

**Kelvin Thomson MP  
Federal Member for Wills**

**Submission to the Victorian Environmental  
Assessment Council  
Metropolitan Melbourne Crown Land Inquiry**

***Edgars Creek Parkland; the lungs of the Coburg  
Community***

**February 2009**

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**1. Overview**

I make this submission to the Victorian Assessment Council, which is investigating the use of Crown owned land across 29 of Melbourne's municipalities. I make this submission with regard to the Edgars and Merri Creek Parkland, located in my electorate of Wills in Coburg.

This land should be retained as public open space. It was originally acquired by VicRoads with the intention of running a freeway into the City along the Merri Creek. Fortunately the freeway reservation was deleted and it is now time to protect this fine open space forever.

The Victorian Government instructed the Victorian Environmental Assessment Council to investigate the use of Crown Land across 29 Melbourne Municipalities. This inquiry's terms of reference include investigating the use of Crown owned land in Moreland. The areas to be investigated include parks- but not parks that are freehold land owned by councils- small slivers of land, areas used for community purposes, VicTrack and VicRoads land set aside for future infrastructure or land owned by a public authority such as Melbourne Water (Fyffe 2009).

The purposes of the investigation are to:

- (a) Systematically identify and assess the uses, resources, condition, values and management of Crown land, and public authority land in metropolitan Melbourne;
- (b) assess values of Crown land, and public authority land for areas not committed to a specific use, and report on appropriate future uses relevant to Melbourne's liveability and natural values; and
- (c) report on the contribution of Crown land, and public authority land to Melbourne's liveability and opportunities for enhancement of this contribution.

The Victorian Environmental Assessment Council will prepare a discussion paper during 2009 and a final report by May 2010 (VEAC 2009).

A Victorian Parliamentary inquiry last year found that important open space and Crown Land- such as areas set aside for roads, rail lines and water authorities, is often sold off to developers for the highest price, with little consideration to the long term community and environmental ramifications (Fyffe 2009).

The sale of the Edgars Creek Parkland is being negotiated between a number of government agencies. VicRoads has had a number of meetings with Moreland Council's CEO to explore options for the land that would be suitable for all parties. The role of the Government land monitor is to provide Government with an assurance of accountability and integrity in land transactions. State Government policy has been that surplus land is to be sold at market value as assessed by the Valuer-General Victoria. As the City of Moreland expressed interest in obtaining the land for a public purpose, the land was offered to Council on this basis (Madden 2008).

The Edgars Creek Parkland site is an extremely important piece of public parkland to the Coburg and surrounding communities. The parkland has been maintained free-of-charge by the Moreland City Council (2008:2), its predecessors and local voluntary community groups such as the Merri and Edgars Creek Parkland Group (2009) over the last 25 years.

The true value of this site cannot be placed in monetary terms. Its environmental, ecological and recreational importance to the community of Coburg far outweigh any short term profit the State Government may be able to derive from its sale.

My submission will outline the ecological, environmental and social reasons for securing the future of this site. I will also set out the pressures that the growing population is having on the local community in terms of public open space.

## **2. Executive Summary**

VicRoads owned land in the vicinity of Edgars Creek should be retained as public open space.

This land was originally acquired by VicRoads with the intention of running a freeway into the city along the Merri Creek. Fortunately the freeway reservation which hung over this land was deleted. It is now time to move forward and protect this fine area of open space forever.

Increasing population is putting even greater pressure on our living space, and parks like this one are not simply important now; they are destined to become even more valuable in future.

Coburg needs all the open space it can get. It is largely built up and has been now for many years, and the new Pentridge Village and Kodak developments will add new pressures. This parkland is one of the largest areas of open space in Coburg, and should not be lost to housing or other developments.

The land readily links in with the existing open space and wildlife corridors along the Merri and Edgars Creeks. The State Government, Moreland Council and the local community have worked in partnership now for over 25 years in restoring the Merri and Edgars Creek Valleys and they are a major asset. Their value will be enhanced if the Vic Roads land is added in.

The Victorian Budget has been well managed and is in a state of healthy surplus. The need for real estate dollars from the sale of public land is much less than the need of the Coburg and Newlands community for room to live and breathe. The land is the largest open space in Coburg and acts as lungs, pumping the oxygen throughout the veins of our community.

On the basis that Moreland Council and the local community is willing to maintain the land as public open space, the land should be handed over to them by VicRoads.

### **3. History of the Edgars Creek Parkland**

The Edgars Creek flows along a 17km course from its headwater in Wollert through the highly urbanised suburbs of Epping, Thomastown and Reservoir, finally joining the Merri Creek in Coburg in the electorate of Wills (FoEC 2009).

Edgars Creek, along with many of the water bodies of Melbourne's north, is of spiritual and cultural significance to the Wurundjeri People, its indigenous Aboriginal People. Several sites of cultural and spiritual significance to the people of the Wurundjeri-willam have been recorded along Edgars Creek. At the old Kodak plant site, and further north in Wollert & Epping, numerous scatters from the making of stone axe and spear heads have been sighted (Freshwater 2006).

Some historians believe that the signing of the Batman Treaty may have taken place along Edgars Creek. Edgars Creek, like many other Melbourne creeks and rivers, provided a vital source of food and water to the local Aboriginal community. Family groups consisting of somewhere between ten and twenty or more people would make up a single clan, or tribe (Freshwater 2006).

The Wurundjeri People had, and continues to have, an intimate physical and deeply spiritual connection to the land. There are many descendents of the original Wurundjeri People who still live in and around Melbourne (Freshwater 2006).

The Edgars Creek Parkland, located at the junction of the Merri Creek, is Coburg's largest parkland and public open space, approximately 10ha in size (O'Connell 2008). Edgars Creek passes through the boundaries of the Cities of Whittlesea, Darebin and Moreland, through rural, industrial and residential areas. It is a seasonal creek, susceptible to drying out during the hot seasons, particularly in its northern most regions, and is likewise prone to flooding (Freshwater 2006).

Though a considerable part of the creek is in an artificial state, through much of Epping to Reservoir, over half of the creek remains in a semi-natural state, particularly in its upper and lower sections. Further downstream Edgars Creek feeds the picturesque Leamington St Wetlands Reserve and Edwards Lake Park in Reservoir, which is home to many bird species (Freshwater 2006).

Edgars Creek departs the lake via a weir wall at the southwest end, continuing from Livingston St through to the City of Moreland, where there are lovely walking areas on both escarpments (Freshwater 2006).

The reserve is a significant piece of parkland not just because of its size, but because of its ecological, environmental and social role in making the Coburg community a better community.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment 2006 Atlas of Victorian Wildlife records 48 fauna species within 1.5km of the Kodak Bridge over Edgar's Creek. Approximately 280 trees already exist on the site, and included in the parkland are areas of remnant vegetation. The land has high intrinsic value due to its position at the meeting point of two linear open space and wildlife corridors (Merri & Edgars Creek Parkland Group 2009).

VicRoads acquired numerous parcels of land in the 1970s for the proposed F2 Freeway and associated East-West Links. The Edgars Creek Parkland was part of the planned route for a freeway along the Merri Creek Corridor into inner Melbourne. Following strong opposition from the local community, the proposal was abandoned (Moreland City Council 2008:2), and it is now time to protect this fine open space.

Following the freeway reservation being removed, VicRoads still owns the land. The original asking price by VicRoads was around \$10 million, with developers having expressed interest. There have been ongoing discussions between VicRoads and Moreland City Council for the land to be gifted to Council on the proviso that it remain as public open space (O'Connell 2008).

Moreland City Council (2008:2) and its predecessors have developed and maintained the land as public open space over the last thirty years at no charge to VicRoads. Thousands of trees have been planted, pathways constructed, weeds managed and fire risks reduced. A significant amount of time and money has been invested into the parkland by the local community.

This inquiry provides the Victorian Government with the opportunity to write the final chapter in the history of the parkland through securing the Edgars Creek Parkland as public open space forever.

#### **4. Moreland City Council and Community maintenance and protection of the Parkland**

A considerable effort has been made to restore indigenous vegetation within both the Darebin and Moreland boundaries by both councils in conjunction with the Merri Creek Management Committee and other local community groups (Freshwater 2006).

Moreland property owners have contributed millions of dollars to the Parks Charge which has been included on their water, sewerage and drainage bills since 1958. They receive no direct benefit as there are no Parks Victoria regional parks in Moreland (Moreland City Council 2008:3).

Over the last thirty years that Moreland City Council (2008:2) and its predecessors have maintained the land, thousands of voluntary hours have been invested by local residents at the park in undertaking tree planting, weeding and general maintenance activities.

In 2007 alone, over 400 volunteer hours were dedicated to the creek restoration and enhancement projects by the local community as part of the Friends of Edgars Creek Activities (Merri & Edgars Creek Parkland Group 2006:3).

The Friends of Merri Creek has been making a significant contribution to the local community through its environmental protection and enhancement projects for the last twenty years. It has accumulated 400 members, planted thousands of trees and has undertaken weeding, water quality monitoring, tours, information stalls and removing litter from the Creek (Gencturk 2008).

The Edgars Creek Parkland should be gifted to Moreland Council in its entirety on the proviso that it is maintained as public open space in its entirety. The sell off of certain sections or parcels would compromise the parkland's ecological integrity (Craig 2009).

To keep this land in public ownership also represents a return for the Melbourne Water Parkland fee paid annually by local ratepayers. To date precious little of the \$3 million in

funds collected each year by the State Government in the form of an annual Melbourne Water Parkland fee has been used for parkland maintenance in the City of Moreland (Merri & Edgars Creek Parkland Group 2009). All parkland maintenance has been undertaken by volunteers throughout the community and at the expense of ratepayers through Moreland City Council activities.

## **5. The Social, Recreational and Health benefits of the Parkland to the local community**

The Edgars Creek Parkland is used as public open space for a wide range of activities by residents of Coburg North and surrounding suburbs. The land is used by walkers, golfers, runners, Coburg Harriers Athletics Club and dog walkers. The parkland is a place for gathering and meeting and fosters social interaction and community connectedness (Merri and Edgars Creek Parkland Group 2007).

Nearly one in three Australians, 29%, play sport or exercise twice a week or more. The most popular sport or physical recreation activities amongst Australians include walking (25%), aerobics (13%), swimming (9%) and cycling (6%) (ABS 2006).

Nearly half of the Australian population, some 10 million people, exercise or play sport at least once a month, with more than half (54%) reporting 'health and fitness' as their main reason for exercising. This was followed by enjoyment (22%), well-being (7%) and social or family reasons (7%) (ABS 2006).

Walking is the most commonly reported sport and physical recreation activity amongst Australians, with a participation rate of 25%. People aged 55-64 years reported the highest participation rates for walking (35%), followed by those aged 45-54 (31%) and those aged 65 years and over (29%) (ABS 2006:10).

Coburg and the area in the immediate vicinity of the Edgars Creek Parkland have a somewhat aged population compared with the rest of Moreland. Residents aged between 55-64 years make up 8.2% of the Moreland population and those of 65 and over make up 16.6% (ABS 2007).

The North Coburg area has 9% of the population aged between 55-64 years old and 19.1% aged over 65 (ABS 2007A).

Walking is the most popular exercising activity undertaken by seniors across Australia. It is therefore important that seniors have adequate access to suitable parkland and walkways to continue undertaking this activity.

According to the ABS (2006:7) there were over 1.0 million (6%) people aged 15 years and over who had been cycling between 2005-06, with more than twice as many males reporting to have cycled than females.

There were 875,500 or 6% of Australians aged 15 years and over who participated in golf between 2005-06, with Victoria recording the highest number of participants along with New South Wales (236,900 and 277,000 respectively) (ABS 2006:7-8).

Running, which is another popular activity undertaken through the Edgars Creek Parkland, has a high volume of participation according to the ABS (2006:8). There were an estimated 681,300 Australians who participated in running between 2005-06, with Victoria recording the second highest participation rate (171,000).

The Edgars Creek Parkland has been enabling local residents to undertake physical and recreational activities for many years now. Its sale for commercial, residential or other development would deal the Coburg community a severe blow in its aspiration to stay fit and healthy.

Providing local communities with the resources and parkland to take part in physical activity has become ever more important, especially with the ever increasing frequency of media reports and concern that Australia is in the midst of an 'obesity epidemic' (Biggs 2006), with child obesity in Australia being at an all time high (Houghton 2007).

Statistics show strong and consistent increases in the rates of combined overweight and obese children over the past 20 years, such that these now affect one in every four school children. Obesity affects 6%-8% of Australian schoolchildren. This equates to 260,000 school aged children. This figure has increased by 1.8% in the last five years, which is an additional 65,000 children (Gill & Baur et al 2008).

Childhood and adolescent obesity is associated with a wide range of immediate health concerns, as well as increasing the risk of disease in adulthood. Some weight-related health problems are also found in overweight children (Gill & Baur et al 2008).

If healthy dietary and physical activity environments and behavioural patterns can be established for young children it may help prevent the onset of overweight or obesity in adolescence and adulthood (Victorian Government 2006A). The State Government should be working to reduce obesity rates amongst the community, particularly young people, through the provision of adequate open space and recreational sporting infrastructure. Keeping the Edgars Creek Parkland as public parkland will ensure the Coburg community has the space to live and breathe so they can continue undertaking popular recreational activities such as walking and cycling.

## **6. Edgars Creek Parkland; 'The lungs of the Coburg Community'**

The Edgars Creek Parkland is a significant piece of parkland not just because of its size, but because of its ecological and environmental role in making the Coburg community a healthier and environmentally friendly community. The parkland acts as the lungs of the Coburg community, allowing residents to live and breathe; providing essential open space with a variety of flora and fauna in our otherwise urbanised and developed area.

The Department of Sustainability and Environment 2006 Atlas of Victorian Wildlife records 48 fauna species within 1.5km of the Kodak Bridge over Edgar's Creek. Approximately 280 trees already exist on the site and included in the parkland are areas of remnant vegetation. The land has high intrinsic value due to its position at the meeting point of two linear open space and wildlife corridors (Merri & Edgars Creek Parkland Group 2009).

I regard climate change as the issue of our time, the issue which will define our success or otherwise as policymakers.

Each day brings further evidence that the ways we use energy strengthen our adversaries and threaten our planet (Obama 2009). The phrase 'think global, act local' has never been timelier. Removing the parkland would certainly add greenhouse gases in the Coburg community (Parliamentary Library 2009:4). We can help play our part in the broader solution of reducing carbon emissions by retaining the Edgars Creek Parkland.

Governments are overlooking what city trees and parklands can do to reduce water use and fight climate change. For some years Australia has experienced a staggering growth in the

installation of air-conditioners, with sales surging by around 10% each year, and some houses having more than one (Fisher 2009).

These air-conditioning units are ravenous electricity users, imposing heavy demands on peak-load generating capacity, especially older less efficient models. The more air-conditioners to fight the climbing temperatures, the more black balloons and carbon emissions, the more the planet heats up. Adding to their workload is the explosion in hard surfaces, patios, pebble gardens, car parks, walls, roads and buildings that retain heat, causing an urban heat island effect (Fisher 2009).

The extent to which parklands, trees, shrubs and wall gardens can cool places has been greatly underestimated. Estimates by the Co-operative Research Centre for Irrigation Futures are that they can lower temperatures by 2-8 degrees because increases in evapotranspiration reduce building energy use by 7-47%. Average electricity saving per tree due to lower air-conditioning use ranges from 70-90 kilowatt hours a year, with savings greater at peak times reducing overall energy demand by 10% (Fisher 2009).

Melbourne has a rich assortment of trees, shrubs and grassed areas, a resource known as the urban forest (Fisher 2009), with the Edgars Creek Parkland being a prime example.

A study of two forested urban parklands in Chicago found total carbon stocks of 230-260 tC ha<sup>-1</sup> and annual carbon uptake of 3-5 tC ha<sup>-1</sup>yr<sup>-1</sup> (Jo & McPherson 1995:109-133). They found that 80-90% of the carbon was stored in the soils. In contrast, a study of green space in three Korean cities found storage ranging from 26 to 60 tC ha<sup>-1</sup> and annual carbon uptake of 1.6 to 3.9 tC ha<sup>-1</sup> yr<sup>-1</sup> (Jo 2002: 115-126). The continuing carbon sequestration by the parklands offset carbon emissions of the cities by 0.5-2.2%. Another US study found that urban forests across the country store an average of 25tC ha<sup>-1</sup>, or about half the storage density in natural forests (Nowak & Crane 2002:381-389/ Nowak 1993: 207-217).

Vegetation represents a carbon store. All plants perform photosynthesis in the presence of light. This process absorbs carbon dioxide gas from the air. When plant material decomposes or is eaten or cleared, the carbon is converted back to CO<sub>2</sub> and returns to the atmosphere (Parliamentary Library 2009:2).

The Edgars Creek Parkland's role in storing carbon should be valued. If part or all of the land is sold and developed, it would result in carbon which it has captured over the last thirty or so years being re-released back into the atmosphere.

A further factor that I urge this inquiry to consider is that the land is vital in maintaining a green buffer between the Newlands Industrial Precinct and surrounding residential areas. This buffer mitigates emissions and manages noise pollution and other impacts emitting from the around the clock industrial operations (Merri and Edgars Creek Parkland Group 2007).

It should also be noted that the Edgars Creek Parkland is subject to inundation. This status is unlikely to change as the frequency of flash floods, related to global warming, increases (Hodge 2008).

## **7. Demographic and population demand for open space**

Increasing population is putting even greater pressure on our living space. Parks like this one are not simply important now; they are destined to become even more valuable in future.

Victoria's population is forecast to increase from the current 4.8 million to over 6.2 million by 2031 (Victorian Government 2006:11). As of June 30<sup>th</sup> 2006, Melbourne's population was 3,744,982 people, and has been growing at an annual average rate of 1.5% annually for the

last five years. Over the previous five years there were no local government areas in Melbourne that declined in population. Moreland has grown by 0.9% (Victorian Government 2007).

Between 2001 and 2006 the population of Moreland grew by just over 5000, from 130,531 in 2001 (ABS 2001A) to 135,764 in 2006 (ABS 2007). This growth is placing extra pressure on local services, schools and infrastructure, including open spaces. This pressure is forecast to grow particularly in the North Coburg area where the Pentridge and Kodak residential developments will result in a major influx of new residents.

There are long term requirements for open space in the area resulting from high to medium residential developments in the Pentridge Village and Kodak sites. The City of Moreland already has one of the lowest percentages of open space allocations in metropolitan Melbourne. Retention of this land as public open space is fully supported by Melbourne 2030 Policy 5.6; to ensure long term protection of public open space (Merri & Edgars Creek Parkland Group 2009).

The *Melbourne 2030* plan supports the position of the Merri and Edgars Creek Parkland Group, who are in favour of retaining the parkland as public open space. The recent Audit Expert Group Report on *Melbourne 2030* notes that the provision of neighbouring amenities, including parks, open space, facilities and services, is an essential component of maintaining neighbourhood liveability. Further it recommends improving open space provision and services in line with population increases (Hodge 2008).

The Audit Expert Group on Melbourne 2030 also notes the reduction of tree canopy and loss of open space are two of the most easily felt and resented potential outcomes of urban consolidation. The allocation of surplus government land for open space is an area that should be taken into consideration (Hodge 2008).

We get told that population growth is inevitable and that it is desirable. Population growth has traditionally come at the expense of open space. Future public policy must take into consideration the threat which population growth poses to our existing public open spaces. Managing population growth so that it does not threaten the liveability of our city ought to be a priority of this State Government and Governments to come.

The Edgars Creek parkland must be protected not just for ours but for future generations. Its value cannot be placed in monetary terms. Its ecological, environmental and social value far outweigh any short term profits the State Government may be able to derive from its sale.

## **8. Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1:** VicRoads owned land in the vicinity of Edgars Creek should be retained as public open space.

**Recommendation 2:** VicRoads should hand over the land to Moreland City Council free-of-charge on the proviso that it will be maintained as public open space.

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