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## **11.4 Jonas Street Plaza Trial - Evaluation Report**

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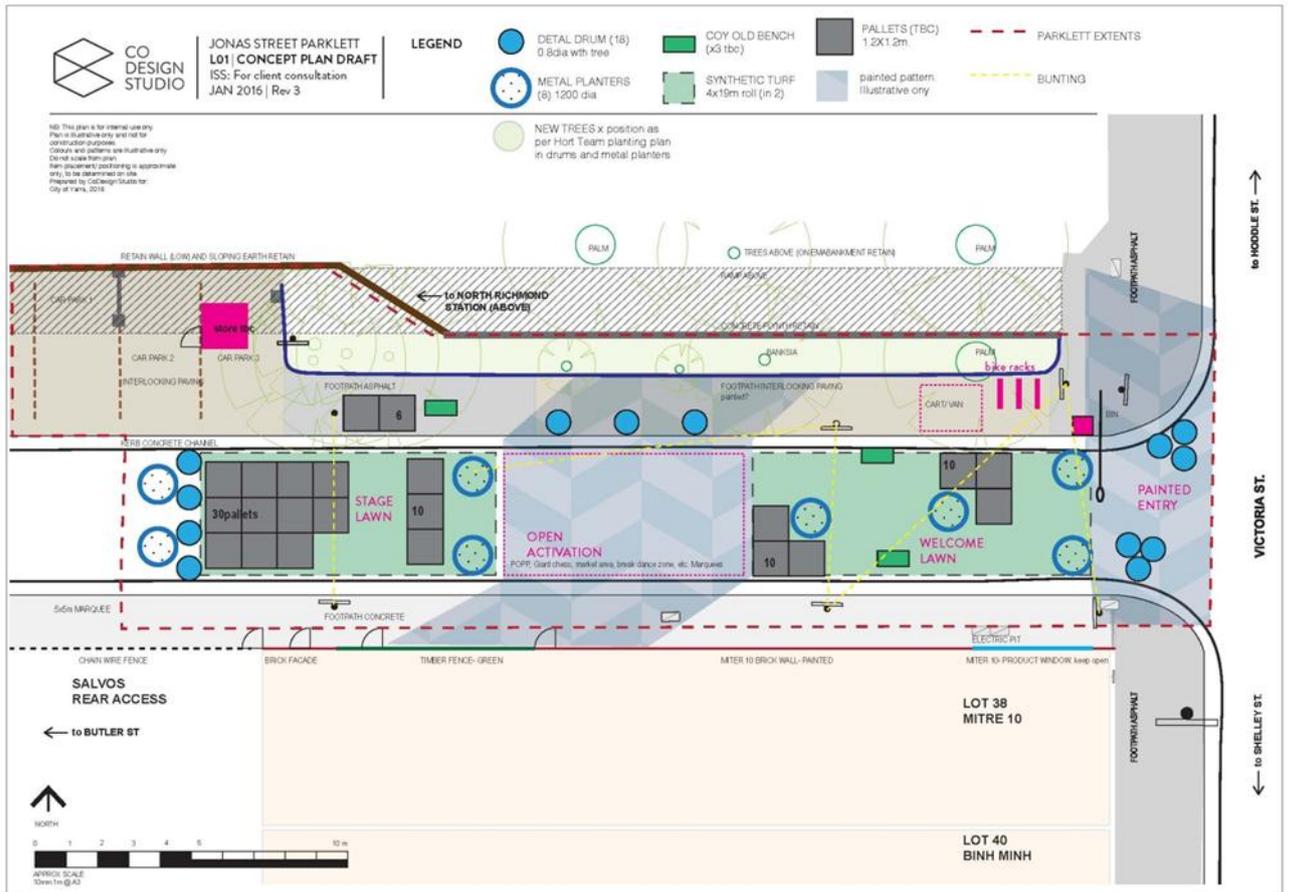
Responsible Officer: Coordinator Urban Design

### **Purpose**

1. To provide Councillors with an evaluation of the community feedback on the recent trial of a public plaza at Jonas Street, near the intersection of Victoria Street, Richmond.

### **Background**

2. The Victoria Street shopping strip is identified as an activity centre in Plan Melbourne. It is also an important transport link between the CBD and the eastern suburbs of Melbourne.
3. In 2010, Council adopted the Victoria Street Structure Plan following an extensive public consultation process.
4. The Structure Plan identified a number of key objectives and strategies relating to public space, transport and access and recommended the preparation of a streetscape master plan.
5. On 15 September 2015, Council adopted the Victoria Street Streetscape Masterplan and authorised officers to proceed with design development, consultation of individual projects, and implementation of the Victoria Street Streetscape Masterplan.
6. A key objective of the Masterplan is to investigate opportunities for new or improved public spaces.
7. The North Richmond Public Plaza at Jonas Street is included as one of the key projects in the Masterplan.
8. In January 2016 Council closed Jonas Street to vehicular traffic to trial the proposed public plaza for pedestrians and low speed cyclists.
9. In February 2016 Yarra Trams installed an Easy Access Tram Stop at Jonas Street using granitic pavers to highlight the platform. The new tram stop design complemented the plaza with its use of colour as an alternative to asphalt, and resulted in a distinctive transport connection node between the tram stop and adjacent train station.
10. The trial plaza was in place from January 2016 until June 2016.



Plan of the temporary Jonas Street Plaza

### Trial Plaza Consultation/Observation Methods

11. Residents and business owners had the opportunity to provide feedback during the trial of the plaza via several tools:
  - (a) an online forum with two topics and a 'brainstormer' was available to the public for the purpose of discussion;
  - (b) an online survey was available to the public to provide specific data to Council's website;
  - (c) flyers were distributed to the local community and information boards were erected on site with information about the project in both English and Vietnamese and inviting feedback on the trial with an email link to Council's public space designer who is managing the project;
  - (d) informal discussions with local traders and the Victoria Street Business Association (VSBA) were held; and
  - (e) vox-pop (one on one) surveys were conducted at four different times within the plaza space with the public.
12. A time lapse camera was installed to monitor use of the plaza. Data collected from the camera indicated the numbers of people that occupied the space and the times at which it was occupied. The camera captured activity in the space on 6 separate days between January and February 2016. The results can be viewed in detail: Attachment 3: Jonas Street Parklet: Monitoring and Evaluation Data.
13. Vehicle counts and queue length observation surveys on Shelley Street and other potentially impacted streets were conducted during the trial to provide data to Council's Traffic unit relating to the changed conditions.

### **Internal Consultation (One Yarra)**

14. Internal consultation on the proposal to create a new plaza on Jonas Street at the intersection of Victoria Street, Richmond was undertaken with the following Council Branches:
  - (a) Urban Design;
  - (b) Communications;
  - (c) Strategic Transport; and
  - (d) Traffic and Transport.

### **Outcomes of the Trial Plaza Consultation/Observations**

15. The outcomes of the community engagement are included in Attachments 1 – 5. A summary is also provided below:
16. During the time of the trial the on-line forum attracted a total of 815 visits, with 31 comments. The majority of the feedback was in favour of the plaza, citing the need for more green public space along Victoria Street. The negative responses were focused on the drug issue prevalent around Victoria Street, and the loss of vehicular access to Victoria Street. A number of participants contributed several times. One person appears to have written seven times in the negative. Another responded five times in the positive. Overall 16 separate people appear to have responded. Six voted against the construction of a park (two of those through concerns over increased traffic congestion), and ten voted in favour of the park. The results can be viewed in detail: Attachment 1: Project Report: Yarra Conversation Forum.
17. The on-line survey attracted 91 visits and 18 responses. 13 were positive about a public space, viewing the plaza as a good place to meet friends, take a break, and have their coffee or lunch. 5 were against the idea of a public space with concerns over the space attracting drug users, and the lack of vehicular access to Victoria Street impeding both residents and police. The results can be viewed in detail: Attachment 2: Project Report: Yarra Conversation Survey.
18. There were 41 vox-pop on-site surveys carried out on 4 occasions; 14 May, 30 May, 3 June and 6 June respectively. The respondents were asked a number of questions around how they have perceived and engaged with the space since its installation. More participants identified themselves as not-local (being visitors from outside the municipality). The highest percentages of participants were in the 35 – 44 year old bracket. The group were evenly proportioned between male and female. The vast majority of the participants totalling 80.5 % wanted the public space to remain. The results can be viewed in detail: Attachment 3: Jonas Street Parklet: Monitoring and Evaluation Data.
19. 13 written responses were received via email. Two identified themselves as residents, and both expressed concerns about the potential for the plaza to become a 'hangout for drug dealers and users', with the overarching issue of drugs around Victoria Street needing to be addressed foremost. There were also three letters from representatives of business tenants along Elizabeth Street expressing concerns about the negative impacts on traffic conditions since the installation of the park. Five responses were in favour of the plaza as an inviting space to relax. A summary of these submissions and officers' responses can be viewed in detail: Attachment 4: Jonas Street Trial: Written Submissions Summary.
20. Community feedback shows significant support for a public plaza in Jonas Street, however, a few issues have been raised that would need to be addressed if a permanent park is to be constructed. These issues have been listed below along with the officer response:

Issue: Drug users and dealings

*Officer Response*

21. This has been a concern not only for Jonas Street but for the broader Victoria Street precinct for some time. The Yarra community has consistently identified drug and alcohol related safety concerns in Council's Annual Customer Satisfaction Survey, a key component of which is assessing "Community perceptions of safety in public areas of Yarra". The 2015 results from residents identified issues relating to drugs and alcohol as being the most common reason for feeling unsafe.
22. Drug use is a complex public health issue and will require different strategies and processes to address this epidemic. Numerous agencies need to work together. Public realm improvements and activation of the area on the other hand can assist in making the area more inviting for the community and providing greater perceptions of safety. Increased lighting, an open environment for natural surveillance, defined walkways and a well maintained space in Jonas Street can lessen the opportunity for crime.

Issue: Provision of CCTV as a safety measure

*Officer Response*

23. Currently Yarra Council does not have a formal position on the use of CCTV.

Issue: Increased traffic congestion and closure of Jonas Street for vehicles

*Officer Response*

24. Traffic observations during the trial have confirmed an increase in traffic accessing Victoria Street from Shelley Street, and also vehicles accessing Shelley Street from Elizabeth Street.
25. Council's Traffic and Strategic Transport units consider that there are options to mitigate the increased traffic by rearranging the traffic in the surrounding streets should Council determine to create a permanent plaza at Jonas Street.

Issue: Safety of the street at night

*Officer Response*

26. A well-lit space with design elements that draw the focus of visitors and passers-by to the space would improve perceptions of safety, and should act as a deterrent to criminal activity.

Issue: Loading/unloading access to the business on 38 Victoria Street, at the corner of Jonas Street

*Officer Response*

27. This issue was raised during the trial. The plaza was modified to provide increased access to that property. This issue can be further addressed during the design stage. The property on 38 Victoria Street also has vehicular access from Butler Street which can help in providing better alternatives during the design stage.
28. Informal discussions were held with the traders association (VSBA) and business owners on the corner of Jonas Street and Victoria Street. The VSBA are in favour of the park, and have offered a number of suggestions towards its design. The business owners on the corner of the street, however, are not in favour of a park as they stated it hinders their deliveries and is inconvenient to their customers. They would like the road re-opened to traffic.
29. A Jonas Street Trial Evaluation report compiled by officers can be viewed at Attachment 5.

### **Financial Implications**

30. A design phase would require funding to implement the design documentation works. \$20,000 funding has been allocated for design in the year 16/17 budget.
31. Detailed design and documentation would confirm the requirements of funds to implement the project. Funding for construction of the project would need to be included in the budget submissions for year 17/18.
32. Opportunities for external funding to contribute to the construction of the plaza would be explored with the State government and transport agencies.
33. An estimate of cost for the construction of a public plaza is \$450,000.

### **Economic Implications**

34. The development of a North Richmond Public Plaza could attract more visitors and encourage greater use of the space, in turn potentially benefiting the local economy.
35. Officers can explore the possibilities of working with traders on an economic or social enterprise venture within the space. For example Acso is a social enterprise that runs a café in Regent Street that offers on the job training to criminal offenders in the local community to reduce the issue of re-offending. Officers have held a number of conversations with Acso representatives about the potential of a future social enterprise venture using the space a plaza would provide in Jonas Street.

### **Sustainability Implications**

36. The development of a North Richmond Public Plaza offers the opportunity to address the following sustainability issues:
  - (a) tree planting to provide shade;
  - (b) decreasing the area of impermeable road surface and introducing permeable, green areas which also contribute to the reduction of urban heat island effect;
  - (c) increased bicycle parking to encourage the use of sustainable transport; and
  - (d) other sustainability initiatives (which would be resolved during the design process) that may include the use of sustainable/recycled materials and the incorporation of WSUD initiatives to treat storm water.

### **Social Implications**

37. The project would result in the following key social benefits:
  - (a) a new and improved public space where people can meet and relax;
  - (b) improved public amenities;
  - (c) increased lighting;
  - (d) improved perceptions of safety; and
  - (e) pride and ownership through recognition of Vietnamese culture in the design.

### **Human Rights Implications**

38. There are no known human rights implications from the report.

### **Communications with CALD Communities Implications**

39. The Victoria Street Precinct is home to a large and dynamic Asian community, particularly people from a Vietnamese background. Officers made extensive efforts to inform and engage with this community during the trial period. The information newsletter informing the local business and residents of the trial was provided in English on one side and a full Vietnamese translation on the other (December 2015). A follow up reminder notice about the Plaza trial was also incorporated in to the written notification for the Lunar New Year Festival, which included a standard CALD translations panel (January 2016). On site signage with information about the Plaza trial was also provided in both English (including a standard CALD translations panel) and fully translated in to Vietnamese. Council Officers had informal meetings and discussions with members of the VSBA, which has a strong representation of, and connection to, the Asian communities in the area. VSBA was fully supportive of the trial.

### **Council Plan, Strategy and Policy Implications**

40. The development of a plaza at Jonas Street is considered consistent with the broad objectives outlined in the Council Plan (2013 – 2017), with a focus on the need to:
- (a) *“Foster and promote Yarra’s arts, culture, history, diversity and vitality”;*
  - (b) *“Increase in pedestrian activity and safety through improved access and infrastructure”;*  
*and*
  - (c) *“Convert road spaces and laneways for parks or improved pedestrian spaces”.*
41. The proposal is considered consistent with the Yarra Urban Design Strategy (adopted 2011) which advocates for a quality public domain in Yarra, universal access, social interaction and walkability.
42. The proposal was one of seven key projects identified for implementation in the Victoria Street Streetscape Masterplan (adopted by Council in September 2015).

### **Legal Implications**

43. Part of Jonas Street is owned by Vic Track.
44. Council officers have discussed the land arrangements with Vic Track. If Council resolves to proceed to design of a permanent park, further discussions would be required.
45. Under the Local Government Act 1989 which allows Council to permanently close a road, Council is required to undertake further community consultation, and seek advice from VicRoads. A formal report to Council detailing the consultation and advice would be required prior to formally determining to proceed with a closure.

### **Other Issues**

46. The land is identified on the Certificate of Title as five lots, three under the ownership of VicTrack. Yarra Council has listed Jonas Street on the Council’s Road Register.
47. Council would require necessary agreement with VicTrack for the use of their parcels of land.

### **Conclusion**

48. The evaluation of various community engagement mechanisms has shown support for a public space at Jonas Street, but also some opposition.
49. The development of a pedestrian plaza would provide an attractive, welcoming, distinctive and safe public space for visitors and the local community. Vietnamese cultural themes could be infused into the design to further promote the cultural identity of Victoria Street.
50. The concerns raised by the community could be addressed with good planning and design incorporating place management principles that focus on reducing the likelihood of crime.

51. Any design of a permanent park should be thoughtfully conceived, and developed with the local community. Whilst fixing the traffic issue is achievable, the issue of discouraging drug related behaviour is more difficult. Drug use is a public health issue and requires numerous agencies working together through a complex process to address this societal problem.
52. In respect to the public realm, good design of public spaces can introduce environmental conditions that encourage the reduction of inappropriate behaviour and can create increased perceptions of safety.
53. In this context, officers recommend that a detailed design now be prepared for Council consideration that has particular regard to the feedback received from the community.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

1. That Council:
  - (a) notes feedback on the evaluation of the recent trial of Jonas Street as a public plaza;
  - (b) endorses the creation of a new public plaza on Jonas Street, at the intersection of Victoria Street, Richmond; and
  - (c) authorises officers to proceed with concept design for a new public plaza and community consultation on a draft detailed design.

**CONTACT OFFICER:** Mark Gebbie  
**TITLE:** Public Space Designer  
**TEL:** 9205 5182

## **Attachments**

- 1 Jonas Street Plaza: Forum Responses
- 2 Jonas Street Plaza: Survey Responses
- 3 Jonas Street Parklet: Monitoring and Evaluation Data
- 4 Jonas Street Trial: Written Submissions and Officer Responses
- 5 Jonas Street Trial: Evaluation Report