)
- Growth to 231 (maintain ratio of 45 vehicles to 100 people)
- Growth to 341 (strategic expansion, reduces total number of cars)
- Growth to 1,000 (half the target of the City of Melbourne)
- Growth to 2,000 (enables 50% of the vehicle fleet to be displaced, and matches the target of the City of Melbourne)

Example #2

Council should not re-define assessment criteria after results have been collected, or re-interpret survey results by referencing anecdotal data sets. For example, the recent Council Report on car sharing stated:

34. In summary, the community consultation exercise generally demonstrates that car share users want more car share bays. The vast majority of community feedback to Council officers' over the last five years is that car share cars and/or car share bays take up parking spaces on streets where they live. The outputs of the consultation exercise need to be taken in this context.

The formal process showed strong support for car sharing but the Council Report appeared to suggest that the opinions of car share users should be discounted because they were biased (they wanted more car share bays). The same logic could equally have been used to suggest that the opinions of owners of private cars should be discounted because they were biased (they wanted more on-street parking). The solution is to define the assessment method prior to conducting the survey.

Further information

Information on how to design & conduct surveys is available online: <https://psr.iq.harvard.edu/book/psr-resources>

Feedback from Strong Towns

The City of Yarra can learn from the experiences of other city councils, including those from the USA. Strong Towns has described some issues related to community engagement:

Customers don't know what they want, at least when it comes to something innovative.

Most public engagement is worthless

Applied to the City of Yarra, most residents don't know how good our streets could be, because most residents haven't lived in the Netherlands. The solution is to offer high quality renderings showing different options for our streets.

The meeting started out with the standard public policy questions planning professionals like to ask. What do you like about the city? What do you not like? If you could change one thing, what would it be? The answers were worse than worthless, and it was painful to watch non-policy people trying to answer questions that weren't designed for them.

Most public engagement is worthless

Applied to the City of Yarra, this occurred in the recent 'Yarra Environment Strategy' consultation sessions. Participants were all keen supporters of a better environment and the usual topics were discussed, but the sessions did not help to address conflicts between cohorts of people who were for/against various environment policies, allow ratepayers to develop an understanding of benefit/cost ratios, or enable ratepayers to prioritise expenditure.

Superficial exercises like dot-voting often fail to respect and take advantage of the expertise of either professionals or the public, and leave both feeling insulted.

Most Public Engagement Is Worse Than Worthless

'Dot voting' has occurred in the City of Yarra, including in the most recent bicycle strategy refresh. It did not appear to be a productive exercise. The solution is to include a clear cost and benefit/cost ratio with each option that is presented to the community, before asking them to identify which projects they support (and must pay for).

Concluding remarks

Streets Alive Yarra applauds the City of Yarra's focus on preparing a Community Engagement Policy. We would be delighted to provide further detail or explanation of the themes raised in this document.

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