

Monday, 25 March 2024

City of Greater Bendigo
Attention: Matthew Kerlin
Lyttleton Terrace
Bendigo Vic 3550
m.kerlin@bendigo.vic.gov.au

Re: O'Keefe Rail Trail Plan

Dear City of Greater Bendigo,

On behalf of the Junortoun Community Action Group (JCAG), I provide the following response to the Draft O'Keefe Rail Trail Plan.

For the residents of Junortoun, the O'Keefe Rail Trail (OKRT) is more than a recreational and tourist trail¹, and its purpose is far more than physical activity². In addition to being a critical part of the natural environment of Junortoun, the Rail Trail is:

- Junortoun's linear park - a place for both active and passive recreation, a place for picnics, and to connect with nature.
- An extension of our Home in the Bush. It is a wildlife corridor, which provides homes for animals and plants and supporting microflora, and which connects and allows passage to/from pockets of bushland found along the trail, for instance Knul-doorong Woodland, Honeyeater Bushland Reserve, and Greater Bendigo National Park. The OKRT provides many opportunities for land conservation, revegetation and rehabilitation.
- An east-west access route through Junortoun that provides a safer means of visiting friends and neighbours compared to the Mclvor Highway, It contributes to the principle of '10-minute neighbourhoods' which the City has adopted.
- A commuter route which provides a safer route and gentler grades for:
 - School students accessing Catherine McAuley College, and
 - Workers and other people to access destinations in East Bendigo (e.g. Mayfair Park light industrial estate) and central Bendigo (e.g. Bendigo Hospital, Bendigo TAFE).
- A place where beginners and less experienced people can learn to ride a bicycle and develop their cycling skills away from vehicle traffic.

Every one of the uses cited above is given insufficient recognition in the Draft Rail Trail Plan.

¹ Draft Plan page 4

² Draft Plan page 21

JCAG relationship with the O’Keefe Rail Trail

For more than a decade members of the Junortoun Community Action Group have worked to enhance the Rail Trail through constructing, installing and maintaining nest boxes for birds and mammals (including microbats; participation in ‘Clean up’ days; assisting in tree planting; repainting access signage and assisting in weed control activities.

JCAG is surprised and disappointed that the objectives and recommendations of the Junortoun Community Plan (see below) are not cited in this Draft Plan, and that the author did not specifically seek input from JCAG when developing the Draft Plan (Engagement, p.2).

We are also surprised that the Draft Plan does not mention Catherine McAuley College and the current and potential for greater use of the trail by their students.

Recommendations of the Junortoun Community Plan 2023-2027 that apply to the O’Keefe Rail Trail

The *Junortoun Community Plan 2023-2027*³ contains several recommendations, including 3 priority recommendations relating to the OKRT. A copy of the Junortoun Community Plan is provided with this response.

Relevant JCAG’s recommended actions, projects and campaigns:

- Construct a separated walking and cycling path along the south side Mclvor Highway from Harley Street to the O’Keefe Rail Trail. [Priority Action]
- Advocate for construction of an underpass where the O’Keefe Rail Trail crosses Mclvor Highway. [Priority Action]
- Install wayfinding signage along the O’Keefe Rail Trail and key routes to support their use. [Priority Action]
- Promote recognition of the O’Keefe Rail Trail as Junortoun’s linear park, and look for opportunities to enhance the trail to further support its use.
- Promote use of the O’Keefe Rail Trail as a route to move throughout Junortoun.
- Explore potential to seal the O’Keefe Rail trail with bitumen from Mclvor Road to central Bendigo to support its use as a safe cycling route.

Aspects of each of these projects are discussed below.

Specific comment on the draft plan

Section 1.0 - Purpose of the plan

- JCAG believes that the OKRT is not solely a recreational and tourist trail. It is a connecting route for safer local access within Junortoun from east-west. Its function is both transportation and recreation.⁴

³ Junortoun Community Action Group Inc. Junortoun Community Plan 2023-2027. 3rd ed. Junortoun.: JCAG; 2022. 16 p.

⁴ Reis AC, Jellum C. Rail Trail Development: A Conceptual Model for Sustainable Tourism. *Tourism Planning & Development*. 2012 May;9(2):133–47.

- We note and do not object to the 'key focus areas' identified in the diagram on page 1, however there is not direct link between these focus areas and the chapters of the draft plan, and the plan is not structured according to that diagram. Consider adding 'intersection safety' and 'use as a commuter route' as major sections.

2.0 – Overview of the Trail

- We ask that the presence of a picnic table at Junortoun (site of former Strathfieldsaye Station and Junortoun Sidings) be recognised (p.3), and that the Draft Plan commits to its retention and future maintenance (p.16).

3.0 – Vision

The proposed vision for the O'Keefe Rail Trail is vague, bland and wishy-washy. The phrase "unique features and natural environment" is generic and lacks meaning. The proposed statement does not have a connection to the Trail and could equally apply to Crusoe Reservoir, or Whipstick Forest, or One Tree Hill or Lake Eppalock or Bendigo Bushland Trail.

The vision should be reworded to be more specific, to encompass its use as a commuter route and to recognise the community partnerships that have led to its success to date.

Here is an alternative vision for consideration.

The O'Keefe Rail Trail safely and conveniently connects Greater Bendigo residents and visitors with the destinations, environment and experiences of the Mclvor corridor. The trail is recognised across Australia for its amenity, features and history, and for the success of its community partnerships.

Outcomes (p.8-9)

When discussing 'a climate-resilient built and natural environment (p.9) JCAG recommends that the erection of nestboxes in Junortoun be recognised, and that the Plan should commit to maintaining existing nestboxes and to extending the installation of nestboxes along the length of the Trail.

In considering 'a safe, welcoming and fair community' (p.9) the Draft Plan mentions

A number of different access points to the trail are available so that people can join the trail at key locations or close to their home if possible.

JCAG recommends this phrase be amended to read:

The trail has numerous well signed access points which allow people to join and exit the trail from roads, estates or townships along its route.

(Note change to 'active voice' and expectation of signage at these access points)

In considering 'a safe, welcoming and fair community' (p.9) the Draft Plan mentions the need for

Warning signs for motorists also need to be provided near key crossings to warn motorists to look out for trail users.

This is also mentioned in section 8.0 (row 3).

We find this statement to be inadequate in addressing the level of risk posed by bicycle/vehicle or pedestrian/vehicle conflicts. In the Hierarchy of Controls (of risks), signage is an example of an 'administrative control', and is far less effective than eliminating a hazard, substituting a hazard or providing engineering controls.

The safety of trail users at intersections and road crossing points is a significant issue, with the draft document identifying three potentially unsafe road crossings.⁵

JCAG recommends an additional section be inserted in the plan titled "**Intersection Safety**" at which the specific risks are stated options for mitigation are discussed and prioritised using a risk matrix.

Ask yourself, "What would the Dutch do?" The Netherlands would not accept warning signs as a satisfactory solution to address cyclist safety at crossing points.

Section 5.0 Growing participation

JCAG believes that more could be done to promote use of the OKRT as a **commuter route**, in particular between Junortoun and central Bendigo. This use is not mentioned in section 5.0, or indeed mentioned at all within the Draft Plan.

A specific section devoted to commuter use of the trail should included in the Plan and should consider and make recommendations for

- A sealed (bitumen) trail surface.
- Safety lighting
- Addressing conflicts and priority at road crossings and intersections.
- Promotion of the trail as a commuter route.

The success of the Bellarine Rail Trail between Geelong and Leopold as a commuter route should be studied, and should serve as a model for enhancement of the trail as a commuter route between central Bendigo and Junortoun.

Section 6.0 Level of Infrastructure Development on the O'Keefe Rail Trail

Emergency or maintenance vehicle access.

JCAG strongly supports the installation of emergency marker signage to assist with location of injured trail users.

⁵ To which we would add Murphy Street, Rohs Road and McDowells Road.

Pedestrian-scale lighting.

JCAG questions the absolute statement that “No lighting will be provided on the Rail Trail” (p.16).

We believe the plan should consider and be open-minded about installing an asphalt surface and safety lighting between Junortoun and central Bendigo. This would be similar to the treatment of the Bellarine Rail Trail between central Geelong and Leopold and would greatly support use of the trail as a cycling and micromobility commuter route.

Location/place sign

The draft plan states “Location/place signs should be provided at each town entrance along the trail. We ask that the Plan defines what is intended by the term “town”. For example, is Junortoun a town? Longlea? Knowsley, Derrinal?

Other comments (section 6.0)

JCAG questions the use of the term ‘trailhead’ within the Draft Plan, and recommends that the term be replaced by the term ‘trail access point’ in many places.

Logically, a trail can only have a ‘trailhead’ at two locations its beginning and its end, In the case of the OKRT that is at Heathcote and at the trail’s intersection with Bendigo Creek Trail north of Lake Weeroona.

The term ‘trail access point’ is more appropriate for use where the Draft Plan discusses Signage (p.13).

JCAG does not consider use of the term ‘trailhead’ is logically or grammatically correct when discussing Axedale. We note that toilets and water are provided at Axedale and it is a lovely place to stop along a ride, but Axedale is not, technically, a trailhead. Like Junortoun, Longlea, Knowsley and Derrinal, Axedale is a ‘trail access point’.

Section 9.0 Signage

JCAG agrees with the identified need for a clear signage plan. We request to be involved in a signage audit planning decisions within the suburb of Junortoun.

Exit point signs.

In addition to the types of sign identified in the plan, there should also be signs installed at exit points along the Trail, where these do not already exist. In particular we identify the need signs on the trail to identify exit points at:

- La Valla Court Junortoun,
- Cassowary Way Junortoun,
- Callistemon Close Junortoun, Jacaranda Court Junortoun,
- Cootamundra Place Junortoun,
- Homebush Drive Junortoun and
- Kalinda Drive Junortoun.

Access point signs.

Signs should be installed on existing street name posts directing people to Trail access points. In particular signs should be placed at the following intersections to encourage local residents and visitors to access the trail safely:

- Cassowary Way and Homebush Drive Junortoun
- Callistemon Close and Somerset Park Road Junortoun
- Jacaranda Court and Somerset Park Road Junortoun
- Cootamundra Place and Caleana Road Junortoun
- Between 42 and 44 Homebush Drive Junortoun
- Kalinda Drive and Bennetts Road Junortoun.

Tourist attraction signs should be installed along the trail where such features can be readily accessed from the trail. In particular directing trail users to Knul-doorong Woodland in Junortoun and Honeyeater Bushland Reserve in Junortoun.

Section 10.0 Prioritised Projects

Mclvor Highway road crossing. JCAG notes the projects identified in this section.

For JCAG the highest priority is installation of an underpass at the point at which the OKRT crosses Mclvor Highway in Junortoun. This is a major safety hazard that prevents use of the trail by many potential users, especially children, and is a major barrier to the Trail's use as a commuter route. JCAG asks that the priority for this project be assigned as High.

Linkages (1)

It is somewhat unclear what is intended in the draft plan where it mentions:

Develop a link between Grassy Flat Creek and Trotting Track Terrace in Junortoun through to Cousins Street in Strathdale

JCAG understands that it should refer to our proposal to:

Provide a link between La Valla Court and the Trotting Terrace to Cousins Street shared path (Strathdale-Junortoun Trail) by constructing a protected shared cycling/walking path along Trotting Terrace Junortoun.

This missing link project of 220m of sealed path was first presented by JCAG to the City of Greater Bendigo in 2018. It is best represented by two dollar signs \$\$\$. This missing link would support connections between:

- OKRT and Grassy Flat Creek Trail at Strathdale, and
- OKRT and the Junortoun-Strathfieldsaye Trail.

Linkages (2)

It is unclear what is intended by

Improve connections between the O'Keefe Rail Trail and Bendigo Bushland Trail

The connections are already in place and perhaps only minor signage installation is required. This should not be represented by three dollar signs \$\$\$\$. It is possible that the expenditure refers to a project to upgrade or redevelop the Bendigo Bushland Trail. This is a worthy project which JCAG supports, but is outside of the scope of this OKRT Plan. The Plan should provide further explanation of what is intended by “improved connections”.

Marketing (p.31)

The trail should also be promoted to local residents. Analysis should be undertaken to identify why potential local users (local residents) do not use the OKRT more often. Identified factors should be addressed, either through problem solving (infrastructure) or marketing. Local community groups⁶ have a role in marketing the greater use of the Trail.

Business development (p.32)

Local community groups may also have a potential role in encouraging businesses to support trail users.

What’s missing from the Draft Plan?

There is no mention in the Draft Plan of the current and future use of **micromobility devices** (scooters, e-scooters, e-bikes) and the potential of the O’Keefe Rail Trail to be enhanced to support their greater use.

- Upgrading the trail surface and user experience between Junortoun and central Bendigo would support micromobility.
- Well-advertised public charging points for e-bikes and e-scooters should be available in central Bendigo, at Lake Weeroona, and in Axedale and Heathcote.
- The proposed trial of public e-scooters in Bendigo should be extended to along the OKRT to Junortoun as soon as practical.

There is no mention of the installation of **nestboxes** for native mammals and birds along the trail (particularly in Junortoun), of the benefits that nestboxes provide, and for the potential to increase the installation of nestboxes along the trail. Section 7.0 (Maintenance / Service Standards) should mention the need to regularly inspect and monitor installed nestboxes, including to identify and address infestation by pest species including feral honeybees and Indian mynahs. Access permits should be arranged for licenced and insured apiarists to remove feral bees.

The Draft Plan should recommend development of a **Revegetation Plan** in section 7.0 Maintenance / Service Standard).

The Draft Plan should recommend development of a **Weed Management Plan** either in section 7.0 Maintenance / Service Standards or section 8.0 Risk Management.

⁶ Junortoun Community Action Group, Axedale – our Town our Future, Advance Heathcote.

As mentioned above, the document should contain a more expanded discussion of the safety risks to trail users at road crossing points. This is deserving of a section in its own right.

The Draft Plan could provide greater recognition and emphasis on the value and importance of community relationships, in particular the connection that the Friends of the Bendigo-Kilmore Rail Trail (FBKRT) has with the Trail. The Plan should commit to maintaining and strengthening that mutually supportive relationship, as well as building connections with other community groups such as JCAG, Axedale – Our Town Our Future and Advance Heathcote. The Plan should also commit to building connections and relationships with schools along the corridor, including in Junortoun, Strathfieldsaye, Axedale and Heathcote.

About JCAG

The Junortoun Community Action Group (JCAG) was formed in 2012 to prepare the first Junortoun Community Plan (2013-15). Since then, JCAG has operated successfully for more than ten years, bringing the residents of Junortoun together, and driving initiatives to benefit and improve the Junortoun community.

JCAG organises events and activities for the Junortoun community, convenes special interest groups (walking, gardening, books), acts as Committee of Management for Honeyeater Bushland Reserve, maintains strong relations with Council and government agencies, and has a history of achievement as one of Greater Bendigo's most effective community groups.

The Junortoun Community Action Group thanks the City of Greater Bendigo for the opportunity to comment on the Draft O'Keefe Rail Trail plan. If you wish to discuss this feedback further, please contact Kevin de Vries on 0418 533 377.

JCAG looks forward to a revised and finalised plan and for its subsequent adoption and pursuit of its recommendations. Given the extensive nature of the comments we have provided, we would appreciate the opportunity to further comment on a pre-release version of the Plan prior to endorsement.

Yours faithfully,



Kevin de Vries

Governance secretary

Junortoun Community Action Group.