

**Combined Residents of Whitehorse
Action Group (CROWAG) Incorporated.**

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Mr. Simon McMillan
Chief Executive Officer
Whitehorse City Council

Dear Mr. McMillan

CROWAG Submission on the *Whitehorse City Council* Draft Budget 2022-2023

CROWAG appreciates the opportunity to respond to Council's *2022-2023 Proposed Budget* and commends much of it, especially the focus on *Council Transformation* (p.7) and each of the elements therein. Much is needed to further build customer experience, stronger internal messaging, (including across-department communications and information sharing) and good governance by way of honouring existing policy. Council needs to be agile and ambitious in organisational change.



Transformation. Matters of transformation are relevant to how all officers build knowledge and work for the environment, climate change action and urban forest enhancement. Notwithstanding the reality of tree loss caused by *State Government* infrastructure projects and in-fill developments within state legislation, we believe that Council could adopt numerous projects in support of its *UFS* implementation without amendment to state legislation. In other words, there is substantial scope for *Council* alone, to create the changes required to respect the environment and turn around the frightening decline in canopy and urban forest across the municipality. That is, *CROWAG* believes that Council is simply not doing enough to honour its policies. Despite our good relations with Council and valuable information sharing, we respectfully suggest that obstacles to change include internal attitudes, culture, the need for more education across departments about Council policy and the priorities set principally by Council officers, (not just elected Councillors).

Not all Communication and Engagement Strategies are Fit for Purpose. Further to matters of culture and education, before we make recommendations in relation to the budget, we note the very unsatisfactory two-week window for allowing community submissions on the Proposed Budget. This is hardly consistent with Council's claimed will to improve

communications and engagement with its community. Unless this two week window was required by state government, it might be highlighting a serious flaw in Council's understanding of its community, the structures and consultation processes required of community groups (especially if Incorporated) and that normally, meetings are needed to endorse formal government submissions. Council's timings always cause a rush and do not allow fair and reasonable times for engagement, nor enable the extent of widespread representative feedback, which competitive, world-class organisations would usually seek to achieve.

Gaps in Leadership for the Environment. We note also, that in 2022 at least, various senior Council Officers have stated clearly in discussions with CROWAG members and/or affiliate members and in correspondence, that '*Council's adoption of the Urban Forest Strategy is a significant step forward*', but that step is of no value if '*the document cannot be given significant weight in decision making on planning permit applications, as the strategy is neither a 'reference' nor an 'incorporated' document within the Whitehorse Planning Scheme.*' This same point is referenced in Council Meeting Papers (28th Feb) at 11.1, 'Strategic Alignment', p. 6, of Report, but we note that it was no recommendation in that report that a process to Incorporation should begin. And we cannot see in the draft budget that Council has sought to make provision in its plans to incorporate the UFS into the *Planning Scheme*, in 2022/23 or the three years beyond.

Now, we acknowledge that in recent months Councillors and Council Officers, yourself included, have made it known to CROWAG that you either support or have sympathy for Council seek incorporation of the Urban Forest Strategy. This has been prompted, it would seem, by the urging of community groups. In light of the well-known negative consequences of the UFS not being incorporated, why wouldn't Council have acted previously to begin the process of incorporation? At the outset we express disappointment at Council's seeming lack of leadership on this matter.

With this in mind, we urge Council to review its proposed budget so that it genuinely provides for action to implement its own *Urban Forest Strategy*. (See our **Recommendation 1**). This is the vehicle to set clear targets and strategies for public, Council, developer education as well as clearer policy direction. We look to you for leadership. This action will require some tweaking of priorities, and no doubt some trimming (albeit small) across numbers of other areas. The current imbalance between funding for the environment, for tree protection, for better consultation and collaboration with the community and the spend on major capital works projects, sports pavilions and grounds, swim centres and the Morack golf course, for example, is notable. (Operational Budget p.4) We support funding in all of these areas, but these and numbers of others could be amended to ensure fairer and more genuine spending consistent with Council's lofty ideals as per the *Urban Forest Strategy*.

We make eight recommendations in this submission, some requesting more funding. And we request that CROWAG be able to summarise its recommendations at its June Meeting and at any other Special Committee(s) of Council which deal with the budget.

1. Incorporation of the Urban Forest Strategy into the Planning Scheme.

Recommendation 1 :

That Council allocate full and adequate funding within the 2022-2023 Budget to ensure that the *UFS* is incorporated into the *Planning Scheme*, such that it has the maximum capability to support Council aspirations for the urban forest and especially for it to guide decisions at *VCAT*. In that endeavour, we also urge Council to engage actively with relevant environment and conservation organisations within the community, including *CROWAG*, who have the skills and expertise to assist in this matter so as to affect some economy in its allocation of funds for this project. This is called collaboration.

2.

Strengthening Community Engagement: (p.3 and *Operational Budget*, p.5 and p. 16)

Council has allocated extra funding for implementation of its Community Engagement Policy which *CROWAG* supports. Yet, it could make other significant progress in this area without spending a cent, by changing its mindset and understanding of genuine communications. To achieve its vision of an 'empowered collaborative community' (*Community Vision* p. 17) significant changes in how Council actually relates to community groups will be critical. More genuine openness to criticism and being very welcoming of new ideas 'in partnership' with creative, innovative and active community groups is needed. Too often community groups are left with the feeling that they are a nuisance, are interfering and couldn't possibly have the level of competence that Council officers have. We refer Council to its



principles of collaboration, excellence, trust and accountability which are at the heart of all it does and suggest that there are gaps in their implementation.

Among many suggestions we could and will later make, on all these cultural issues, is one very practical priority which requires minimal additional extra funds, just deeper listening, more understanding and more will. It is this -

Recommendation 2:

That Council conduct a review of its timing of communications with the community, the time it allows for responses to *YourSay* surveys, as well as the crafting of these surveys such that they are not heralding a fait accompli and are more extensive and open-ended. In addition, high targets should be set for the number of responses, or participation in, all surveys, invitations for comment, submissions and attendance at 'drop-ins', seminars and the like. (The recent May, *Volunteering Consultation Meeting* facilitated by a consultant, apparently had eight community participants!).

3. **Parks, Open Space, Streetscapes and Environment Objectives**

CROWAG notes Council's Vision for a Sustainable Climate and Environment Care (p.17) and the seemingly contradictory reduction in funding for work on parks, open space and streetscapes in this budget for the next four years.

CROWAG reminds officers and Councillors that Council has allocated an average of \$300,000 for **street tree planting** over the past 16 consecutive years. The 2022-2023 Budget does not state a specific financial allocation. Our argument, along with others, for many years, is that funding must be increased. One reason is that tree canopy is declining not increasing! The other is that inflation has rendered a decline in the average allocation over all these years. An increase in real terms is clearly justified.

Whitehorse Budgeted Funds for City-wide Street Tree Planting Program (source Whitehorse Budgets 2003-04 to 2021-22)

Year	Amount	Comments
2003-04	\$235,000	
2004-05	\$200,000	- \$35,000
2005-06	No Figures found	-
2006-07	\$300,000	+ \$100,000
2007-08	\$300,000	No Change
2008-09	\$310,000	+ \$10,000
2009-10	\$320,000	+ \$10,000
2010-11	\$300,000	- \$20,000
2011-12	\$340,000	+ \$40,000
2012-13	\$350,000	+ \$10,000
2013-14	\$300,000	- \$50,000
2014-15	\$300,000	No Change
2015-16	\$300,000	No Change
2016-17	No Figures found	-
2017-18	\$300,000	No Change
2018-19	\$300,000	No Change
2019-20	\$330,000	Increase due to concerted community lobbying
2020-21	\$300,000	Cut \$30,000
2021-22	\$300,000	No Change

The total street tree planting expenditure for the 17 years in this table was ~ \$5.1M. (or ~\$300,000 per year). By way of comparison, *City of Whitehorse* spent (from 2003-04 to 2018-19 excluding years 2005-06 and 2016-17):

- Over \$2M on the Morack Golf Club and more planned.
- Over \$3M on car parks.
- Around \$4.5M on the Box Hill Gardens and
- Over \$50M on Box Hill Aqualink.

(Source: David Berry *BDTPS, Newsletter 251*, March 2019, p. 4-5 reviewing WCC Budget Briefing Session Feb., 2019 -updated).

Recommendations 3:

That Council allocate an additional \$100,000 to its previous average \$300,000 street tree planting. \$400,000 would be a fair and reasonable increase to make up for declining expenditure for 16 years. If Council is serious about its tree canopy and UFS aspirations, this should be made possible without reducing funding elsewhere in the Parks, Open Space and Streetscapes and Environment components of the Budget.

Recommendation 4:

That Council demonstrate its advocacy for its own *UFS Implementation Plan* by substantially increasing funding to parks, open space and streetscape in other areas of the budget in ways that will contribute to its UFS goals.

Council's *Strategic Direction 5* says that it will '*take a leadership role in tackling climate change*'. The work of Council officers, and Councillors in this area will be commensurate with their personal sense of urgency and belief in what is now indisputable science. The *April 2022 IPCC Report*, its sixth, makes 'crisis' the key word, let alone an emergency. <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-3/>

Recommendation 5:

That Council allocate resources to revisit the case for seeking unanimity on Council and within its staff, that there is a ***climate emergency***. It should also devote more funds and energy to do more to educate residents to better understand this foundational principle which seems to logically underpin the *Urban Forest Strategy*. The Climate Emergency Plans adopted by (Moreland and Nillumbik Councils might be a good model.

Furthermore, other wording in Council *Strategic Direction 5* in the Budget (p. 29), says that Council will '*Consider our natural environment when making decisions including creeks, wetlands, lakes, bushlands, flora and fauna*'. This is a weak, unclear and seemingly non-committal statement. We request that it be strengthened.

Recommendation 6:

That the statement at p.29 be altered to '*Give reasonable priority to our natural environment when making decisions including creeks, wetlands, lakes, bushlands, flora and fauna, in accordance with our Urban Forest Strategy.*'

4. Education and Engagement

CROWAG is 100% supportive of using education as an essential means to progressively shift community, Council officers and developers appreciation of urban forest, tree canopy etc. and greater awareness of there being a climate emergency.

Recommendation 7:

That Council significantly increase its budget allocation to public education, to better inform residents about the value of trees, tree maintenance, and also to diminish perceptions of the risks of trees. *Council* should conduct many more environment-based seminars, lecture series, forums and discussion groups for residents and its own staff and developers. In so doing, it might consider forming alliances with sufficiently expert community groups to assist in this work.

Recommendations 8:

CROWAG endorses the recent establishment of Council's *Environment and Sustainability Reference Group (ESRG)* and recommends expansion of its membership numbers to include further expertise and experience in environmental and sustainability matters and including a full voting representative from *CROWAG*.

We hope that the adoption of our recommendations will be seriously considered by Council.

Yours sincerely, on behalf of *CROWAG* and its affiliates, individual members and other supporters whose own submissions we support.

Ross Gillespie
President, *CROWAG*

Bellbird Residents' Advocacy Group, (BRAG) Glenburnie Road Residents Association Inc, (GRRRA) Jefferey Street Residents Association Inc., (JSRA) Holland Road Residents – Blackburn South Raiders, Friends of Blackburn Lake, Significant Landscape Overlay Group (SLOG), Surrey Hills-Mont Albert Progress Assoc. Inc. (SHMAPA), Blackburn & District Tree Preservation Society (BDTPS), Whitehorse Active Transport Action Group (WATAG), Glengarry Avenue Group (Burwood), Blackburn Village Residents Group. Inc. (BVRG) and the ACF Community Chisholm (ACFC).