

Executive summary

In 2007, the City of Wodonga supported a proposal from the ‘Friends of Willow Park’ that a community-led Master Plan be developed for the park. A Steering Committee comprised of equal numbers Council and community representatives was formed to oversee the process. A comprehensive study plan was developed collaboratively by the Steering Committee. Strategies were developed with a view to ensuring that: the interests of all stakeholders were represented; power imbalances were considered and alleviated as much as possible; activities promoted participation; and there were opportunities for reflection.

An anticipated State grant to ‘Friends of Willow Park’ to assist it lead the community engagement part of the Master Plan process did not eventuate. Consequently, the process relied more heavily on volunteer resources from within ‘Friends of Willow Park’ and a local consultant engaged by Council to assist coordinate activities.

A mixed-methods approach was chosen to ensure validity of data and to promote inclusion. It was comprised of four major methods: a document analysis and three methods that sought direct input from citizens (questionnaire; a *Play and Say Day*, and an on-line forum).

A relatively high number of people participated in the various activities. Data analysis occurred thematically, with an emphasis on a set of key study questions focused on: what people value; their concerns; and their vision for the park.

What do people value?

The stand-out value related to the sense of bushland in an urban setting. The part the park and its natural surrounds play in providing habitat and improving ecosystems is important. People also like that the park is located near the centre of the city.

Recreation is the next major aspect. Generally, people like that the park offers a wide range of passive, unorganised recreational and social activities. The current level of organised sport is accepted, but people do not wish this to be expanded. Its capacity to cater for all ages and for families was highlighted.

What concerns to people have?

The most prominent concern was the state and adequacy of amenities. By and large, people think that the toilets are inadequate and in a poor state, with several people reporting they prefer not to use them. The picnic facilities were also reported to be inadequate, especially during high peak times such as weekends and holidays. The need for shade over the playground and picnic area was a recurring theme. These particular concerns have also been identified in other Council studies.

There were strong views expressed in opposition to the riding of off-road dirt bikes in the park. Calls were made for this issue to be addressed.

There was some concern about the car park, including the parking of cars inside the park during events such as Carols by Candlelight. However, there were mixed views about whether the car park should be upgraded, and how this might be done. Some people put forward alternative solutions to the issue. The mixed responses suggest that, should an upgraded car park be considered in the Master Plan, that solutions could be explored collaboratively with a group representing the various views.

Mixed views were also evident in relation to dogs off leads, with roughly equal numbers of people supporting on lead as off lead. Likewise, there were mixed views in regard to fencing areas of the park for dogs. Given that any change to the current situation in relation to walking dogs is potentially controversial, there is merit in Council engaging the community further if changes are ever mooted.

Safety was raised but not as a high concern. Likewise, people are, generally, not concerned about the environment. Largely, they are happy with the natural aspects of the park with the qualification that they would like it expanded. Where concern was raised it was in relation to the state of the creek: the erosion; the weeds; the rubbish; its untidy state. The findings suggest that there is a need for community education in relation to the management of the creek as many people think that the Indigenous reed is a weed.

What is the vision for the park?

There was a strong alignment between what people value about the park and their aspirations for its future. Not surprisingly, given the stated values, the most prominent aspects of the vision related to passive recreation and the natural environment. Basically, people reported wanting more of the same: more bushland; an emphasis on unorganised recreational activities; improved amenities that meet people’s needs and encourage families and friends to socialise and recreate.

Playgrounds and play spaces featured highly. There were many calls for attention to be paid to the play needs of both younger and older children. People are very interested in more natural play spaces and ones that encourage children to interact with nature. They are also seeking play spaces that promote creativity and a sense of adventure. There were some notable differences between what adults and children expressed. Adults preferred natural play spaces that are more structured. Children often liked the more informal play ideas such as climbing rocks, walking and climbing on logs, playing with sand hills, interacting with water. In addition, children also expressed a strong desire for traditional swings, slides and monkey bars. Whilst the data indicate a strong preference for natural play spaces, it is not clear that people share a common view as to what this means. Before further design and construction occurs, it would be valuable to engage families and children in more deliberative activities that could inform decisions.

People would like to see play spaces and the associated complementary facilities (toilets, picnic areas and shade) in the current location near Pearce Street and additional ones at Hereford Street, Wilkinson Street and near St. Monica’s School.

There were a small number of calls for recreational activities that are not currently part of the park, for example: a swimming pool; a BMX track; golf practice nets; an indoor sports centre. However, these responses were very few in number and were contrary to the widespread calls for the status quo. There were very strong views that there should be no major developments or structures and where facilities are built that they should be sensitive to the surroundings.

As part of the social component of the park, many people would welcome some more events. However, there was a consistent caution that these should be periodic rather than regular and should not impinge on the quiet ambience and amenity of the park.

In regard to the other major component of the vision, the environment, people were calling for such things as: more bushland areas; trees and shrubs that encourage increased wildlife; and bridges across the creek and the wetland to enable greater interaction with the creek.

Whilst people mainly seek Indigenous and native plants, it is important to note that many people would like to see some exotics in the park. From an ecosystem point of view it is critical that if these are retained, or more planted, that they be away from the creek and be of a species type that will not escape to the creek.

The calls for bridges were many, with people suggesting possible locations as: the wetland; on the creek near the football ground; and across the creek midway between Hereford and Brockley Streets. In a similar vein, several people discussed the ‘goat track’ that runs alongside House Creek and how it provides an opportunity to interact more with the creek. However, there were mixed views as to whether this should be formally constructed. This is another area of potential controversy and would benefit from further engagement with the community before decisions are made.

The poor drainage areas in the park were identified by several people, who expressed the view that these could be turned into natural water courses or wetlands of some sort.

Interaction with nature and the chance to do this in a communal way led to a number of calls for a community garden. This suggests that there is scope for Friends of Willow Park’s regular ‘Community Gardening in the Park’ to be promoted better.

There were calls for aesthetic improvements to the entrances of the park, particularly, Pearce Street, Vermont Street, Hereford Street and Brockley Street.

The final aspect of the vision related to the management of the park. Whilst some people felt that Council should be left to do this alone, calls for a joint approach between Council and the community were more common. The experience of the joint approach to the development of the Master Plan and the associated Steering Committee provides a good foundation.

Recommendation: That a Master Plan be developed using the findings in this reports to guide it and that this plan be subject to further community engagement before being finalised.