

Crossing Paths– Leveraging Government investment in Bayswater

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ABSTRACT: When the Victorian State Government announced a \$177 million investment to remove two rail level crossings within Bayswater, in Melbourne's outer east, Knox Council had to be agile and influential in order to deliver on long-desired aspirations for the heart of the Bayswater township. Over the next 18 months, Knox not only managed to contribute its own investment into the project, but also leverage Federal Government investment to deliver urban renewal outcomes for the benefit of the community. The methodology used in getting the desired outcomes required analysis, storytelling, partnering, negotiating, influencing, selling, begging and occasionally fending off criticisms. In the end, each stakeholder suffered some losses along the journey, however the overall winner was the community.

KEYWORDS: Rail, Level Crossings, Congestion, Urban Renewal, Bayswater, Level Crossing Removal Authority

1 Introduction

In November 2015, the Victorian State Government announced a \$177 million investment to remove two level crossings within the heart of the Bayswater activity centre. The announcement formed part of the Government's election commitment to remove 50 level crossing across Melbourne in the subsequent two terms of Government.

The project announcement provided opportunity for Knox Council, situated in outer eastern Melbourne to leverage from the project some longstanding urban renewal outcomes for Bayswater. These outcomes had been strongly articulated by the community through a significant engagement process as part of the Bayswater Structure Plan development in 2005.

Given that a key premise of the Level Crossing Removal program being delivered by the State was one of addressing congestion and removing delay, it seemed a long shot that Council would be able to negotiate a reduction in the number of trafficable lanes along Mountain Hwy in Bayswater. The key driver for this was the opportunity to provide an enhanced urban realm environment through Bayswater and to bring back some sense of identity through delivery of the project.

The methodology used in getting the desired outcomes required courage, partnering storytelling, negotiating, influencing, selling,

begging and occasionally fending off criticisms. In the end, each stakeholder suffered some losses along the journey, however the overall winner was the community.

2 Surveying the landscape

2.1 Acknowledging the past and the present

Sitting at the foothills of the Dandenong Ranges, Bayswater has a long history of serving the people of Melbourne, initially as a jumping off point for weekends away, growing as many outer suburbs of Melbourne in the 60's and 70's and most recently as serving as a jobs and industry hub for the manufacturing and logistics sectors. The heart of the Bayswater activity centre was always seen as a place in four parts – east of the railway, west of the railway, north of Mountain Hwy and south of Mountain Hwy. As a centre, if you went to one part of the precinct, it was considered challenging to visit the other.

From a socio-economic perspective, Bayswater has always had it's challenges, with higher levels of poverty and social service utilisation and lower levels of education and employment.

When a \$177 million investment was announced by the State – the biggest investment within Knox since the Eastlink road

project was delivered, Council was determined to leverage several positive outcomes.

Council turned to its Structure Plan, which clearly articulated the influence and disruption of Mountain Hwy - a six lane arterial road cutting through the heart of Bayswater - on the amenity of the precinct. Key aspirations in the Structure Plan included reducing the severance of the road and rail lines, enhancing pedestrian and cycling and creating some landmark developments which would complement the scale of the precinct.

2.2 Defining the ask

As officers, it was recognised that a grab-bag of requests to be delivered as part of the project was never going to work. The advocacy process required working across teams to form an evidence base which could be articulated to the State Government, who had already developed a reference design, but had not formally landed a position for the project. To some extent, Council was fortunate that the announcement came first with details of the project to follow.

Council held a couple of all-day workshops with 15-20 Council staff members with a vested interest in the project, supported by external consultants, specialised in the fields of transport and urban design. Through this process, a top ten wish-list was formed as the basis of Council's "ask" to the State.

This included a mix of easy, medium and hard outcomes, which drew upon not only the Structure Plan for Bayswater, but specific precinct planning work for the heart of Bayswater. This included forming positions on:

- rail over versus rail under;
- provision for cyclists both along the rail line and along Mountain Hwy;
- the need for a signature new train station to be delivered as part of the project, reflecting the backdrop of the Dandenongs;
- pedestrian activation through the precinct;
- the delivery of a public plaza through delivery of the project;
- reconfiguration of the bus interchange;
- a reduction in trafficable lanes along Mountain Hwy through Bayswater, and

- future-proofing of the design to support future activation including modular car parking elements, which could transition to multi-storey to support commercial development.

2.3 Making friends and influencing people

Although a base case reference design for the level crossing removals had previously been developed by the State, its' origins pre-dated the establishment of the Level Crossing Removal Authority, and while the design informed the shortlisting of potential alliance teams, there was a small window of influence which Council worked hard to seize.

As both bidding teams were working up a tender response to the reference case, Council was given an opportunity to present its aspirations to each of the bidding teams. This provided Council with both an opportunity to state its aspirations and also to inform their design approach and methodology. In hindsight, it was a rare opportunity to influence functional design aspects and potentially cemented fruitful and active working relationship with both design teams, representatives from VicRoads and the Office of the Victorian State Government architect and what at the time was a fledgling staff group who would later become part of the newly established Level Crossing Removal Authority.

Like any good duck, we were all paddling furiously below the water, trying to remain calm above the water. In order to be successful, the influence had to extend beyond the project team tasked with delivering the project. Council officers and elected representatives spent a very intensive three months managing relationships across all levels of Government.

Initially, we had to seek support from our Council that investment in the streetscape elements of the project was worthwhile and that investment of Council funds to complement a State led investment was worthwhile. This was followed a series of delegations to the office of the Local Federal MP, to seek contribution to accompanying contribution to streetscape elements of the project. These project contributions exceeded \$4m.

These conversations were supported by delegations to the Minister of Public Transport, the Minister's office, the Level Crossing

Removal Authority, the Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister for Public Transport. These conversations focussed on reinforcing the commitment of both Council and the Federal Government to the project, seeking to align streetscape elements with the project and also to continue advocacy for Council's urban realm enhancements within Bayswater.

2.4 Giving and taking away

A key element necessary for delivering an enhanced streetscape within Bayswater was the narrowing of Mountain Hwy through the retail heart. Trying to convince the State Government to immediately lose some of the congestion solving benefits associated with the removal of boomgates by simultaneously removing one of three lanes in each direction required a solid evidence base, both in terms of traffic data and policy positions.

Council spent some significant time and money in evaluating the existing operational traffic conditions, undertaking video surveys, intersection counts and conducting its own intersection and road performance analysis prior to approaching both VicRoads and the Level Crossing Removal Authority with the proposal. It was fortunate that this particular crossing was not the worst site on the State's priority list. In fact the video analysis convinced Council officers that the boom gates were the primary source of congestion through the site, even during peak periods.

The traffic data was coupled with strategic policy perspectives about how activity centres were supposed to perform and how economic growth can be impeded by an inappropriate mix of traffic, heavy vehicles and commercial activity.

It was argued that reinforcing Mountain Hwy as a priority traffic route did not align with the State Road Agency designation of the road. Through these conversations, VicRoads became a key ally, as they were able to take the view that if such an outcome could be achieved in Bayswater, it could potentially be achieved in other locations around Melbourne.

Other influencing factors used to give weight to the argument were that:

- The outcomes were consistent with the long-held community position as to how locals regarded Bayswater into the future, as articulated within the Structure Planning process.

- Mountain Hwy was seen by the Victorian Planning Authority as a potential Bush Boulevard, giving it's proximity to Dandenongs;
- The removal of a land would provide opportunity to deliver a dedicated bicycle path through Bayswater
- The concept would reinforce the role of Bayswater as an Activity Centre of choice in the local area;
- The reduced road profile would improve safety and crossing distances for pedestrians
- The provision of widened footpath areas would support outdoor dining and reinforce the well respected role Bayswater already as a restaurant destination in Melbourne's east.

2.5 Selling the proposal

After undertaking some of their own analysis to validate the proposition and its impacts, both VicRoads and the Level Crossing Removal Authority embraced the idea of a reduced road profile and it then became necessary to support each other and work as a unified team in selling the concept to our community and our key stakeholders. These conversations continued for many months even while the design development process was ongoing. If we'd waited even another two months, the opportunity would have passed us by.

It's fair to say that the process didn't leave any of us un-scarred. There was considerable community backlash, pushback from officers within our respective organisations, attacks from well regarded transport planning professionals and derision from Local MP's with strong interest in Bayswater. It was at this point that it was understood that evidence takes a back seat when emotions get involved. It should also be noted that political concerns were being amplified by the political cycle which saw both Local Government and then State Government elections in quick succession.

Key messages relating to the project were developed to assist in communicating the proposal across the media. Talkback radio, major newspapers and local media outlet were acutely aware and interested in the proposal, and it was imperative that the messaging was clear and direct. A video articulating the benefits of the proposal was co-created and branded by Council, VicRoads and the Level Crossing Removal Authority.

VicRoads also used the Bayswater project as a test case for its Movement and Place methodology, which has now been rolled out as a planning tool and framework for planners and decision makers in how to identify the role of both the road and the creation and contribution of places they pass through.

3 Conclusions and recommendations

It's acknowledged that level crossing removals can deliver direct economic benefits through safety enhancements, reduced delay and reduced operating costs for vehicles¹. However some of these benefits may be offset by further delay resulting from induced traffic or loss of amenity through reinforcement of a private vehicle dominated road environment in proximity to centres, which require people, interaction and engagement to be successful.

In arguing for a different outcome from the Bayswater Level Crossing removals, it was evident that Knox Council, in articulating its vision for the precinct, had identified factors that would not only contribute to the economic potential of Bayswater, but also leverage social and environmental outcomes that would continue to deliver benefits for decades to come.

The true benefits of the decision may come directly through economic prosperity for the area through business investment and accelerated development in line with the aspirations of a successful activity centre. Equally, they may reveal themselves through a well-designed urban realm which retains its connection with the natural environment and potentially sets a benchmark for developments which follow. Alternately, the dividends may come through the provision of open spaces for people to mix and socialise and the sense of identity that key infrastructure projects can create. The future of Bayswater will reveal itself piece by piece.

Acknowledgements

This report would like to formally acknowledge the considerable investment of the Australian Government towards the project. We would also like to acknowledge the role of both VicRoads and the Level Crossing Removal Authority in listening to the ideas of Knox

Council, considering them carefully and then supporting the proposal 100% once the direction was confirmed, often in the face of considerable adversity. The project truly was a collaborative effort.

4. References

1. De Gruyter C and Currie G (2016) 'Impacts of Rail-Road Crossings: International Synthesis and Research Gaps' Transportation Research Board 95th Annual Meeting January 2016