

## **Royal Park Protection Group Inc**

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### **ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ROYAL PARK PROTECTION GROUP (RPPG)**

**GIVEN AT THE AGM ON 13 NOVEMBER 2002**

#### **Introduction:**

Tonight we are holding our fifth Annual General Meeting since our establishment in 1996. On the eve of a State election this is a particularly significant time for our Group whose mandate is to defend and protect what is left of Royal Park, our bushland park in the centre of Melbourne. We are defending it from the inroads of development for the Commonwealth Games Village, from expansion of the already built Commonwealth Games venue the Netball and Hockey stadiums with their intrusive lights (still not ameliorated) and from the insidious menace of piece meal erosion as the Park is slowly swallowed up for a barbeque here and another parking lot there plus access roads for sporting venues. Another potent threat comes from the proposed expansion of the freeway network in Melbourne.

I would like to tell the apocryphal story of Ron Walker Sport Supremo who, back in 1996, was putting in the bid for the Commonwealth Games for Melbourne. He was said to have stood on in the Games Office on the top floor of the Rialto and picked out the sites for the venues and village in Royal Park, Albert Park, Yarra Park and Melbourne Park. The criteria for the choice of the sites were that they had to be in inner Melbourne presumably within sight from the top of the Rialto and presumably free ie public land. Fortunately he couldn't see as far as Princes Park otherwise this might have been the home for another venue. His model village for the Parkville site, which he took to KL Games, was on display at the time and shows wall to wall accommodation not very different to the current plan. This museum piece is still in the Office of Major Projects. It should be noted that Mr Walker said on TV at the time of the Manchester Games 2002 that if the Village did not go on the "Parkville Site" – his choice of site then he would take the Games away from Melbourne. Naturally the Games Village is to be located on this site.

We realised early on that like Save Albert Park we were up against a mighty strong enemy being pitted against the interlocking interests of the Big End of Town, corporate sport, gambling, the construction industry and in our case real estate development. It is truly shocking that in the twenty years since the Cain Government first alienated parkland for the tennis centre that the green belt of parks round central Melbourne established by Governor La Trobe has been virtually destroyed. The Bracks Government has completed what Cain started and Kennett implemented.

I would like to quote from a prominent person writing in August 1998 about the fact that Royal Park and other parks are regarded as "terra nullius" – vacant land there for the taking. This person said: "...that is why you have come here tonight to talk about the relationship between economic growth and the sustainability of our natural environment, so graphically reflected at Royal Park. In fact Royal Park and the decision about its future are almost a microcosm of the broader debate on how we measure progress. Will we be drawn into narrow and short sighted visions largely configured by economic aspirations or will we take the time to subject decisions about Royal Park's future to some broader measures of progress? ...I am concerned that the culture of impatience and the blind acquiesce to "the bottom line is the only line" may not lead us to sustaining Royal Park and other breathing spaces in the city. . One thing that I hope we have learned in the 90's is that Terra Nullius

ifs a legal fiction. Royal Park is not vacant land ready and waiting for development. (This person was Bronwyn Pike, then ALP Endorsed Candidate for Melbourne giving a speech at the RPPG AGM on 31 August 1998).

## Key Campaigns

### Green Games for Melbourne 2006

This campaign was announced at our AGM in 2000 by Bob Symington, then Director of Green Games 2000 for the Sydney Olympics. We then met the intractable opposition of the Bracks Government, which has taken no interest in emulating the achievements of the Sydney Olympics 2000 – famous as the first green summer games in history. The Government failed to implement a legislative framework for incorporating ecologically sustainable development guidelines for the construction of Games Venues and Village and for staging the Games along the model of the Sydney Olympics 2000.

The coalition of RPPG with environment and community groups failed to persuade the Government otherwise, despite an extraordinary lobbying campaign over the *Commonwealth Games Arrangements Bill 2001* In September this year the Government introduced this Bill to Parliament - with no advance public consultation or notice - to fast-track it through the Lower House. The purpose of the Act was said to 'give certainty' to the construction of Games facilities but in reality to ensure the MCG redevelopment is expedited. The Act, reminiscent of the Grand Prix Act, bypasses the checks and balances of democratic processes and deprives citizens of their rights. It overrides all heritage planning and environmental assessment acts

RPPG formed a coalition with a large number (about 45) of environmental, political, resident, community, union and transport lobby groups. We received the support of several leading psychiatrists about our plans for the future use of the site. The position of the Victorian Coalition for Green Games was as follows:

1. *Support Green Games 2006*
2. *Support location of the Games Village on an appropriate location and oppose location of the Games Village on the former Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital site ("Parkville" site) and*
3. *Support reintegration of parkland surrounding the Royal Park Hospital into Royal Park and restoration of heritage Hospital buildings for future use as a comprehensive mental health centre for training/education, rehabilitation and research*

In view of the Government's failure to legislate to include environmental benchmarks to govern the construction of the Games Village and venues and the staging of the Games The RPPG approached the unions at the end of last year. A "working party" was set up with union approval and a set of draft resolutions drawn up for adoption by the unions. The rationale for doing this was given as follows:

*"The Games are an ideal opportunity for Victorian unions, esp. building & construction unions, to kick-start environmentally sustainable development (ESD) in Victoria, and to obtain training for workers in new, green technologies. (But OH&S training should also be enhanced.) As well, the State's worsening energy supply v demand situation requires a total ESD approach, including the retro-fitting of energy-saving items (eg solar panels) on existing buildings".*

Detailed recommendations were given modelled on the successful Sydney Olympics about benefits for unions and their members plus industry and all Victorians if a truly radical "Green Games" Approach was taken and a Green Village built showcasing green technologies were to be built. Unfortunately few recommendations got up. As a consequence the Government has simply done a "green wash" providing minimal green features and calling the Village "The Village Park".

Under the Commonwealth Games Arrangements Act 2001 passed in October 2001 the Government provided for an Environment Advisory Committee to be set up. Nine months later the Government set up the Committee. Community representatives were allowed only two weeks to make submissions on establishing Environmental Benchmarks for the Games and the Environment Advisory Committee only one month in which to report. Minister Madden has not released the report and is not expected to look at it until 2003. There has been no environmental impact assessment made of the village or the Games venues. A claim that the Village has been built on Green principles is entirely false.

### **Games Village Campaign**

The ever-present threat since 1996, which materialised during this year, was location of the Games Village on the former Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital site, in the environs of Royal Park. As every one realises this presents a very real danger to the Park (with its newly established vegetation and natural habitat precincts) will certainly result in damage from the Village for 6,000 athletes and a future residential development of 1,000 units.

A full on war has been waged on many fronts with support coming from residents of the suburb of Brunswick who realise as do residents of other inner city suburbs that the location of the village will have a disastrous social and environment impacts.

Our campaign has included a variety of events, actions and rallies. The Open Day at the Royal Park Hospital site was a wonderful success with over 500 people visiting to see the historic buildings set in parkland. Two demonstrations were held in May outside Minister Madden's Office and large public meeting held in June at the Brunswick Town Hall and Melbourne Town Hall. Actual rallies have been held on the site in February and September and one is scheduled with the Greens on 24 November 2002 – a Picnic in the park with Bob Brown. Extensive leafleting campaigns have been undertaken particularly last July to counter the propaganda campaign of the Government.

Positive proof that the public of Melbourne support our position was given when we held a series of stalls at the Queen Victoria market for five consecutive Saturdays then one at Brunswick market. Shoppers actually queued to sign petitions. And letter to politicians. Similarly the public has shown support for our position at the Spring Fling community festival in North Melbourne.

The announcement by the Bracks Government that the Games Village would be located on the Royal Park Hospital site and that Australand was the successful tenderer saw a huge amount of publicity in the media to our opposition. This is now a campaign issue of great magnitude in the electorates of Melbourne and Brunswick and may well be influential in deciding the outcome of the election in these seats.

A legal case may proceed as we examine the legal status of the Royal Park Hospital site which we maintain was part of Royal Park and the Hospital has now closed is till part of the Park.

### **Operations of the State Netball and Hockey Centre Royal Park**

The first of the 2006 Commonwealth Games facilities to be built in Melbourne was the Royal Park State Netball and Hockey Centre. These are international standard stadiums complete with high intensity, outdoor lighting whose obtrusive light spill and glare impact adversely on the Park, the Zoo and surrounding residential/suburban areas. The SNHC itself was built on 8 hectares of land alienated from the middle of the Park, under the Royal Park Land Act 1999. RPPG continues the battle to have these lights ameliorated.

The menace still looms of a car invasion. Parking in the SNHC is inadequate and appears poorly managed and so SNHC visitors vie for Royal Park carspaces with Zoo visitors and other sports groups. Demands to build a road to allow visitors to use Royal Park as a car park and to light up the road continues.

### **Northern Central City Corridor Study**

The threat to Royal Park from the extension of the Eastern Freeway through Royal Park has preoccupied members of the Group since the Bracks Government showed a revived interest in the project in 2000. We are hopeful that solutions to the traffic congestion of the inner north may be found in the course of the Study now in progress and the freeway/tunnel option through Royal Park will be forever dropped.

### **Royal Park Master Plan**

The revegetation projects undertaken by the City of Melbourne as part of the implementation of the Master Plan is in some respects a good news story but the fight continues to ensure Council funds are spent on replanting rather than on barbecues, toilet blocks, carparks and new paths and roads criss-crossing the Park.

### **Assistance with Campaigns**

Park Protection Group continues to campaign with the assistance of solid alliances with other community groups, peak environmental organisations, trade unions plus support from a number of the Melbourne City Councillors and State Parliamentarians (with the exception of Labor Ministers and MPs). We have the backing for our campaigns on the Green Games and in opposing the Village in Royal Park from the Australian Greens. The use of email appears to facilitate ready communication between groups and has engendered new spirit of co-operation between groups working on a range of interconnected issues. A special mention needs to be made of some of the friends of Royal Park. Councillor Kevin Chamberlin has long been a champion and defender of Royal Park. Rod Quantock, is a well-known community activist and patron of parks and has been MC at many of our Royal Park protests and rallies. Paul Mees is representing RPPG on the Northern Central City Corridor Study. Peter Goad continues to help with our banners and artwork for our rallies (some of these are on display tonight). Barry Clark continues to provide expert assistance over the Royal Park stadium lights, over questions of light pollution, green house gas emissions and matters astronomical. Dr Barbara Falk – a Parkville elder – is our patron and has been of great assistance. Thanks to the Committee members of the RPPG and to Max Costello who is retiring this year. A special mention to Brian Walters SC for his assistance with legal questions. And thanks go to our ever increasing band of members and telephone tree volunteers who stand ready to man or person the barricades when the call comes on the Royal Park Hospital site.

Julianne Bell

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