



Friends of Lorne is a planning and environment conservation organisation. It was founded in 1966. We are dedicated to conserving the natural fauna and flora of Lorne whilst ensuring that there are services and activities suited to the needs of permanent residents, holidaying residents, campers and tourists.

## **Our Focus Our Future, Surf Coast Shire Council Submission from Friends of Lorne**

**3 February 2025**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the planning of Council's priorities and chief focus. We note that the Vision and Principles for the SCSC were designed in 2021 and that you are now seeking "focus" for the immediate term. Your survey introduction points out that the Council needs-must prioritise and make choices and so you are seeking community guidance about what we value most. We divide our comments into two sections, feedback about Council focus and process and the design of your survey.

### 1. Feedback about your plan

We agree broadly with the stated vision for the future as well as the 10 community principles. However our interest is more in the **execution of the plan**, the resources devoted to that, and the accountability mechanisms.

We believe your immediate focus for the next four years should be on **assessing (and correcting if needs be) the way you are currently addressing the community principles**. For example, Principle 1 is "Protect, conserve and restore our natural environment" and Principle 4 is "Identify and maintain our community identities." Your planning department implements actions pertaining to these two principles on a daily basis, as they process planning applications and assess compliance with the Neighbourhood Character Overlay (NCO). We have an NCO designed to protect what is best about Lorne's natural beauty and amenity as a wildlife habitat. Yet we see a progressive urbanisation of Lorne's look as built form and non-recessive development comes to dominate.

We have nothing but praise for your planners for the courtesy and assistance they have provided Friends of Lorne over the years. But our sense is they *do not have sufficient*

*resources* to do their job properly. For example, there is no capacity for post development review to see if applicants have complied with landscape plans.

We are also aware that your staff have conducted an audit of the extent to which Lorne planning decisions are in keeping with various aspect of the NCO (ie, on how many occasions is height allowed to exceed the recommended planning control in return for an increase in set back; how many of the developments exceed the 30% block overage requirement, etc). But your team do not have the resources to tabulate and report on their findings.

We also suggest that *changes to planning procedure* would also assist in helping to make practice match principle. For example, right now applicants are not required to provide detailed landscape plans and colour schemes during the public advertising period. This means that the community is unaware of what any particular planning application intends in these key areas of “Lorne Fit” and in being recessive in the landscape.

Other actions by Council *in conjunction with other authorities* would also serve Principles 1 and 4. We would like to see some forethought and commitment to that. For example, the Council could collaborate with the power companies to place power and telegraph lines underground on key streets to stop the slashing of trees and to compensate for the loss of canopy trees to the 10:30 (fire clearing) rule. This would be consistent with your Nature Strip Policy which aims to play an active role in supporting Council’s climate change response (ie, Principle 6, “Tackling climate change and implementing climate resilient strategies”).

## 2. Feedback about the survey design

The survey design does not serve your purposes well, unfortunately. We have little confidence in major sections of the results. We also don’t think the results will be statistically reliable (ie, people will not say exactly the same thing if asked a day later). In particular, the design of the section on financial sustainability is flawed.

In dealing with the trade-offs the Council faces it is unhelpful (and misleading) to ask the community for generic values rather than **a context- specific response**. That is, at any one point in time, it may be better to sell off an asset or delay a project, or to raise a fee. The answer will depend on factors such as the amount of funds the sell off would raise, those most affected by the sell off, possible delays, and capacity to meet needs in alternative ways.

When eliciting community values there are better ways to design the questions than ones that ask respondents to rank options (like a popularity poll). While a popularity poll might seem at face value to be clear and fair, in practice it makes all options interchangeable when in fact one option might be “worth” 20 times another and 5 times “better” than all the rest. This insight is lost or buried in mere ranking exercises.

A better way of assessing values and community preferences is contingent valuation, a method from the field of economics. The method recognises that people make choices depending on (ie, contingent on) the options and trade-offs under specific contexts. Such methods are well established in health service planning, transport planning and environmental protection and management planning. These methods are specifically designed to understand what people value when they face tough choices. See example below.

Under Health and Well Being section, our concern was **how can respondents meaningfully rate the importance of something in ignorance of the prevalence of the problem** in the Surf Coast Shire? A respondent might rate violence as of low concern just because they see little of it. But faced with some statistics on the prevalence, they might change their mind about its importance and by inference the support that they might give the Council to help address it. Perhaps, however, your purpose might be to show how at variance community understanding and opinions might be with the facts. But why would you put effort into that?

The opening questions (“In Our Communities”) fall into a similar problem where your results will be difficult to interpret. Events could be very important to some people, and they want more of them. Others could tick the same ‘very important’ box, because they want to see far fewer of them.

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### **EXAMPLE OF A CONTINGENT VALUATION EXERCISE**

Contingent valuation walks the respondent through a series of pair-wise choices, (perhaps as many as 30 or so) varying the options slightly each time. Respondents are asked to specify which option they prefer (option A or option B) at each step. By careful design of the survey questions, the responses can be used to assess how the community views each of the trade-offs, which provides insight into community values.

Imagine for this exercise that the SCSC had already finished the new swimming pool being planned in Torquay, the public has already had some experience of it, but now there are some decisions to be made to improve access to the facility.

*Council is considering extending the opening times for its swimming pool, but it needs to raise funds for this. It is considering a number of options. It can sell an existing asset (land being held as a site for affordable housing). Or it can slow down its planned maintenance schedule for SCSC amenities (toilet blocks and parking facilities). Or it can raise the admission fees. Forced with the following specific choices, which option would you prefer? A or B?*

CHOICE 1

OPTION A	OPTION B
<i>Extend opening times by two hours per day for general use</i>	<i>Extend opening times by two hours per day for general use</i>
<i>Keep existing admission fees</i>	<i>Raise admission fees by 10%</i>
<i>Reduce maintenance schedule on other facilities from a three-year cycle to a five-year cycle</i>	<i>Reduce maintenance schedule on other facilities from a three-year cycle to a four-year cycle</i>
<i>Retain all existing assets</i>	<i>Retain all existing assets</i>

Then the respondent would be presented the next set of choices

CHOICE 2

OPTION A	OPTION B
<i>Extend opening times by two hours per day for general use</i>	<i>Extend opening times by two hours per day for general use</i>
<i>Raise admission fees by 5%</i>	<i>Raise admission fees by 15%</i>
<i>Reduce maintenance schedule on other facilities from a three-year cycle to a four-year cycle</i>	<i>Reduce maintenance schedule on other facilities from a three-year cycle to a five-year cycle</i>
<i>Sell a parcel of land and establish an endowment fund with the proceeds to subsidise the costs of the pool</i>	<i>Retain all existing assets</i>

Then the respondent would be presented the next set of choices.

CHOICE 3

OPTION A	OPTION B
<i>Keep opening times as they are currently</i>	<i>Extend opening times by two hours per day for general use</i>
<i>Make no changes to admission fees</i>	<i>Raise admission fees by 10%</i>
<i>Make no changes to maintenance schedule</i>	<i>Reduce maintenance schedule on other facilities from a three-year cycle to a five-year cycle</i>
<i>Retain all existing assets</i>	<i>Lease a parcel of land for private development and use the income to subsidise the facility.</i>

And so on.

Contingent valuation is usually done by a survey questionnaire. It can be done with a facilitator so that the deliberations and reasons for choosing one way or another are recorded.