

**CONVENOR'S REPORT TO THE FIRST ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING  
OF THE ROYAL PARK PROTECTION GROUP**

**Angela Munro, AUGUST 31, 1998**

**THE BACKGROUND**

It's almost exactly two years (September 14, 1996) since representatives of the Parkville Association and South Parkville Precinct Environment Group met to discuss the possibility of a concerted approach to the protection of Royal Park. Barbara Falk, a respected advocate and conciliator in community issues, chaired our initial meetings. We then moved out to enlist citizens from all four municipalities adjoining the Park, and the wider metropolitan area - because Royal Park is a local park, but it is also of metropolitan, statewide and even national significance.

The impetus for our action was the apparently illegal yet unstoppable degradation of Royal Park. The desecration of the historic parkland setting of the Zoo, by construction of a sterile, supermarket style carpark, contrary to the Royal Park Master Plan and to the Crown Land (Reserves) Act, was the rallying point. Our hopes that a newly returned, democratically elected Council would halt the damage were dashed. And early correspondence from Council indicated that a review of the Royal Park Master Plan, our Magna Carta, was planned. In amongst the usual rhetoric about an 'upgrade' was buried a reference to the opportunity provided by a Commonwealth Games Bid.

So 18 months ago, we were very much on the back foot, facing multiple and ill-defined threats to Royal Park - including a freeway link, a sportsmen's hotel, the domino effect of relocating the golf course to accommodate the Zoo carparks, a new helipad and approach path, an athletes' village for 7,000 for the Commonwealth Games, on the site of the Royal Park Psychiatric Hospital, an international hockey and netball stadium and more, especially more carparks! Above all, the Review of the Royal Park Master Plan, chaired by the two ward councillors, meant that the hard-won planning and management framework for the Park was under attack.

I won't list the obstacles we've faced but focus on what we've tried to do, what we've achieved and why the campaign is tremendously important.

**OUR AIMS**

We agreed, prior to incorporation on 24 September 1997, that our aims are:

- i To protect, regenerate and conserve Royal Park as a unique, indigenous central city park for present and future generations, consistent with the principles of the 1987 Royal Park Master Plan;
- ii To oppose alienation of parkland by government, commercial and sporting bodies and to ensure public access consistent with the terms of the establishment of Royal Park.

As to the Commonwealth Games, we have agreed:

That the Commonwealth Games Netball and Hockey stadiums, as well as the Athletes' Village and hotel be located other than in public



parkland, following a proper process of site identification.

## **ACHIEVEMENTS**

We've done a myriad of things and what has been achieved can be broadly grouped as follows:

### **1 A POLITICAL LOBBY**

We have built a formidable vehicle through which to effect the restoration of a central city bushland park and to resist its suburbanization and deforestation by the responsible authorities. We have (within our ranks and on call) an impressive array of specialists in planning, government, indigenous issues, ecology and parks management, as well as the law. We are particularly grateful to our Barrister Fran O'Brien and Solicitor, John Breheny, for enabling us to exercise our legal rights (however reduced in the current climate), without fee. We are also extremely grateful for the huge effort and parkland advocacy of Cr Kevin Chamberlin, following the May by-election, and the related support of Cr Wellington Lee and Cr Rosemary Stott.

Unlike the Melbourne City Council, we have been participatory in developing and voting on our positions in publicly advertised meetings. We are not only unafraid of alternative views, we know that our success lies in dealing with them out in the open. We have developed a network of alliances, including the Wurundjeri, environment and transport groups (local and statewide), resident associations and coalitions such as the Parkland Defence Council. We've also formed productive relationships with Melbourne University and RMIT Planning and Landscape faculties and with the management of the Zoo.

As a body, we've met and/or corresponded with relevant Ministers and Shadow Ministers, Commonwealth Games Bid Committee, City Councillors and bureaucrats at state and local levels. We've also sought support from and conveyed our views to the Commonwealth Games Federation meeting in Lausanne (1997), the Secretary-General at the Commonwealth Secretariat in London (1997), the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Edinburgh (1998) and the Governor-General, Sir William Dean, patron-in-chief of the Australian Commonwealth Games Association (1998).

### **2 RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT**

Given the secrecy surrounding the many, simultaneous threats facing the Park, R&D has been a major part of our achievement over the past 18 months. We have had to range across the portfolios of health and mental health, juvenile justice, natural resources and environment, planning, transport, sport and recreation - all with a stake in capital works in and around the Park. With the 'downsizing' of government and contracting out of many services, the lack of specialist staff at state and local level has made this work infinitely harder than in the past, and all the more important. The quality and presentation of our case and evidence has been essential to effective enlistment of a range of credible



supporters, both prominent individuals and organisations such as the Wurundjeri Council of Elders, the Australian Democrats, the Greens (Vic) and peak bodies such as Environment Victoria.

Indeed, the accuracy of our early fears of mega international, spectator-based hockey and netball stadiums, have been borne out by the belated release last week, of the March 1997 Feasibility Study commissioned by the State Government and the Melbourne City Council. Its release was due to our argument and pressure; that it had been withheld from the elected Councillors of the relevant Planning Authority, and the public, is a symptom of the weakened state of democracy in which we are operating.

### 3 STATUTORY PLANNING

The detailed submissions made, at several stages, by the RPPG to the Master Plan Review had no discernible effect. In November 1997, a poorly documented and 'neutralised' Master Plan was formally adopted. We did, however, achieve several commitments from Council at the eleventh hour, notably that a cultural survey and documentation of carparking be undertaken. Neither has materialised and the International Commission on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS) has urged the Lord Mayor to abort a seriously flawed survey which is, nevertheless, proceeding.

The absence of cultural, environment or heritage assessment or protection of any natural or built feature of this historic Park, (or its adjacent nineteenth and early twentieth century hospital buildings), by the National Trust, Heritage Victoria or the Melbourne Planning Scheme, has been highlighted by the Group. That a unique, prefabricated mid-nineteenth century iron house, (marked for demolition under the rejigged Master Plan), was actually 'discovered' by the Group's Secretary, Julianne Bell, in February this year, is indicative of the situation.

The Group's successful Appeal at the AAT on 1 August, 1997 against the issue of a permit for the construction of a Zoo portico, was a major breakthrough. On 11 February, 1998 we unsuccessfully appealed against the redevelopment of the so-called 'Urban Camp', for which the Premier had allocated \$1.145 in advance of the completed Master Plan and of the issue of a permit by Council. Following a most generous and rapid response from members, an Appeal was lodged in the Supreme Court, due to be heard on September 16.

Before the Appeal against the Urban Camp/Sports Hotel development around Anzac Hall (the remains of the huge World War II Army encampment), the Group made a detailed submission, supported by the RSL, to Heritage Victoria for its inclusion on the Heritage Register. The AAT ignored the convention of awaiting the outcome of that assessment.

Our achievements in the area of statutory planning and legal action represent a base from which we will seek to exercise and strengthen our rights to permanently reserved parkland, as long as these threats continue.



#### 4 COMMUNICATION

Dissemination of our vision, agenda and critique has been part and parcel of the above three categories. This we have done through unremitting correspondence to relevant authorities, as outlined, including letter-writing campaigns at critical points. We have also had continual correspondence and related articles in the local press - the Melbourne Times and Melbourne Leader/Brunswick Sentinel, as well as coverage in the Age and local press in Ballarat and Bendigo. We have had frequent coverage on community radio 3CR, ABC talk-back shows and news bulletins and, to some extent, commercial radio.

On the basis of such coverage we have been sought out by students and academics who have undertaken individual and group projects. Our web site supports such dissemination, as does our Quarterly News Bulletin. We have also provided articles for various publications, including those of the Institute of Landscape Architects and the Parklands Defence Council, and the North Melbourne News.

The attempted commercialisation of Royal Park by corporate interests and by stealth, as part of Melbourne's Major Events Strategy, is now a well established issue - as any taxi driver will tell you. At the time of the Group's establishment, the threat was unknown as indeed, it seems, was the Park in many quarters. Likewise the potential and, indeed, imperative, for a degraded Park to be rehabilitated rather than obliterated with bitumen and concrete, is emerging as a valid position.

#### 5 PROMOTIONAL ACTIVITY

As with the Queen Victoria Market in the 60s and 70s, derelict and without intrinsic value as far as the Council and State Government were concerned, Royal Park is regarded as prime real estate - 'a dump' in the words of one Minister. The 'job lots' of mixed eucalypts, planted in serried ranks, serve to obscure an ever increasing array of sports facilities and roadways. The vision of an indigenous parkland and sanctuary, revegetated through the involvement of inner city residents, is one the responsible authorities are blind to. They would rather display an artificial rainforest and desert ecosystem in a glass shard, designed by foreign architects.

So promotion is a long-term function which the Group has only begun. We have sought to engage the popular imagination in a variety of ways: through a Clean-Up Australia Day project on the rubbish-strewn, weed-choked railway cutting - the core of a potential linear park and walking track, linking into the municipalities of Moreland and Hume. We've contributed to the Upfield Line Revegetation Project and sought funding to enable community-based planting and land care on this railway land in Royal Park. This will both generate community support and demonstrate the transformation which is possible. We've even discussed a Land Care link with the Goulburn Valley, a region of massive land degradation and massive community response.



One or two of our members recorded the many species of birds in the Park, readily increased if there were appropriate understorey and land management - including avoiding mowing the grassland within an inch of its life! In March, we held the first of what we hope will become regular bird-watching walks, led in this case by well-known ornithologist, Alan Reid. Again, one of members (a bird watcher and artist) would gladly co-ordinate a Park Watch project if others were interested. Some people prefer hands-on involvement, rather than endless correspondence or litigation.

Eminent nature photographer, David Tatnall, has donated a series of wonderful pictures of the Park. One has already been printed as a card, thanks to the donation of another generous supporter. Our sales will make possible further print-runs and related Park promotion. The Parkville Post Office is doing a roaring trade - there have not been local cards for sale before. We're also hoping for funds for a photographer-in-residence project.

Another initiative has been to knit-up an alliance of relevant professional and community-based environment organisations to promote a 'Green' Games Bid. This involves crystallizing and marketing the elements of energy efficient design, water and waste management, transport and land-use planning and management, including parkland. We hope this will be launched in October, drawing on the experience of those involved in the green Sydney Olympic Bid.

Working with the Wurundjeri on a Parkland Reconciliation Project, funded by the Victorian Women's Trust, we are part of a series of initiatives, one of which will be a truly memorable, remarkable and pleasurable day in Royal Park. It will be part of our awakening consciousness of what this land means - what it is, and was and could be. The day is to be called 'Footsteps of the Ancestors: remaking a meeting place'. The artistic director will be North Melbourne resident and devotee of Royal Park, Meme McDonald.

In the meantime political promotion will also proceed and a public rally will be held in the Park, later this year, to signal the start of a rolling campaign involving international lobbying and networking amongst the 69 voting member countries of the Commonwealth Games Federation. There's no shortage of ideas only a limited capacity to make them happen!

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF WHAT WE'RE DOING

So what this band of citizens has taken on, saving a Park, is very small in one sense, but huge in others - because we're thinking globally and acting locally. Some would say it's a lost cause - that we're up against the most powerful forces in the state, that we're adrift in a dark age of 'economic rationalism' and mounting global crisis, that 'there's nothing we can do.' But there is and we are beginning to do it. And we're having effect.

Because Royal Park is an arena in which we can clearly see how decisions are being made, by whom and with what appalling effects.



A cultural, environmental and recreational asset is being pillaged by powerful interests without regard for the law, natural justice or our long-term economic well-being. Our elected Council has been returned in a form and on terms in which it is readily intimidated and humiliated by the State Government.

The stakes are high. But we live in a country with one of the proudest democratic traditions in the world. And we live in the State in which the Eureka uprising laid the groundwork for revolutionary reform, in the context of a far more threatening regime and with far less resources at their disposal than we.

So this Parkland campaign is about the quality of our environment, it's about social justice, it's about indigenous land rights and it's about long term economic well-being. Inevitably, this means it's about the political system that will achieve those outcomes.

To summarise: we face an Appeal in the Supreme Court in a fortnight over the proposed construction of an athletes hotel. We also have the immediate prospect of a freeway connection, whether over or under Royal Park, linking the Eastern and Tullamarine Freeways into massive international hockey and netball stadiums which will entrench corporate control over at least 10 acres of permanently reserved public parkland.

This appropriation, the antithesis of due planning process, represents a triple whammy. First, our only inner city bushland park will be irreversibly degraded. Second, the operation of the Zoo (separated only by a tram-line) will be seriously affected by lights and noise, and the welfare of its fauna, (especially the adjacent rare and endangered animal breeding program) threatened. Third, the future of the nearby Royal Showgrounds (and of the Royal Show) is in jeopardy, following the rejection by the State Government of the bid by the Royal Agricultural Society for funds to construct the Netball and Hockey Stadiums.

So as we celebrate our first Annual General Meeting may I, on behalf of the Committee, thank all of our members and other supporters for your generosity, intelligence, passion and tenacity. We need those qualities as never before.

*Angela Russo*