

Yarra Langridge and Nicholls Ward Candidate Survey 2020

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Q1. Why have you decided to stand for the Yarra City Council?

I am standing for re-election because now more than ever our community needs a seat at the decision-making table. I have a strong track record of working with our community, bringing our community together and navigating the bureaucracy to achieve results for our community. I am an independent, with a strong environmental focus, a commitment to equity and a deep dedication to our diverse community, the unique character and vibrant culture we know as Yarra.

I am passionate about greater community participation in local government and community led decision-making at Council.

Q2. Are you a member or supporter of a local group or organisation?

In my role as Councillor I have developed strong working relationships with all local community groups including FRA, the 3068 Group, PFN - Protect Fitzroy North, FNRA – Fitzroy North Residents Action Group, and NNTG – the North Nicholls Traffic Group. I am a member of various creative and cultural groups, I have long standing connections with environmental organisations as a volunteer including FoMC – Friends of Merri Creek, FOBB – Friends of Bats and Bushcare, Wildlife Victoria, BirdLife Rescue and beyond Nicholls with the Darebin Parklands Association, DCAN – Darebin Climate Action Now, the Yarra Riverkeeper Association, heritage groups and others.

Q3. Have you been a participant in a local project or campaign?

For over 10 years I have been on the organising committee for Music From The Wetlands, a local environmental music Festival. It is a free community, family and dog-on-lead friendly event held in the wetlands of Alphington beside the Yarra River. I organise the community and environmental stalls every festival. The Bowls Club provide drinks, the Scouts put on action activities, the Community Centre and Primary School contribute, local businesses provide food, local artists put on creative activities and we hold a competition before the Festival for young musicians. The committee brings it all together and determines the music line up (including the competition winners); some of my contributions have been The Stiletto Sisters and Mojo Juju.

I also volunteer at the Soft Release Enclosure at Yarra Bend Park to return orphaned and injured Grey-headed flying foxes back into the wild. Last summer saw unprecedented heat events that resulted in significant fatalities of this endangered species at the Yarra colony and left hundreds of pups orphaned. It is the only facility in Victoria and so all bats injured in wildlife unsafe fruit tree netting, orphaned by the fires or heat events go through the facility for rehabilitation.

Q4. What experiences have you had with the Yarra City Council?

Prior to becoming a Councillor my experiences with the Council amounted to patronage of the Libraries and Swimming Pools, attendance at various festivals and events such as Blak Wiz, applying for community grants to run a Festival and as a community group objector to large scale planning applications.

As a Councillor I now have experience and understanding of the inner workings of Council. I am intimately familiar with planning approval and objection processes, VCAT and State Planning Panels, heritage controls as well as the strategic and statutory policies at Yarra. I have sat on numerous community Advisory Committees including Environment, Heritage, Yana Ngargna and Arts; and previously bike, waste and transport. I have a 100% attendance record at Council meetings with oversight of all areas of the organisation. I have made significant contributions to policy development particularly around equity/inclusion, safety in public places, community engagement, transparency and access to information and also to the Nature Strategy.

I have contributed updates to the website from "Other Animals and Pests" to "Living With Wildlife" and "Biodiversity and Wildlife". I have represented Yarra at numerous events and forums; provided support and advice to individual community members as well as facilitated contact with appropriate staff, other community members, groups and organisations.

Q5. What role does the community play in council decision making?

Council recently endorsed the new Community Engagement Strategy and Action Plan. It is primarily based around the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) framework. It provides a policy for community participation in Council decision making on planning and the delivery of services. It is a motherhood document that includes a commitment to community engagement, a spectrum of engagement (ie: levels of engagement or input the community can have), an outline of who is to be engaged and the tools and methods to facilitate engagement.

Ultimately the role our community can play in decision-making when input is not specifically sought by particular stakeholders is still limited to responses to 'Your Say Yarra' surveys, community Advisory Committees and lobbying Councillors. Consultation results, planning objections and Your Say Yarra feedback are analysed by the responsible area of Council and summarised in a Report with a Recommendation for a decision by your elected representatives.

How can this be made more effective?

I have argued that determining the level of engagement allowed by the community, oversight of the engagement and the analysis of the results of the engagement should be conducted by a team with specific expertise. On the occasions I have requested the full results that informed a Report summary, I have found various levels of unintended bias or misrepresentation. Furthermore, minutes and agendas of Advisory Committees, Project Reference Groups etc are not readily available to all Councillors and are not accessible to the community. When the community is engaged in consultation, this must be accessible for the decision-making process. To encourage the community to engage the feedback must be valued.

Q6. How do you propose to communicate with the community if elected as a councillor?

Aside from day-to-day phone and email availability, I attend (virtually these days) community group meetings, organise public meetings and smaller interest group meetings. I have also produced a newsletter that I will bring out quarterly and will continue to develop an online platform via social media.

I will work to strengthen Yarra's website as a community hub and continue my efforts to make information more accessible. For greater community participation and input into decision-making the community must be informed, the input respected, and the outcome owned. I have already achieved greater public notice of Council meeting agendas, successfully proposed a push notification system for planning applications and ensured all advisory groups are listed on the Yarra website. I aim to ensure the expertise of our community is harnessed for a long-term vision for our community and neighborhoods.

Q7. What are your priorities if elected to the Council?

- Greater community participation, better consultation and community led decision-making. Development of a process for community directed strategic planning for the future, that is transparent and flexible to accommodate change.
- Environment – protecting our remaining biodiversity and the Yarra catchment in our municipality including planned wildlife refuge areas; faster implementation of the Climate Emergency Plan and emission targets; further native tree planting, extension of green corridors and connectivity; and a gardening for wildlife program and community network.
- COVID-19 recovery directed by the community, for our whole community that embraces lessons learnt and addresses the inequalities exposed. Consultation with small businesses to support COVID-safe operations, permit waivers, facilitation of bulk purchases of cleaning materials to lower costs for individual traders; develop strategies to revitalize local shopping precincts with small festivals and focused activities; discussions with landlords to minimise vacancies through pop-ups, community spaces, art exhibitions and studios; better graffiti management. Protecting our diverse community, the most vulnerable, the elderly, and making sure our youth aren't left behind. Ensuring our music and nighttime economy survive, our creative community are supported and working for strategies to address the disproportionate impact on women.
- Planning and heritage - an overhaul of Yarra's Planning policy to ensure heritage is better represented as a priority within both statutory and strategic planning areas of Council. Better heritage controls, better controls to ensure the character of our residential streets are not compromised by inappropriate and unsympathetic designs. Heritage oversight on all Council planning matters, the implementation of the Heritage Strategy and better resourcing for a Heritage Department of Council. Planning policy that supports our residents and is not skewed in the favour of developers focused on profit not community benefit.
- Traffic and cycling issues – strategies to reduce rat running and lower speed limits in residential streets, park and trail pathways for leisure activities and improved infrastructure for bike commuting in consultation with residents, informed by a community developed vision for the future.

Q8. The FRA has identified the following key priority areas - Heritage Protection and Conservation; Planning Permit Information and Advocacy; Yarra Council Strategy, Policy and Guidelines; Homelessness and Social Issues; and Climate Action.

What priority would you give to each and how would you respond to your top 3 if elected as a councillor?

I consider these issues all interconnected and closely aligned with my priorities outlined above and elsewhere. The first, Heritage Protection and Conservation, is inextricably interconnected with the second, Planning Permit Information and Advocacy. Planning policy must reflect the values of our community and protect what makes Yarra special, desirable and livable. Permit information must support these values and Council must advocate on behalf of the community for the greatest net benefit for our community. Council must provide sound support to the community, information on State and Federal planning policy, processes and legislation as well as advocacy for the community not the State, the Commonwealth or a developer. This relates to Yarra Council Strategy, Policy and Guidelines. These must be developed and driven by our community then strenuously defended by Council to inform the first and second priorities.

Our community is diverse and in our diversity is our strength. Homelessness and social issues have at their core inequality. The COVID recovery provides a unique opportunity to address some of these inequalities, build a more resilient and interconnected community that supports and embraces everyone. Our diversity is part of the fabric of Yarra's community, and we should support it. We need to provide social housing, support services for those facing hard times and work toward a safer environment where we live and work. Hence the Climate Emergency is also relevant. Without addressing it we will all face more frequent severe weather events, losing our biodiversity will lead to more virulent viruses and new pandemics. I commit to each of these priorities.

Q9. What should be the role of Yarra City Council in relation to State and Commonwealth governments?

Yarra City Council's role in relation to State and Commonwealth governments is to advocate for our community, seek external funding opportunities and provide input into decisions that affect our community. This advocacy and input must be transparent to our community and there must be accountability for it and the outcomes.

Q 10. What relationship should the Yarra City Council have with neighbouring councils?

Yarra City Council should collaborate with all local governments to advocate to the State and Commonwealth on behalf of our residents. Yarra City Council must have good working relationships with neighbouring councils to advocate for our community and ensure continuity at our borders.