



Bruce Lindsay
Environmental Justice Australia

2 October 2018

Dear Bruce,

The Australian Institute of Landscape Architects has long advocated for the importance of green infrastructure in our built environment. This was formalised in a National Policy Statement in 2012, *Adapting to Climate Change – Green Infrastructure*. AILA’s definition of green infrastructure¹ differs slightly from that in the document proposing a Rivers of the West (Green Infrastructure and Caring for Country) Act but this difference is of no consequence. The underlying concept of legislating for the protection and preservation of the rivers and waterways in Melbourne’s west in terms of green infrastructure is one that AILA unequivocally supports.

In the national policy statement on green infrastructure, AILA also recognizes human settlements as “complex, evolving social-ecological systems which are dependent on the health of their associated natural environments for ongoing sustainability”

(http://www.aila.org.au/imis_prod/documents/AILA/Advocacy/National%20Policy%20Statements/AILA%20Green%20Infrastructure.pdf). The proposed legislation addresses the complexity of these constantly evolving socio-ecological systems by providing a framework that protects, restores and connects, “to the greatest degree practicable, the natural and cultural landscapes of the west”. AILA (Victoria) applauds the holistic approach that this legislation would support. In its national policy statement, AILA states that “Green infrastructure strategies provide a framework for more holistic planning, design and monitoring of the complex interactions between the (non-regenerative) built form and the environment within which it is situated—in order to enhance the performance of both, and to enable human settlements to function as integral components of larger landscape processes affecting energy, water, carbon and biodiversity”.

AILA (Victoria) supports the four purposes of the Act:

1. To achieve healthy rivers and waterways in the west of Melbourne,
2. To provide a new model of urban design for communities of the west,
3. To deepen integrity and accountability in decision-making, and
4. To promote respect and reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous communities.

¹ The term ‘green infrastructure’ describes the network of natural landscape assets which underpin the economic, socio-cultural and environmental functionality of our cities and towns—i.e. the green spaces and water systems which intersperse, connect and provide vital life support for humans and other species within our urban environments.

Individual components of this environmental network are sometimes referred to as ‘green infrastructure assets’, and these occur across a range of landscape scales—from residential gardens to local parks and housing estates, streetscapes and highway verges, services and communications corridors, waterways and regional recreation areas etc.

http://www.aila.org.au/imis_prod/documents/AILA/Advocacy/National%20Policy%20Statements/AILA%20Green%20Infrastructure.pdf



In addition, it makes sense to draw principles for river and waterway management from the Yarra River Protection Act, with additional principles relating to:

1. landscape connectivity,
2. guardianship, and
3. river protection application.

Elaboration of these purposes and principles reveals issues of great interest to AILA, relating to urban design and delivery and community involvement.

1. Top-down and bottom-up approaches to landscape design

To achieve the vision of healthy rivers and communities, we must take both top-down and bottom-up approaches. The proposed Act will be a great top-down initiative that provides support and outlines mandatory requirements for government officials, urban design and planning practitioners and private developers. It is equally important to recognise the vital role that community consultation plays in the decision-making process. We need to raise awareness of natural landscape character of the west among our new communities of diverse backgrounds. For instance, the fear of snakes and a general aesthetic preference for European landscapes and green space often lead to decisions that disadvantage native landscape designs in waterway and drainage corridors. AILA hopes that the new model of urban design proposed in the legislation would adopt both top-down and bottom-up approaches.

2. Nurture an industry of specialists that understands the west

Western riverine landscapes, grasslands and red gum woodlands are unique landscapes. A whole industry chain including indigenous nurseries, landscaping contractors and landscape architects is required to protect and restore the landscape. Often proposed plant stock has to be pre-ordered for the nurseries to gather seeds from the region. Native, but non-indigenous species (i.e. NSW Lomandras) are often more harmful to the natural western environment than an exotic species because it can hybridise with the indigenous species. Landscaping contractors who maintain the revegetation sites need to be able to identify naturally occurred indigenous plant communities and native weeds to avoid killing rare plants and letting the weeds thrive. The prevailing situation of unavailable plant material and inadequate skilled labour resources often results in poor implementations of well-planned and well-designed restoration projects. AILA would encourage some mechanism in the proposed legislation to address this issue.

3. Management of waterways, both land and water, as a single entity, by a single body

AILA wholeheartedly agrees with the statement in the draft proposal that “Western Melbourne and surrounding peri-urban regions are the subject of extensive development pressures.” Subdivision is the main form of growth in the western region. It captures a large share of capital investments from the private sector as well as government funding. The subdivision process imposes a significant threat to the natural environment but at the same time presents many opportunities for conservation, improvement or restoration of our waterways if the available financial resources can be wisely channeled. The issue of adequate financial resources is fundamental to effective implementation of the legislation. Many of the proposals will require substantial funding. Without it, the vision of the legislation is at risk.

The process of subdivision currently allows the government the opportunity to conserve areas of significant environmental values and deliver high-quality green infrastructure (including waterways, green spaces and green engineering). However, conservation efforts are often limited to the areas that have National or State significance. These areas alone are often fragmented and cannot afford a valid network of habitat with appropriate scale by themselves. Although most developers aspire to deliver net community benefits, they are driven by commercial outcomes. Solid legislation, supported by a policy framework, is required to enable local governments and other approving authorities to demand the best practice from environmental perspectives. In addition, subdivision works are constrained by title boundaries.



A single guardian or advisory body, such as a Rivers of the West Trust, that manages and coordinates over the broader context of Melbourne's west will greatly consolidate the conservation and restoration efforts and achieve coherent outcomes along a particular river corridor as well as across a catchment. No doubt Environmental Justice Australia is aware of informal coalitions that currently exist within Melbourne, managing suburban waterways. Such coalitions could provide insights into successful strategies to achieving proposed outcomes and contribute insights during the preparation of the Act.

AILA (Victoria) commends Environmental Justice Australia for developing this draft legislation for protection of the rivers of the west. We wish it every success. Please do not hesitate to contact the state office if AILA (Victoria) can assist further in this task.

AILA Victoria contact, Felicity McGahan vic@aila.org.au or 0401 811 976.

Yours sincerely,

Adrian Gray
AILA Victoria President