

Submission to Governance Rules Review



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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 thriving businesses in vibrant neighbourhoods. We see our streets being used by people from all ages, irrespective of whether they walk, roll on a wheelchair, cycle, use public transport or drive. Residents and shoppers should be able to move safely, comfortably, and conveniently around Yarra; and park near shops.



Image credit: OCULUS Landscape Architecture and Urban Design

Streets Alive Yarra was founded in 2017 and now has over 2,800 followers on Facebook. A network of local champions develops concepts and proposals for how to improve their local street or precinct. Streets Alive Yarra is also a member of the Victoria Walks Walkability Action Group network.

Further information is available at: streets-alive-yarra.org/about.

Summary

In this submission we offer brief feedback on the topics of *Public Question Time* and *Councillor Forums*, extensive feedback on the topic of *Public Submissions*, and no comment on the other topics.

Public Question Time

We support the proposed approach and amendments, so that Officers and Councillors have sufficient time to prepare a response to public questions. The proposal would be improved if it allowed members of the public to use electronic means, e.g. MS Teams, to ask their question, instead of requiring them to physically attend the meeting.

Councillor Forums

We support the recommendation to introduce formal and transparent reporting regarding all councillor forums, because this would increase public trust in the performance of councillors (if councillors were known to be attending forums), and increase the information available to electors (if councillors were known to not be attending forums).

Public Submissions

We agree with the description of the ‘difficulty with the current system’ from the directions paper, including:

- It introduces community contributions at the very end of the process
- It removes opportunity for officer advice or councillor reflection
- It reflects the views of only those people who are able to contribute in that way, i.e. the need to physically attend a meeting is a barrier for many people to participate, including people working evening shifts and parents of young children
- The receipt of a large number of submissions at Council meetings can result in the submission overshadowing the Councillor debate, and resulting in a significant period of time at each meeting being occupied by the hearing of community statements, rather than the debate and decision-making process itself.

We disagree with the proposed approach, i.e. to reduce the duration that a submitter can speak, from 5 minutes to 3 minutes, because we don’t believe that it addresses the identified difficulties. Instead, we suggest an alternative approach:

- On the same day that the agenda is published on the council website, council sends a bulk email to people who have subscribed to a ‘Notice of council meetings’ email distribution list (in addition to posts on social media). This reduces barriers to information for people who are not on Facebook or Twitter.
- On the same day that the agenda is published on the council website, council opens an online ‘public submissions page’.

- Any member of the public can upload a submission, after they have registered for an account and their identity has been verified (this is similar to submitters stating their name before making a public submission at a council meeting).
- Submissions can only be made to items on the published agenda (i.e. similar eligibility as the existing process for public submissions)
- All submissions are on the public record, able to be viewed by officers, councillors, and other members of the public (similar to how a public submission is on the public record).
- Submissions are received and reviewed by an officer prior to becoming publicly viewable, to guard against submissions that are defamatory, indecent, abusive, offensive, irrelevant, trivial or objectionable in language or substance.
- Submissions can be written (limited to 700 words, equivalent to the existing process of speaking for 5 minutes at 140 words per minute), audio (limited to 5 minutes) or video (limited to 5 minutes).
- The 'public submissions page' is closed 24 hours before the start of the council meeting, to provide sufficient time for officers to provide advice and for councillors to reflect.
- The 'public submissions page' forms part of the council meeting record, in a similar manner to how the video recording is archived and made available.

This alternative option would solve the identified difficulties.

Difficulties identified by discussion paper	Proposal from discussion paper	Proposal from Streets Alive Yarra
Community contributions at the very end of the process	Not solved	Solved
Removes opportunity for officer advice or councillor reflection	Not solved	Solved
Reflects the views of only those people who are able to contribute in that way	Not solved	Solved
Submissions overshadowing councillor debate	Partially solved via reduced duration	Solved






Summary of two proposals

We note that public submissions at council meetings are only one way that council can engage with the community, and are not necessarily the most effective method. Council adopted a Community Engagement Policy in 2020; it does not mention public submissions at council meetings, suggesting that they are not a core element of best practice methods.



Council's adopted Community Engagement Policy does not mention public submissions at council meetings. Image credit: City of Yarra.

Instead, the Community Engagement Policy highlights citizens juries and deliberative panels:

	Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
					
Example methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Signs• Yarra Life ebulletin• Social media• Yarra News bimonthly magazine• Direct mail	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Surveys (online and hard copy)• Ideas boards• Creative projects• Online pin-dropping map tools• Face-to-face listening posts	Partnering with the community <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Workshops• Community panels• Advisory groups• Online forums• Detailed online mapping, ranking and prioritising tools• Regularly reporting back to the community across multiple stages of engagement• Elements of deliberative engagement processes	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Independently governed reference groups• Citizens juries• Representative deliberative panels• Deliberative budgeting	

Council's adopted Community Engagement Policy gives representative deliberative panels the highest rating. Image credit: City of Yarra, highlight from Streets Alive Yarra.

Based on the adopted Community Engagement Policy, we suggest that council allocate a greater focus on deliberative panels than on time for public submissions at council meetings. For example, we suggest that council make it standard practice to conduct 2 to 3 deliberative panels each year, for the most contentious issues of the year.

Deliberative panels are said to cost approximately \$300,000 each. We suggest that council should decrease this cost to less than \$50,000 each by developing the capability to operate them in-house. Even if deliberative panels did cost \$300,000 each, the budget for 2022/23 shows forecast expenditure of \$3.5 million for *Advocacy and Engagement*, so it should be possible to conduct 2 to 3 panels per year.

Service area	Description of services provided	2020/21 Actual \$'000	2021/22 Forecast \$'000	2022/23 Budget \$'000
Advocacy and Engagement	Advocacy and Engagement provides an end-to-end communications function (internal, external, media, brand, digital channels, civic events, brand management, marketing, graphic design, speeches, consultation). Key Services: • Communications and engagement • Digital communications and marketing • Strategic advocacy			
	<i>Inc</i>	-	-	-
	<i>Exp</i>	2,429	2,895	3,548
	Surplus/ (deficit)	(2,429)	(2,895)	(3,548)

Excerpt from draft budget 2022/23, showing \$3.5 million for advocacy and engagement. Image credit: City of Yarra.

If some other community engagement activities must be sacrificed to enable 2 to 3 deliberative panels to be conducted each year, council should assist residents to understand the trade-offs by publishing granular data on how the expenditure for advocacy and engagement is broken down, e.g. allocation to advocacy versus to allocation to engagement, and to the nominated fields of: internal, external, media, brand, digital channels, civic events, brand management, marketing, graphic design, speeches, and consultation. It would also be valuable to break down the \$3.5 million expenditure plan by internal staff costs, external contractor costs, number of pop-up sessions, number of topics on Your Say Yarra, number of deliberative panels, the cost to conduct a deliberative panel, the cost to conduct an engagement on Your Say Yarra, etc.

Council's adopted Community Engagement Policy also highlights workshops and community panels. We suggest that council allocate a greater focus on these than on time for public submissions at council meetings.

We would welcome quarterly ward councillor meetings, where the community could ask questions in a structure that is less formal and more flexible than at council meetings. At such meetings it would be valuable to have the support of the CEO (or another senior officer) to moderate, to ensure that everyone has an equal chance to participate.

We would welcome workshops to discuss options for street treatments. An example is the proposed pedestrian crossing in Cremorne. Officers have selected a treatment without engaging local residents. Their selected treatment has apparently resulted in an extreme delay to installation. Residents do not know the likely cost, nor do they know the location. A better process would have been to conduct one or two workshops with residents,

describing the requirements for pedestrian crossings, possible locations, possible treatments, likely costs, and the trade-offs. Residents may have been able to offer feedback, e.g did they prefer a higher-cost, higher-safety, raised crossing that would require significant time to design, approve and install; or a lower-cost painted crossing that would be much faster to design, approve and install?



If council had hosted a workshop, residents could have offered feedback on whether they would prefer a slower higher-cost treatment or a faster lower-cost treatment. Image credit: Streets Alive Yarra.

Concluding remarks

Streets Alive Yarra would be delighted to provide further detail or explanation of the themes raised in this document.

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