PRESENTATION TO THE INQUIRY AND ADVISORY COMMITTEE
ON THE NORTH EAST LINK PROJECT –
ENVIRONMENTAL EFFECTS STATEMENT
5 September 2019
Dianne Williamson (Submitter 666)

This is a personal statement to advise the Inquiry and Advisory Committee of my continuing concerns related to the Environment Effects of the North East Link Project (NELP).

Reference design
I’ve read the EPBC Referral, the Public Environment Review documents, all of the EES documents, most of the submissions to the IAC, and I’ve listened to (or read) most of the presentations to the Hearing. Over the last 2 years I have attended most of the public NELP seminars and have met with NELP staff on several occasions. I find it both confusing and frustrating that in many ways I understand less about the Reference Project now than before the hearing commenced. Although the EPRs are being refined through this process there are now even more options for location of roadways and WSUD. There is too much uncertainty about the design of the Project and the resulting environmental impacts.

It appears that the actual route of the tunnel is still somewhere within a wide area (the ‘lozenge’, ‘pregnant snake’ or ‘football’) to be decided at some time in the future by the contractors. Some maps indicate that the tunnel will be directly beneath my house, with resultant vibration during construction and groundwater drawdown which may cause the death of trees adjacent to my garden. My neighbours and I will have planning restrictions imposed by the proposed Planning Scheme Amendment which could impact our future plans and property prices, even if the tunnel is actually constructed in a different location.

In summary my concerns are that:

- The amenity of the natural environment where I live will be diminished
- The stability of the escarpment on which my house is built will be compromised
- Changes to the hydrology of Simpson Barracks, Banyule Flats and the escarpment will cause loss of vegetation and thus diminished habitat for wildlife. Several listed species will be at increased risk.
- Loss of trees will negate local efforts to mitigate climate change.
- I face several years of vibration, noise and traffic disruption during construction and potential long term impact on property value and air quality.
- The impost of a potentially irrelevant Planning Scheme Amendment

I ask that the actual route of the tunnel be decided as soon as possible and that the Project Boundary and the Planning Scheme Amendment is adjusted to match. I support Mr Melican’s proposal (IAC Doc 143) for the tunnel to follow the course of Banyule Creek, thus largely avoiding a route under residential properties.

Amenity
I decided to live in Banyule about 30 years ago because I was drawn to the natural environment and parklands of the city, especially areas along the Yarra River. I was fortunate to find property adjacent to the Banyule Flats Wetlands and every day the natural environment of this area brings joy, purpose and serenity to my life.

Geoff Lacey described this location: ‘Banyule Flats constitute one of the most beautiful sites along the Yarra Valley. Here the river runs first south and then turns west. Bordering the floodplain is a low and mainly gentle escarpment, with the cleared grassy fields of View Bank Hill to the northeast … The site contains two of the most important wetlands in the region. Banyule Billabong … is surrounded by a few old River Red Gums … to the northwest is Banyule Swamp, a broad, shallow wetland, with much emergent vegetation … just west of the Swamp Banyule Creek runs along the edge of the escarpment to the river.’ (Lacey G., 2004 p. 5)

The 2016 Middle Yarra River Corridor Study stated that the Yarra River corridor in Banyule is valued for ‘…its rich natural environment which includes some of the most valuable flora, fauna, geological and geomorphological assets in metropolitan Melbourne; the role it plays as a key biodiversity corridor through the municipality; its dense vegetation cover underpinning the landscape character of surrounding residential and rural areas. (Planisphere, 2016 p. 16)
I have been a member of several conservation groups working along the Yarra River, and contributed to countless community plantings to re-vegetate the areas previously cleared in the mid-1800s for agriculture, and later for housing and business. The re-vegetation work has resulted in habitat not just of lovely aesthetic, but one which has attracted kangaroos, wallabies, wombats, echidna, platypus and many bird species to return to the area in recent years. Banyule Flats is recognised as being of State biological (biodiversity) and conservation significance (Practical Ecology, 2017).

On a daily basis I am able to immerse myself in this natural environment with walks around Banyule Flats and along the banks of the Yarra River; being able to do this is important for both mental and physical health. I fear that this valuable habitat will be irreversibly damaged by NELP construction.

Vibration
My property is located on the Banyule escarpment, above the proposed route of the tunnel. Vibration during construction is acknowledged in the EES as a problem for residents like myself. I am concerned about the potential stress and health effects caused by the tunnelling. The escarpment is already fragile as evidenced by regular rock fall and erosion. I am concerned that the combined impact of vibration and water drawdown, with subsequent loss of trees on the escarpment, will cause further instability.

Monitoring of ground movement during and after construction needs to take place along the Banyule Escarpment, with appropriate remedial stabilisation if required. I support the EPRs related to assessment of properties before construction and for avenues for compensation and remediation of damage to both built assets and to ground movement on private land. I believe that NELP should provide funding for land owners to undertake their own independent additional assessments.

The vibration from tunnelling under Banyule Flats and Warringal Parklands may disturb wildlife, and these areas need to be monitored for vibration as well as for ground movement.

Changes to hydrology – too much, too little or too nasty
The management of water from Banyule Creek and water run-off from the road sections of NELP north of Lower Plenty Road is uncertain. There is no physical space in the area for water treatment, so how can contaminated road and trench run-off north of Lower Plenty Road possibly be treated before flowing into Banyule Creek? If diverted to sewer will the Creek, Banyule Flats and the Yarra become contaminated in the event of a sewer overflow?

Will our local environmental water be re-routed to Werribee, reducing Banyule Creek to a trickle and reducing the amount of water available for local vegetation and groundwater refresh? The Creek does flood occasionally but this is a natural process which replenishes local habitat and the waterways. Any diversion of the creek should meet Melbourne Water’s Constructed Waterways Guidelines to retain surface water for local wildlife.

The EES acknowledges that there will be water drawdown at Simpson Barracks, Banyule Flats, on the Banyule escarpment and around the Bolin Bolin Billabong. Many trees may be lost in future years because of changes to hydrology caused by the Project. This includes large habitat trees on the Banyule Escarpment (IAC Doc 255b). The EPR to water trees at risk is commendable but achieving this for the trees are on a virtually vertical slope is questionable.

Wildlife corridor & Loss of trees
I am dismayed that an estimated 26,000 trees will be lost through construction of the NELP, many of these at the Simpson Barracks, and that this count doesn’t include all of the small trees, sub-story and ground cover vegetation which are essential elements of this ecosystem. This vegetation provides food and habitat for birds and mammals which need nesting hollows only found in very old specimens. In addition to the planned removal of Matted Flax-lily and Studley Park Gums, loss of vegetation will impact on several faunal species including Swift Parrot (critically endangered), Powerful Owl (threatened), and Latham’s Snipe (listed migratory).

Victorian Government policies and strategies, including Plan Melbourne 2017-2050, and Living Melbourne: A metropolitan urban forest strategy, stress the importance of increasing tree canopy and natural environment and yet NELP will permanently reduce canopy in Banyule as only 30-40% of trees lost can be replaced within the Project Boundary (IAC Doc 24u) (Department of Environment Land Water and Planning, 2017) (Resilient Melbourne & Nature Conservancy Australia, 2019).

There are several special trees which need to be retained for reasons of conservation and community value. These should be declared ‘no go’ zones:

- the Studley Park Gums at Simpson Barracks are unique to this area and much of the remaining population of this endangered taxon will be lost. The endangered Matted Flat-lily at the Barracks is also at risk from the NELP.
Extending a TBM tunnel north of Lower Plenty Road and removing this unnecessary interchange would provide many environmental and community advantages.

- the priority habitat trees at Macleod Railway Station which have been used in recent years by migrating Swift Parrots
- the old, large River Red Gum ‘Caltex tree’ at the corner of Bridge Street and Manningham Road which is of significant community value.

Compared to other recent Government projects the proposed tree replacement appears minimal and I would like to see the replacement ratio increased from 2:1 to 4:1. Replacement trees must be planted very close to the site where they are lost to retain local habitat and biodiversity. Sub-story and ground cover vegetation need to be planted, in addition to the 30,000 trees, with an ongoing maintenance program for weeding and replacement. Off sets in other areas are not acceptable because of the loss of local biodiversity, so every possible measure should be employed to mitigate against the loss of vegetation.

**Climate change**

The loss of the cooling effect of canopy will be combined with increased heat from extensive new road surfaces, creating a local heat effect and a negative impact on local and State measures to control climate change. I and many others in my community have been working together and with Banyule City Council to mitigate the impact of climate change, especially by increasing tree canopy. Even if 30,000 trees are indeed re-planted it will be decades before they are large enough to provide any canopy compensation and many more decades before they are good habitat trees.

Encouraging the use of roads instead of public transport increases car emissions and the green-house effect. There are inadequate plans for improved integration of NELP with public transport.

**Conclusion**

I face the disadvantage of living above and near a construction zone for several years suffering the impact of building restrictions, increased emissions, vibration, noise, traffic disruption, loss of green canopy and fragmentation of an important wildlife corridor.

NELP will do nothing to reduce car usage for myself or other local community members, although it will be disruptive and damaging to our environment.

We have heard about the relevant legislation, guidelines and standards throughout the Hearing, including the Yarra River Protection Act, EPBC Act, FFG Act, Climate Change Act, Plan Melbourne, SEPP Waters, and Melbourne Water guidelines.

As a Victorian community we need to embrace the spirit and principles embodied in these documents rather than be looking for loopholes so that they can be disregarded.

Although Banyule Flats has been declared a ‘conditional no go’ zone its future could be degraded vegetation, and degraded wetlands and waterways – devoid of birds and animals.

Dianne Williamson
4 September 2019


