

Royal Park Protection Group Inc

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ANNUAL REPORT OF THE ROYAL PARK PROTECTION GROUP (RPPG)

GIVEN AT THE AGM ON 16 DECEMBER 2003

Overview:

Tonight we are holding our sixth Annual General Meeting. This has been undoubtedly the most difficult and demanding year since our establishment in 1996. Our mandate written into our objectives in our constitution is *"to oppose alienation of parkland by government, commercial, sporting and other bodies to ensure public access consistent with the terms of the establishment of the Royal Park."* It has not been easy, however, as a small community group to take on the interlocking interests of the State Government, the "Big End of Town", corporate and elite sport and the construction and real estate industries and come off unscathed.

Our energies over the past year since our last AGM have been directed chiefly into opposing the location on the Royal Park site of the 2006 Commonwealth Games Village (seen as the excuse for the Australand - Citta Property Group real estate development) and for its relocation to a suitable site. Our year started with supporting candidates (a Green and Independent) in the State election to attempt to unseat the sitting member in Melbourne, Bronwyn Pike, and so to obtain a voice in Parliament. During the year our campaign targeted the draconian legislation - the Commonwealth Games Arrangements (Amendments) Act 2003 - enacted in April and May to give legitimacy to the private real estate development, masquerading as a Games Village. Along the way, throughout the year, we were unwillingly drawn into the "consultations" in one form or another, by the Government about the plans for the "Games Village" development on which we naturally had no impact but allowed us to confirm them as a sham and to obtain information about plans for the development. The Bracks Government's increasing alliance with developers including public private partnership arrangements has seen the blatant alienation of public open space and parkland for high rise, high density development not only in Royal Park but State wide. In early November we launched the coalition of Protectors of Public Lands, modelled on the successful NSW group, to resist the take over of parkland. Most recently we acted to try to save and protect the Royal Park Hospital Heritage Precinct from demolition and damage by appealing to the Heritage Council to have the buildings included on the State Heritage Register.

Our previous campaign pursued throughout 2001 and 2002 for Green Games 2006 had to be abandoned as the Government proved to have no real commitment to green principles or environmental sustainability and appears only interested in a PR "greenwash" of the Games, including the Village.

Another ongoing campaign has been the opposition to the extension of the Eastern Freeway through Royal Park. RPPG's representative Paul Mees on the Northern Central City Corridor Study, which has been in progress for over a year, appears to have been influential in ensuring that the freeway/tunnel option linking the Eastern Freeway with City Link will not proceed and solutions are found to inner northern suburb traffic congestion.

The first objective in the RPPG constitution is *"to protect, regenerate and conserve the Royal Park as a unique, indigenous, central city park for present and future generations, consistent with principles of the 1987 Royal Park Master Plan"*. While we have been preoccupied with saving Royal Park from the obvious threats of the Games Village and the Eastern Freeway extension, other more insidious threats have materialised in the form of Melbourne City Council bureaucrats signing off permits for

capital works - more parking, toilets, footpaths, bikepaths, playgrounds, barbeques, seats set on concrete slabs and lights. The very facilities supposedly to assist "passive recreation" are now slowly killing Royal Park. There has, fortunately, been success with some of the revegetation and replanting projects. RPPG continues to attend the State Netball and Hockey Centre Advisory Committee only in the hope of persuading the Government to fix the SNHC hockey lights, which continue to be a blight on the Park, the Zoo and surrounding suburbs.

Games Village Campaign

At our AGM last year we were on the eve of a State election and held a forum of election candidates to discuss the central election issue in the campaign for Melbourne District and Province - the location of the Commonwealth Games Village in Royal Park. Although the member for Melbourne nearly lost her seat to Richard Di Natale of the Greens in the election, the huge majority of the Bracks Government and Government control of the Upper House has meant that there has been no effective opposition to the decision announced on 23 October last year to locate the Games Village in Royal Park nor any constraints apparently on the almost obscene expenditure on the Commonwealth Games (now blown out to \$1.1 billion).

Some significant dates relating to our Village campaign over the past showing our tenacious pursuit of the Government and continuous and trenchant opposition to the Games Village are:

- 16 February 2003. RPPG held a Non Violent Action Training session on Royal Park Hospital site led by Dean Mighell of ETU, which has a green ban on the site, in preparation for a picket of the site at the start of construction then expected at the start of April 2003.
- February 2003. Minister Madden mounted a propaganda campaign on "selling" the Games Village with distribution of 15, 000 flyers in the northern suburbs.
- 19 March 2003 RPPG held a protest, led by Rod Quantock, at Brunswick Town Hall where the plans of the Games Village/Real Estate Subdivision were being exhibited.
- 10 April 2003. RPPG demonstrated on steps of Parliament House as the Commonwealth Games Arrangements (Amendment) Bill was passed the Lower House the same day. Opposition members of Parliament spoke in support of our protest. (The bill was passed in the Upper House on 6 May 2003).
- Beginning of May 2003. Minister Madden finally released the report on the Environmental Framework for the Games (dated from 14 September 2002), too late to provide any guidance over environmental sustainability for construction of Games Venues and Village.
- 6 May 2003. The Commonwealth Games Advisory Committee (Games Village) appointed by Minister Madden commenced hearing on the Royal Park "Games Village". RPPG attended the hearings and was a major contributor. The PAC then spent four weeks, effectively on refining the plans for a private real estate subdivision, but failed to provide advice on the design, construction and operation of the Village in Games mode.
- 19 June 2003. The State Government announced the 1,000-day "count down" to the Games. The Parliamentary Public Accounts and Estimates Committee hearing criticized the blowout of the Games budget. RPPG commented in the media on revelations over the extent of asbestos contamination of the Games Village site and the cost of any clean up.
- 5 August 2003. Minister Madden released recommendations of the Planning Advisory Committee for the Games Village, accepting most but added a few of his own (eg 11 storey tower blocks). The worst features of the various plans presented to the hearings were retained

including: greater density of development; reduced open space from 4 to 2.8 hectares; three 11 storey tower blocks on the freeway wall of apartments (increased from 9 storeys), which will overshadow and overlook surrounding suburbs, the site itself and nearby Royal Park. The plans spelt out certain degradation and destruction of the heritage precinct. Government promises to provide public transport to connect the site with other suburbs and the city were not believed. The settlement will be entirely car based and hence a major contributor to future increased traffic chaos and gridlock in the northern suburbs.

- On 20 August 2003 the Bracks Government announced the phoney gift of 1.4 of parkland, which was supposedly to be added to Royal Park. The land lies along two creeks or drains, which are polluted with Zoo effluent and industrial waste and are already in Royal Park.
- 20 October 2003. RPPG representatives met Games Minister Madden at Coburg Town Hall as part of the "Cabinet Comes to the Community". Discussions on the "Games Village" included the RPPG appeal to Heritage Victoria to have the Royal Park Hospital precinct included on the State Heritage Register
- 24 October 2003. The Administrative Building (the central pivotal building) on the Royal Park Hospital Heritage Precinct plus two other buildings were demolished, authorized by Minister Madden on 20 October, prior to the appeal hearing.
- 2 November 2003. A Parks Protest was called by RPPG on alienation of public land, parkland including Royal Park and open space for high-rise, high-density development and sporting facilities. The "Protectors of Public Lands" coalition was launched.
- 21 November 2003. The appeal was heard by the Heritage Council of the RPPG, National Trust and City of Melbourne to have the Royal Park Hospital Heritage Precinct included on the State Heritage Register. (RPPG's initial nomination made on 1 August 2003 was refused). A determination has not yet been made.
- Future date – Community Picket Line Monday 12 January 2004 when construction starts.

Media Coverage

RPPG has received extensive media coverage of actions, rallies and has been interviewed for comment on TV plus radio news. We comment frequently on 3CR Programs – Beyond The Barricades (Save Albert Park), Strike Back (CFMEU and ETU) and City Limits (Coalition for Melbourne). Kenneth Davidson, a leading Age writer, has over the past eighteen months covered the scandal of the Commonwealth Games finances and Games Village plus the wider question of the alienation of public land and parkland for major projects and residential "development." Unlike the Age, the Herald Sun appears willing to publish our letters and RPPG has had several columns in "My Say". RPPG campaigns and views receive excellent coverage in local papers particularly "The Melbourne Leader" and also the quarterly North Melbourne News. I am the RPPG media spokesperson and am very aware of the need for great care since so many community groups have been sued for defamation. This is the reason for having one spokesperson.

A video *Save Royal Park Part II* on the battle over the Games Village has been produced by Russell Kerr of Transfer Press and will be shown for the first time tonight at the AGM.

Our website www.royalparkprotect.org.au has been an invaluable aid in assisting with our publicity and contacts with the media.

Eastern Freeway Extension and the Northern Central City Corridor Study

The threat to Royal Park from the extension of the Eastern Freeway through Royal Park has preoccupied the Group since the Bracks Government showed a revived interest in the project in 2000. The Northern Central City Corridor Study (NCCCS) has been in progress now for well over a year. We are convinced that our representative, Paul Mees, has been responsible for redirecting the Study into eliminating the freeway/tunnel through Royal Park as an option and for putting forward constructive solutions to the traffic congestion of the inner north. Final submissions were made to the Study on 7 November 2003. Our recommendations to the Minister for Transport on the NCCCS are as follows:

- that a feasibility study of the Doncaster rail line (DART) be undertaken including a budget estimate together with other associated public transport improvements suggested in the course of the NCCCS. This study is to be carried out by genuinely independent experts, rather than those approved by DOI. The RPPG would be happy to join a selection committee to choose the team.
- that the freeway construction (especially Mitcham-Frankston) should not proceed until after the whole NCCCS package, including the public transport improvements, is in place. At that time, the need for the freeway should be independently reviewed.
- that the effectiveness of Travelsmart be evaluated independently, as outlined in our submission, in the context of DART.
- that the NCCCS develop proposals to reduce the volume of truck traffic in the inner north, in particular, possible closure of the route through Royal Park.

RPPG has not yet heard of either the recommendations of the Study Team to Minister Batchelor or to his response.

Royal Park Master Plan

The RPPG is represented on the City of Melbourne's Royal Park Master Plan Implementation Advisory Committee and its Vegetation Sub Committee. The revegetation program as part of the implementation of the Master Plan and the reviews of maintenance regimes in the Park are extremely valuable. But major battles take place virtually every month if not weekly on the fatal urge by Council officers to spend ratepayers funds on putting infrastructure in the Park in the form of barbeques, seats fixed to concrete slabs, toilet blocks, carparks, new asphalt paths criss-crossing the Park, playgrounds and lights. As much of the Park is in a Heritage overlay area objectors are barred from appealing against any planning permit decisions. More disastrous decisions recently have included approval of installation of a barbeque by itself in the middle of an empty paddock opposite the SNHC; approval of a playground for all 15 children living in West Parkville. (previous warnings to Council that there was an electrical substation in the middle of the playground went unheeded and now there are railings fencing off the substation); erection of lights along the tram track especially for patrons of the SNHC despite the policy that Royal Park is a "dark park"; the current push to install a cast iron toilet block in Park Street despite the protestations of the residents of Park Street; and the proposal to alienate a strip of Royal Park West along Brens Drive for a bus pull in station outside the Urban Camp when there is a huge bus turning circle and a 600 carspace virtually opposite at the SNHC. RPPG has spent an immense amount of time on submissions about the Wetlands Project which was listed as a Master Plan project but which has been virtually high jacked by the State Government to "green up" the Games Village.

Future Park Campaigns

In the New Year RPPG hopes to progress the coalition "Protectors of Public Lands" to form a strong lobby group to resist the alienation of public land and public assets

Assistance with RPPG Campaigns

Park Protection Group thanks all those allies who have continued to assist with our campaigns relating to Royal Park in particular Save Albert Park plus the support from a number of the Melbourne City Councillors and State Parliamentarians (not of course Labor Ministers and MPs). The Parliamentary Opposition has increasingly given us much support by raising issues particularly about the Games Village in Parliament.

To end on an ironic note I would like to quote Bronwyn Pike who was guest speaker at our first AGM in 1998. She said: "one thing I hope we have learnt in 90's is that Terra Nullius is a legal fiction. Royal Park is not vacant land ready and waiting for development." You could have fooled us, Bronwyn!

Julianne Bell

RPPG Convenor

16 December 2003