



23 May 2014

Yarra Climate Action Now (YCAN) would like to thank Council for the opportunity to comment on the Yarra City Council Proposed Budget for 2014–15, and request that they consider the following submission.

While we are pleased to see an ongoing commitment to sustainability in the form of continuing funding for the Bicycle Strategy and the Yarra Environment Strategy, we are concerned that key positions have been quietly left out of the budget.

Urban Agriculture Facilitator

We are most disappointed about the axing of the position of Urban Agriculture Facilitator. The reason for this action is hard to fathom. Throughout the budget there are references to the City of Yarra's pride in its record on sustainability. The draft Waste Strategy contains a detailed Urban Agriculture Program, and new Urban Agriculture Strategy is in development. And yet the person in the position to lead and drive urban agriculture in Yarra has been cut from the budget.

In the Yarra Environment Strategy 2013–17 (YES), the very first point in the action plan is to “Empower and educate the community to support sustainable consumption”. Action 1.2.2 is “Strengthening the Urban Agriculture Program”. Under this heading is the claim that Yarra is “a national leader in supporting local food growing activities through our Urban Agriculture Program.” It goes on to state that “a holistic Urban Agriculture Strategy and Implementation Plan is required to tie the many elements together and ensure a clear and unified set of actions and direction that meet the needs of all sectors of the community”.

The question is how are these admirable aspirations to be met without a facilitator to run the program? Since there is no mention of urban agriculture in the Budget, we can only hope that the entire program is not going to be axed. Will the planning for a new Urban Agriculture Strategy go ahead and if so how will it be effected? Will the Urban Agriculture Advisory Committee continue to meet? Can staff manage these additional duties? The future of this program, which has been so well supported, so well run is unknown. Those residents who have taken time out of busy lives for two years to attend the committee meetings, are in the dark. No one has had the courtesy to inform them what this budget decision will mean for the Urban Agriculture Program.

The Value of Urban Agriculture

The Urban Agriculture program has many important outcomes. It helps people produce some of their own food. It is well known that children who grow vegetables, will eat whatever they grow. For adults who have unhealthy eating habits, it can also encourage them to eat well. Home-grown vegetables promote healthy living.

Urban agriculture also provides a focus for community involvement and neighbourhood communication.

There are benefits from the Urban Agriculture Program for Council as well. The program promotes composting and teaches people how to do it. Every person who is encouraged to grow their own vegetables and to compost, is reducing his or her contribution to the huge amount of organic waste that Council takes to landfill, around 200 kg per person per year. Not only is this saving money for Council, it is also reducing methane emissions from landfill sites, and therefore reducing Yarra's greenhouse gas emissions.

Vegetables bought from the supermarket have been fed with synthetic fertilizer, sprayed with pesticide, possibly irradiated. None of these processes are good for the consumer or for the environment. Supermarket vegetables are often packed in plastic bags and punnets, they might also have travelled hundreds of miles, even from overseas. This further adds to Yarra's carbon footprint.

Sustainability Coordinator

The Budget does not inform us what has been cut. We learned from an article in a local paper (*Melbourne Leader* 8 May) that a full-time position for a Sustainability Officer to manage the YES has been reduced to a part-time position.

Yarra's environmental and sustainability programs are wide ranging, ambitious and admirable. If the strategies are to be more than aspirational words in a document, if they are to be successful and lead to meaningful outcomes, then it is essential that there is firm leadership, someone to oversee the entire spread of actions.

Conclusion

It is clear that urban agriculture is good for the environment, good for Yarra residents and good for Council. Council is justifiably proud of its environmental and sustainability programs. These programs are keenly supported by residents, as repeated consultations have shown. Yet it seems Council's enthusiasm for sustainability within Yarra, is waning.

Councillors and staff involved in selecting past Urban Agriculture Facilitators have done an excellent job. Both have been dynamic, enthusiastic and effective leaders of the program.

Success of any sustainability program is not in the quality of the written strategy. It is measured by the effectiveness of the outcomes. We urge Council to reinstate the position of Urban Agriculture Facilitator and give the YES the level of leadership it requires. Then Council might still be justified in referring to Yarra as a leader in sustainable living.

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On behalf of YCAN members