Community Consultation and the ‘Hard to Reach’

City of Melbourne Case Study Report
Southbank Boulevard Linear Park Consultation

Ivan Zwart
The **Hard to Reach Project** is a collaborative research venture with eight Victorian local councils, the Victorian Local Governance Association and researchers from Swinburne University. The three year project is jointly funded by the Australian Research Council and partner organisations.

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Foreword: About the Hard to Reach project

The ‘Hard to Reach’ project is a collaborative research venture supported by the Australian Research Council (ARC). It is being undertaken by the Institute for Social Research at Swinburne University, in partnership with eight local councils and the Victorian Local Governance Association. Melbourne City Council is one of the industry partners. The researchers on the project are Professor Denise Meredyth, Professor Brian Costar, Dr Ivan Zwart, Nicola Brackertz and Liss Ralston.

The project aims to investigate the community consultation practices of Victorian local government, with a particular emphasis on how Councils can engage citizens who may be disinterested, disengaged or face barriers to participation. In doing so, it aims to provide some useful resources for each of the partner councils, as well as a broader commentary and analysis of the challenges faced when Councils (and all governments) attempt to consult or engage their communities. At the time of writing, two reports and one working paper have been completed, outlining the first year of the research and a research agenda that will involve case studies with each partner council. These reports can be found at:
http://www.sisr.net/cag/projects/community.htm

This report is based on the City of Melbourne case study and analyses Council’s attempt to engage citizens and stakeholders about the proposal to transform Southbank Boulevard. I hope the staff who read this report find it engaging and beneficial to their community engagement practices and that Council considers implementing its conclusions and recommendations.

Finally, I would like to thank all the staff who provided information for this report. In particular, thank you to the Design and Culture team, who have shown considerable support for the project and who suggested Southbank Boulevard as a case study. Thanks also to Denise Meredyth and Nicola Brackertz for their insightful comments on earlier drafts of this report.

Dr Ivan Zwart
October 2006
Introduction

With a small but rapidly growing residential population, the City of Melbourne faces some unique challenges engaging with its residents. Among these is the speed at which its population is expected to increase, given its 2001 population of just over 60 000 is expected to double by 2016. Many of these new residents will choose to live in the new high-rises of Southbank, a suburb which has grown from a residential population of 85 in 1991, to an estimated population of around 10 000 people in 2006 (Age 2003).

Southbank was first defined as an area for redevelopment by the State Government in 1984. Identified by postcode 3006, the suburb is bounded by the Yarra River, Westgate freeway, Kings Way, Dorcas Street and St Kilda Road (DSE 2006). With public works and land sales stimulating private redevelopment, in only a short period of time there has been a complete transformation of the area, which formerly contained manufacturing and warehouses. Among the changes that occurred were the creation of a new Arts Centre complex at the north-east corner of Southbank, which was soon followed by the Jennings Southgate development immediately westwards. Southgate’s Arts and Leisure Precinct was opened in 1992 with 37 specialty shops, numerous restaurants and thousands of offices. In 1997 the Crown Casino complex was opened, which includes a hotel, shops, restaurants, numerous theatres and space for over 8000 cars. In recent years, significant redevelopment has also occurred around Southbank Boulevard, including new buildings housing the ABC, Fosters, and several apartment complexes. The Malthouse and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art are nearby along Sturt Street, while a new recital hall is proposed for the vacant Telecom site between Sturt and Dodds Streets on the south side of Southbank Boulevard (City of Melbourne 2005a). These new developments have not only attracted many visitors to the area, but led to new residential accommodation for a population attracted to the benefits of inner-city living. There remain many opportunities for further redevelopment of Southbank, which is being managed by both the City of Melbourne and the Victorian Government. The Victorian Government is responsible for large development proposals, while smaller development proposals and the maintenance and management of the public environment is generally the responsibility of the City of Melbourne (DSE 2006).

The style of inner city living in Southbank means that its residential population has a number of characteristics that make it different from more
traditional and established Australian suburbs. Like other inner city apartment residents, the people of Southbank tend to fall into three main categories, being university students, young professionals and ‘empty nesters’ – middle aged adults living in couple only households. Residents are generally well educated, work long hours and earn high incomes, and very few have children living with them. The vast majority use the internet at home, while relatively few own cars. A high number of young people and students also leads to a transient population, although when residents do move they often stay in the inner city area (Metropolis 2005). Each of these factors is likely to impact in different ways upon the ability of the Council to inform or consult with these residents.

With such a rapidly changing landscape, the City of Melbourne and the Victorian Government have undertaken some important strategic planning for the area and attempted to engage residents in these processes. The most significant is the Southbank Plan, led by the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) in concert with the City of Melbourne. Among six key changes suggested by the Southbank Plan is the proposal to reshape Southbank Boulevard to create a large local park. The Council’s consultation process about proposed changes to Southbank Boulevard was therefore important to the future of the area. It also provides a good example for considering the wider issue of how Council conducts community consultation in this suburb and the City.

This report begins with a short overview of community engagement concepts, before briefly discussing methods for participant recruitment. Following this, an explanation of the Southbank Boulevard consultation process is provided, which includes details about the consultation processes used and their findings. Analysis of the case study then raises a number of technical issues that Council should consider in the future when undertaking community consultation. This is followed by some conclusions and recommendations, which include suggestions to improve the planning of community engagement processes, and the potential benefits of creating a citizens’ panel.
Models of community participation

In order to provide a context for the community consultation at Southbank Boulevard, it is worth considering the range of options that are available to Councils when engaging their residents and stakeholders. As outlined in our second report to Councils (Brackertz, Zwart et al. 2005), there are numerous ways in which community consultation, participation and engagement can be conceptualised and evaluated. Community engagement can be seen from the perspective of a community activist, with participation placed on a continuum of activity depending upon the range of influence that citizens have over decision-making. For writers such as Sherry Arnstein (1969), participation should involve a transfer of power from the Council to the community, and ensure that final decision making was left in the hands of the various stakeholders. Arnstein argues that community engagement processes that do not make a genuine attempt to consider the views of citizens may be tokenistic or even a form of manipulation that will lead to a greater degree of cynicism from the public. Assuming open and transparent processes will automatically lead to an empowered citizenry is problematic, however, as it raises the question of where legitimacy should lie in a system of representative democracy. It also ignores the issue of who is likely to participate and how decision making will be improved, given that providing opportunities for participation may simply increase the power of those who already have it. Nevertheless, Arnstein rightly points out that governments should be open about why they engage the public, and should not use consultation processes to simply justify a decision that has already been made.

A more sensible and pragmatic approach for Councils is to view public participation as an activity that should be shaped by the public policy problem at hand. One influential model to outline choices for governments in community engagement is the International Association for Public Participation’s (IAP2) ‘Spectrum’. This model outlines the choices that decision-making bodies have when engaging the community, depending on the degree to which citizens are expected to be actively involved in the decision-making process. The model attaches some key messages for organisations to consider when they decide on a particular approach by clearly outlining the goal of the engagement process and providing a ‘promise to the public’ for each engagement category (such as information, consultation and empowerment). This shows that a genuine commitment to engage the public does not necessarily involve handing over power to those who take part. The IAP2 spectrum takes
on board the concerns of Arnstein but does not share her almost utopian view about the inherent need to transfer power to citizens. Both of these frameworks provide ways to think about the goals of the Southbank Boulevard consultation process, although the IAP2 spectrum is a far more useful tool for creating and evaluating community engagement practices.

The spectrum demonstrates a variety of options that organisations have when engaging their communities. At one end of the spectrum, organisations can choose to simply inform their citizens of a decision that has or will be made. At the other, they can delegate decision-making to the public. The IAP2 spectrum also suggests a small range of techniques that can be used depending upon the level of involvement required of citizens, although it should be noted that some techniques can be used for a range of engagement levels.

The IAP2 spectrum is useful for thinking about the degree to which organisations want citizens to contribute to decision-making, and emphasises the need to be clear about the messages provided to the public. Nevertheless, it does little to address a range of other issues that are important to consider when undertaking community consultation. Among these is the manner in which ‘the public’ is invited to participate.
Table 1: IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inform</th>
<th>Consult</th>
<th>Involve</th>
<th>Collaborate</th>
<th>Empower</th>
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<tr>
<td>To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions</td>
<td>To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions</td>
<td>To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered</td>
<td>To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution</td>
<td>To place final decision-making in the hands of the public</td>
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<th>Promise to the Public</th>
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<tr>
<td>We will keep you informed</td>
<td>We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced that decision</td>
<td>We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision</td>
<td>We will look to you for direct advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decision to the maximum extent possible</td>
<td>We will implement what you decide</td>
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<th>Example techniques</th>
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<td>• Fact sheets</td>
<td>• Public comment</td>
<td>• Workshops</td>
<td>• Citizen juries</td>
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Methods for participant recruitment

Although recruitment of participants for community consultation can be undertaken in many different ways, there are only a few key options available to Councils when deciding who should take part, being selection, self-selection or random selection. These options are available for consultation with stakeholder groups (such as businesses, community groups or representative organisations) and the general residential population.

The first option is to select participants based on one or more characteristics. For instance, particular stakeholder groups may be chosen because they are seen to represent the interests of a group of people, organisation or cause. Alternatively, they may have particular expertise that will assist in making decisions. Selection of participants can also be appropriate when having one or more segments of the population (based on factors such as age, gender, occupation, education, knowledge or geographical location) is desirable. In each case, it is important to think about why certain groups or individuals are being included and excluded, and whether it is important to have a diverse range of representatives, or simply a diverse range of views. If it is critical that some groups participate, then it may be necessary to use personal methods of contact and even incentives to improve the chance that they will take part.

The second option is participant self-selection, which provides all people with an interest in an issue the opportunity to participate. In this way, no attempt is made to limit participation, beyond perhaps considerations based on citizenship status. The benefits of this form of recruitment are that all citizens or stakeholders with an interest are given the opportunity to take part, and can represent their own interests in whatever manner is provided. It is perhaps for this reason that self selection remains a very popular method for recruiting participants. Nevertheless, there is a significant drawback to any form of participant recruitment that encourages citizens to choose themselves. As Carson and Martin (1999: 56) have suggested about the traditional council advisory committee:

Inevitably, such committees attract the strongly interested and highly educated – those who want to change the way things are currently done and those who enjoy serving on a committee, talking, and making decisions. Meetings of advisory committees usually are held outside of business hours, so members are inevitably drawn from those free to attend…A portrait is therefore emerging of the usual committee member: educated, middle-aged, and male.

Clearly, the degree to which the characteristics of participants matters depends upon the aims of...
Consultation on the Southbank Boulevard Linear Park

the consultation exercise. If the aim of inviting participation is to simply inform citizens of a proposal or to seek new ideas, then it may not matter who provides input. Alternatively, if the aim is to understand what a cross-section or particular segment of the population thinks about a particular issue, then strategies involving self-selection are inadequate and some other form of participant selection should be considered. One such method is random selection.

Random selection works on the principle that citizens, organisations or groups have an equal chance of being selected, and is particularly valuable when other methods create the possibility of bias or conflict of interest. There are a number of ways in which random selection can be used – to make decisions directly, to judge opinions, or to choose decision-makers (Carson and Martin 1999: 14). For councils, the judgement of community opinion is probably the area where random selection can be most beneficial, and can be understood by thinking about the rationale used in opinion polls. Opinion polls do not require that everyone in the population needs to be consulted, as a relatively small sample of randomly selected participants can give an accurate result. The key is to choose the sample carefully to ensure that it has the same characteristics as the population as a whole. One way of doing this is to have a stratified sample that divides the general population into groups, and sets quotas for each group. A separate random sample must be selected from each of the subgroups, rather than just taking a single random sample from the entire group. The process is slightly more time consuming and will require a greater number of people to be surveyed, but this technique can be very valuable as it is likely to produce a more accurate result (CustomInsight 2006). If participation from some groups is initially low, it may also be necessary to follow up by contacting people personally to encourage them to participate. Otherwise, as Carson and Martin (1999: 26) note, policy makers may base their decisions on biased poll results.

It is important to note that all methods of participant recruitment involve an element of self selection, given people can always refuse to take part in any consultation process. Nevertheless, some forms of recruitment provide a much better chance of obtaining the input of particular segments of the population than others. These can be categorised as selection, self-selection and random selection, and can also be used in combination with each other at different stages of a consultation process. It is with this in mind that we move to the City of Melbourne’s consultation on a proposed new park for Southbank Boulevard, where important decisions were made regarding participant selection.
Strategic planning and Southbank – a short overview

Although the Southbank Arts precinct and waterfront have quickly become vibrant public spaces, development behind these areas has not created places that are appealing for residents, workers and visitors. As an article in The Age commented in 2003:

*Alas, most of Southbank is not an inviting spot for a passeggiata. Once you leave the glittering Southgate waterfront you quickly find yourself on grey boulevards where wind whistles past mini-marts and car dealerships, and empty chip buckets scuttle in the gutters* (Age 2003).

There has been some criticism by residents that Council and the State Government have failed to adequately plan, with the suburb’s development being driven by private developers showing little interest in creating enjoyable public spaces or community services. One Melbourne Councillor even suggested that for a number of reasons, the suburb’s new residents were faced with a ‘wasteland’ behind the wonderful arts precinct and cafe’s of the foreshore (Age 2003).

A number of policy documents have been produced by the Victorian Government, the City of Melbourne and the City of Port Phillip that relate to future planning for Southbank, which attempt to address a range of issues facing this quickly emerging suburb. These include *Melbourne 2030; City Plan 2010; the South Melbourne Central Structure Plan; the City of Melbourne Transport Strategy and the Metropolitan Transport Plan* (DSE 2006).

Although it is yet to be formally adopted by the Victorian Government and remains in draft form, the *Southbank Plan* (or Structure Plan) embodies many of the aims and objectives of these earlier strategic documents. The plan outlines a number of key issues as well six principles and six projects. The major issues identified for future development can be summarised as:

- **Improving the public environment**: Southbank’s public environment is to be repaired and improved to address the needs of workers, residents and visitors.
- **Supporting walking**: Walking is to be supported as the preferred means of access and a valued means of informal recreation throughout Southbank.
- **Developing community infrastructure**: Additional meeting places, community support facilities and other means of fostering local attachment and identity are to be provided.
- **Integrating intensive development**: All development in Southbank is to be integrated and complementary to the district as a whole (DSE 2006).
Six principles underpin planned improvement of the public environment of Southbank. The principles are:

- **Create an integrated walking network**: Southbank needs a network of convenient, attractive and safe walking routes.
- **Provide better public spaces**: Southbank needs an accessible, open space system with diverse opportunities for recreation and social and civic engagement.
- **Encourage complementary land use mixes**: Southbank needs to include activities that support each other and contribute to the quality and vitality of the public environment.
- **Encourage high quality built form**: All development in Southbank should contribute to the quality of the public environment and be respectful of neighbouring developments.
- **Improve the cycling and traffic network**: Southbank needs to achieve a better balance between vehicle access and sustainable transport including public transport, walking and cycling whilst recognising that the Southbank arterial roads and public transport network are important both locally and to the Melbourne and Victorian economies.
- **Coordinate parking provision and access**: Car parking throughout Southbank needs to balance accessibility by car with the long-term objectives of a sustainable, inner urban district (DSE 2006).

These six principles, which included a range of more specific objectives, were also accompanied by a goal of creating an ‘active street life’, which is ‘made up of people walking, sitting and bike riding in the public environment’ (DSE 2006). Six proposed projects were then outlined, one of which was the Southbank Boulevard open space link (or linear park) which embodied many of the principles in the Southbank Plan. Importantly, while the report was created by DSE and was thus an important factor driving the proposal from the Council’s point of view, it had not been officially endorsed by the state government when community consultation began on the Southbank Boulevard Linear Park in October 2005. Southbank Boulevard is marked with number 2 on the map below, while the suburb of Southbank is represented by the light area. The Royal Botanic Gardens are a short walk away on the eastern side of St Kilda Road. The other numbers on this map represent the location of the additional projects proposed in the Southbank Plan.

**Southbank Boulevard Linear Park**

Southbank Boulevard was created in 1990 as a traffic route between St Kilda Road and the CBD via Queens Bridge Street. Its variable width (30 to 53 metres) accommodates a grassed median, two traffic lanes in each direction,
and multiple turn lanes including left turn slip lanes at most intersections. Since the development of Freshwater Place (a new residential building) began in 2002, however, the river end of the boulevard has been closed, resulting in a reduction in the volume of traffic. Traffic volume is now considered low in proportion to the capacity of the wide roadway. In recent years, significant redevelopment has occurred around Southbank Boulevard, including new buildings housing the ABC, Fosters, and several apartment complexes. The Malthouse and Australian Centre for Contemporary Art are nearby along Sturt Street, while a new recital hall is proposed for the vacant Telecom site between Sturt and Dodds Streets on the south side of Southbank Boulevard (City of Melbourne 2005a). It is within this context that Council considered making some significant changes to the road and median of the boulevard.

As noted above, the Southbank Plan identifies the Southbank Boulevard Open Space Link as one of six proposed projects for Southbank, suggesting various benefits that could be forthcoming from changes designed to reduce traffic, increase open space and encourage cyclists away from the waterfront where they 'compete' for space with pedestrians. Further support for this project came from Council's CityPlan 2010, which recommended that council 'enhance the network of Melbourne's parks and gardens to include a wide range of diverse landscaped areas', and the need to develop Southbank Boulevard parkway (City of Melbourne, undated: 35). The Southbank Community Plan (2004) was less specific, but also highlighted the lack of public open space in the area.
Consultation on the Southbank Boulevard Linear Park

Figure 1: View from Yarra River side of City Road

Figure 2: Map of Southbank
Supporting the strategic documents was the view that there was a good opportunity to provide public open space at relatively little cost. A staff member from the Design and Culture Division stated, while ‘this parcel of land is not ideal…we do think we can do more with it’ (Design and Culture 2005/06). The project was also of interest to Council’s Parks Division, given their work on a public open space strategy to classify public open space. One of the existing criteria (which was under review) for the creation of public open space was that the area be at least 30 metres wide. Given the proposed park was considerably narrower at only 23 metres, the project was considered a ‘bit of a test case’ for what the community would accept and would be used to inform the development of a future classification (Design and Culture 2005/06).

Decision to undertake community consultation and details of proposal

Given the traffic implications of the proposal, there was a desire from Council’s traffic department in particular to undertake community consultation to assess community views (Design and Culture 2005/06). As a result, a presentation (Appendix 1) was made to Council’s Planning and Environment Committee on 5 July 2005 about the proposed plan. This sought to advise the Council of the proposal, and seek approval for community consultation to take place.

The proposal to alter the boulevard involved a number of key elements. As outlined in the presentation to Council, the current space includes ‘a grassed and treed median that is difficult to access by pedestrians and is too narrow and exposed to traffic to be a pleasant, usable public space.’ Moreover, despite providing an important local link that uses a large land area, it was described as ‘a disorienting space’ that ‘fails to provide a civic focus for Southbank.’ The following changes were proposed:

- Widen the centre median from 14 to 23 metres.
- Increase the overall area of public space from approximately 2500 sq.m to 4350 sq.m.
- Create a clearway in peak periods during weekdays from 7am to 9am, and from 4.30pm to 6.30pm.
- Create 2 additional car parking spaces in Southbank Boulevard and 6 additional spaces in Kavanagh Street (north side).
- 18 car parking spaces will be lost during clearway periods.
- The new park will include low hedges and a fence adjacent to the road to provide a scene of containment for users of the park and safety for children (Planning and Environment Committee July 2005).

Importantly, the proposal also included the loss of a traffic lane on each side of the boulevard to allow these changes to occur. The Planning and Environment Committee were informed in July...
2005 that the project would cost around $500,000, although detailed analysis by external consultants in December 2005 raised the estimated cost of the project to $3.9 million for base scope works, plus an additional $330,300 for ‘optional extras’.

The report to Council included an attachment from consultants, stating that this project was one of six identified in the draft Southbank Plan. The attachment outlined a number of key benefits of the proposal, including the creation of an attractive public place for recreational use; improved pedestrian amenity, safety and confidence; support for sustainable transport; and a distinctive formal urban space. Also included in the report were a number of descriptions and photographs of overseas precedents that ‘help to illustrate the potential amenity that can be provided in Southbank Boulevard’, such as a small park in Suasalito, California. A sketch of the area was also produced, showing an artist’s impression of what Southbank Boulevard could become. The sketch was also included in the subsequent community consultation undertaken by Council as well as the various drafts of the Southbank Plan. The images of Suasalito and the sketch are shown below.
Figure 3: Artist’s impression of Southbank Linear Park

Figure 4: Park in Suasalito, California
Following the presentation from the Council officer, the Planning and Environment Committee agreed that the plan should be ‘put out for public consultation’ using a public meeting as its primary method (City of Melbourne 2005a).

Prior to the consultation process, a media release on the 7th July 2005 showed there was strong support for the proposal among some councillors. The Lord Mayor John So was reported as saying that due to the history of the suburb, public space was ‘badly needed’ but would be addressed in ‘new and inventive ways’ by the Southbank Boulevard park proposal.

Moreover:

*The Southbank Boulevard park will create a delightful space for residents to enjoy as well as forming a pedestrian link between the Kings Domain gardens, St Kilda Rd and Queensbridge Square. This sort of design has been very successful in similar situations around the world and I will be interested to hear the community’s response to this idea* (City of Melbourne 2005b).

The media release also quoted the Planning and Environment Committee chair Cr Catherine Ng, who said the planned new park was a response to the community’s needs:

*The population of Southbank has grown rapidly in recent years and the Council is responding by creating new open space and community facilities. Many of the residents live in high rise towers without gardens and so open space is especially important* (City of Melbourne 2005b).

Following these public statements, a consultation strategy was developed to create a more extensive consultation strategy than staff initially outlined to Councillors. This was developed by the Design and Culture Division using the Council’s consultation guidelines, while a communications plan was also created by staff from Marketing and Cultural Affairs.

**Consultation strategy**

To assist staff in undertaking community consultation, Council has Consultation Guidelines that include a ten step worksheet to ensure consultation programs ‘are clear and consistent – and effective’ (City of Melbourne 2001: 47). Council staff involved in the Southbank consultation worked through each step, outlining the various elements of the project and the actions required to make it happen.

Staff identified a number of key objectives in their consultation strategy that involved elements of both informing and consulting the community – and could be viewed as indicative of the second level outlined in the IAP2 spectrum. The objectives were to:

- Gauge the level of support for the project.
- Understand the nature, severity and implications of any concerns, and the extent to which these are shared.
• Involve the locals in the decision-making process. This should contribute to community engagement and to the long-term success of the project. The Council's consultation guidelines also state that context and constraints should be outlined. Among the constraints mentioned were that the Southbank Structure Plan had not been endorsed by the State Government, a factor beyond the control of Council. But perhaps more importantly for the consultation efforts, it was acknowledged that there was a ‘lack of cohesive community and difficulty contacting apartment residents’.

The consultation guidelines then require that the relevant target groups for the consultation (defined in the Consultation Guidelines as everyone affected) should be identified and given the opportunity to participate. As a consequence, the following groups were highlighted in the consultation plan:

**General public**
- City of Melbourne residents and commuters (students, employees and visitors, particularly those with addresses on or adjacent to Southbank Boulevard)
- Businesses and companies operating within the City of Melbourne (particularly those with addresses on or adjacent to Southbank Boulevard)

**Government**
- Victorian Local Government Association
- State Government of Victoria (Department of Infrastructure, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development)

**Business and industry**
- Citylink Melbourne, Metlink, National Bus Company, RACV, Victoria Taxi, Directorate, Transurban

**Academia and education**
- Planning Institute Australia (Vic), Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Vic), Urban Development Institute of Australia, Engineers Australia (Vic)

**Community groups and other**
- Bicycle Victoria, Tourism Victoria, Environmentally Sustainable Development Industry, Victorian Transport Association, Melbourne Bicycle Users Group, Public Transport Users Association, Motorcycles Riders Association Australia, Disability Advisory Committee, Australian Greenhouse Office

**Internal City of Melbourne**
- Lord Mayor, Councillors, management, key departments of Council
Step 5 of the consultation guidelines ask staff to identify the techniques to be used to implement the consultation. To reach the general public, a public meeting, ‘documents for inspection at MCC’ and ‘MCC Council Committee meeting’ were identified as appropriate, although a survey, website and other means for communication were added after further discussion between council staff. For other stakeholders such as community groups, government and business, individual meetings or conversations were considered appropriate.

After identifying the target groups and consultation techniques, a range of other steps were followed, as suggested in the consultation guidelines. These included the development of a communication strategy, and consideration of timeframe, resources, responsibilities and monitoring, feedback and evaluation processes.

A key issue confronting the consultation process that was not addressed in the consultation plan was an acknowledgement that this particular consultation involved a familiar problem when changes are planned to any area. As one staff member stated prior to the consultation process beginning:

*The problem we will face is its easy to get negative views, we know where these views will come from already, and they will be the loudest. Those that support the project will be the hard to reach, as it's the negative people who you hear from. So we need to get to the local residents who support it, and the out of to owners may not, so we need to speak to them too* (Design and Culture 2005/06).

This statement is a further indication of Council officers’ desire to obtain a good understanding of community views – not only from the ‘usual suspects’ who may be opposed, but also from citizens who do not feel passionately about the proposal but could support it if sufficiently informed or appropriately engaged. It also illustrates a certain apprehension about the consultation process, given the possibility that negative reactions could disrupt a project that was strongly supported by Council staff, elected representatives and the state government.
 Conducting consultation

Publicity about the Council’s decision to consider the Southbank Boulevard proposal occurred following a media release on 7 July 2005 outlining the Council’s decision made two days before. The media release resulted in an article in St Kilda’s ‘3004 News’ published before details of the public meeting were known. It is perhaps for this reason, that it did not suggest there would be opportunities for residents’ input.

Publicity of the proposal and the public meeting occurred following a media release on the 14th October 2005. On this occasion, an article was placed in the MX on the 24th of October 2005 inviting people to attend the meeting, and phone or visit the Council website for more information. Letters were also sent to 670 residents and ratepayers in the area immediately surrounding Southbank Boulevard. The map below indicates the area where invitations were sent.

As the map illustrates, letters outlining the proposal and inviting people to attend a community consultation session on 27 October 2005 were sent to a range of business and residential addresses close to Southbank Boulevard. These included the ABC, Fosters and the National Gallery of Victoria, as well as 3 residential apartment buildings - Southside Garden Apartments, Southpoint Apartments and Southbank Condos.

Figure 5: Map of area where personal invitations to public meeting were distributed
A brief outline of the proposal was also provided to the 27 residents that attended the ‘Working Together for Melbourne Forum’, whose focus community was South Yarra, East Melbourne and Southbank. At this forum, held on the 26th October 2005, residents were invited to fill out a survey form and attend the public meeting the following evening to hear more about the project. The November Melbourne News also included an invitation for people to comment upon the plan through the online submission form.

The public meeting

The public meeting was held at the Malthouse on the evening of 27th October 2005. Twenty-one people attended the meeting, some of whom were representatives of the local stakeholder groups identified by Council. I also attended to observe the process.

The meeting was chaired by representatives from the Design and Culture Division and a consultant to the project. After introducing themselves, Council staff outlined the Southbank Community Plan and the Southbank Structure Plan, which had led to the proposal. Staff stated that the public meeting was the first of a series of consultation exercises that also include key stakeholders such as VicRoads, who must approve the project. Furthermore, they stated that although the Councillors were ‘supportive enough to agree to public consultation, they haven’t made their minds up yet and will be interested to see what the public reaction is to the proposal.’

A visual presentation was given by the consultant that outlined the key elements of the project. This included a map showing major traffic connections around the area, and another highlighting the limited open space currently available. The consultant also discussed the opportunities available to widen streets and make them more pedestrian friendly.

Photographs of the area illustrated how the space is currently designed for traffic travelling at high speed, but is not favourable for walking or passive recreation. Furthermore, the consultant argued that the current space does not have bike lanes, does not offer disabled access at tram stops, and is ‘wasted space in a high density precinct.’ He pointed out the opportunity to reduce the traffic lanes and increase the number of bicycles and pedestrians moving through the area, while making the current park more useable for citizens. He also stated that this was the largest open space in Southbank and thus it was important that it be better utilised.

A number of precedents were displayed, illustrating areas in Melbourne and overseas that are quiet and enjoyable public spaces surrounded by roads. A map of the existing space was then overlayed with the proposed new plan. This showed the proposed wider pedestrian area, and the increase in car parking in off peak times that
is offset by reductions in peak time parking on the street. Following this a more detailed slide was shown illustrating the traffic and parking impacts, which included a decrease in the carriageway and a loss of ten parking places.

During and after this information was presented, citizens asked a number of questions and raised concerns about a variety of issues. These included:

- The ability of buses to move through the area
- Likelihood of off-street parking restrictions being adhered to
- The amount of use the new park would receive; and
- The willingness of people to ride their bikes along the area, given the close proximity to the river.

Discussion was briefly halted while further pictures of potential changes to the area were displayed, which included potential hedges, tree planting, seating and sculptures. The organisers then opened up the meeting to further discussion. While a number of people expressed strong support for the project, others continued to have reservations. Among the issues raised by those present included:

- A concern that the community consultation did not involve enough people, such as those living in St Kilda Road who 'wouldn’t be too happy about this' due to alterations in traffic flow;
- Apprehension about the impacts of traffic alterations to people south of the river;
- A question about whether children’s play equipment had been considered; and
- The safety of children.

In response to the traffic issues, the organisers responded that they were 'not traffic engineers' and that VicRoads would undertake an assessment provided the Councillors supported the proposal. Similarly, further assessment of the potential uses of the area would be undertaken at a later stage to consider options such as play equipment for children. Council staff then summed up the key changes that would occur if the proposal went ahead, and addressed some of the concerns that had been raised by the meeting.

One resident felt the number of attendees was disappointing, leading the Design and Culture team to agree that a copy of the plan would be available at the Town Hall. The team also stated that 'we’re happy for people to put up signs in shops or whatever to get the word out.' A survey (see below) was then passed around for citizens to fill out, which was made available following a request, at the Council chambers. People were also informed that the survey would be available on the internet, and that the Design and Culture team, the local place manager or their Councillors were also happy to be contacted regarding any concerns or comments.
Stakeholder discussions

Face to face meetings or telephone discussions also formed part of the consultation methodology. Interviews were undertaken with many of the stakeholders outlined in the consultation and communications plans. The information obtained from stakeholders such as Fosters and the ABC was then presented to supplement the survey analysis with regard to parking, while input from Vic Roads, Melbourne Bus Link and the RACV was included to inform Council about other traffic issues (Environment Committee May 2006: 6-7).

Council website and survey

A survey was used as a complementary method of consultation. The survey was provided online at the Council website, and a link was also provided from the Southbank Residents’ Association. The Council website highlighted existing conditions in Southbank Boulevard and some specific details of the proposal. The attached survey aimed to address two primary issues:

- The degree to which people would appreciate the provision of increased and enhanced open space; and
- The acceptability of reduced road space – particularly the loss of on-street parking at peak hours on week days.

Views were also invited on the naming of the linear park.

The survey asked the following questions:

1. Do you think the new linear park will be a useful place for recreation? (yes/no)
2. Would you walk to the park from your home? (yes/no)
3. Please describe how you would make use of an open space such as this one.
4. Is there anything in particular you would like to see included in the park?
5. Would the proposal improve the experience of travelling by foot, bicycle or car along Southbank Boulevard? Park’ or ‘Alfred Felton Reserve, after Alfred Felton, benefactor to the National Gallery of Victoria.
6. Do you consider the reduced parking at peak hours acceptable? (yes/no)
7. Would you value the increase in on-street parking at other times? (yes/no)
8. Please provide comments on the effects of the proposal on transport and/or movement through the precinct – traffic, parking, public transport, cycling or walking.
9. The proposed names for the new park are ‘Alfred Felton
Southbank Boulevard (local resident or worker/ local business or institution/ road user/ other).

11. Please provide the City of Melbourne with your contact details (optional) (name, street address, suburb, postcode).

Following the completion of the survey, Council staff reported the results to the Environment and Planning Committee on 11 May 2006. A total of 29 completed response forms were received, together with 7 other written submissions. To the extent that interviewees addressed the questions on the response form, their verbal responses were included in the statistics collated (Environment Committee May 2006: 5). Councillors were thus aware that the survey results were made up using responses from the survey form, written submissions and one-on-one interviews with stakeholders.

Most of the key questions required a yes/ no response, while others asked people to provide a written response. The following results were presented to Council for each of the questions with a yes/ no answer:
Table 2: Survey questions with a yes/no answers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Do you think the new linear park will be a useful place for recreation?</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Would you walk to the park from your home?</td>
<td>51.5%</td>
<td>48.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Would the proposal improve the experience of travelling by foot, bicycle or car along Southbank Boulevard?</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6) Do you consider the reduced parking at peak hours acceptable?</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7) Would you value the increase in on-street parking at other times?</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As suggested in the survey aims, the first group of questions dealt with the park as a place for recreation. The results indicated reasonably good support for the park as a place for recreation, while around half of the survey respondents suggested they would walk to the park from their home. As the report to Council noted, however, this question did not mention walking from one’s office. Most survey respondents also believed the proposal would improve the experience of moving along Southbank Boulevard, although the report to Council also noted that the positive responses mostly came from pedestrians or cyclists, rather than road users (Environment Committee May 2006: 5).

The survey also asked people to describe how they would ‘make use of an open space such as this one.’ While the Council report did not specifically mention responses to this question, analysis of the survey results shows that people supportive of the plan would use the space for activities including reading, meeting friends, sunbaking, walking, resting, playing with children and walking dogs. A second descriptive question asked people whether ‘there is anything in particular you would like to see included in the park.’ Survey results provided a range of ideas, some of which were included in the report to Council as ‘Suggestions for Design Development.’ Among the ideas was the provision of toilets and shelter, all-weather seating and native plants (Environment Committee May 2006: 6).

The second group of survey questions related to parking. As the results in Table 2 indicate, about two thirds of people considered the loss of peak hour parking acceptable, while a similar number valued the increase in on-street parking at other times. A further descriptive question asked respondents to comment on the ‘effects of the proposal on transport and/ or movement through the
precinct – traffic, parking, public transport, cycling and walking.’ The Council report noted that answers to this question ‘varied from strongly negative to strongly positive. Several respondents expressed concern at increased congestion at peak times, although the initial traffic analysis shows the proposal to be quite acceptable in this respect’ (Environment Committee May 2006: 6).

Town Hall display
The public meeting resulted in the creation of a display comprising drawings and a project outline at the Town Hall reception desk between 9 November and 9 December 2005. The display people were also encouraged to complete and return a survey prior to 30 November 2005 (Environment Committee May 2006: 5).
Decision making

As indicated above, Council’s Environment Committee received a report from the Design and Culture Division at their meeting on 11 May 2006. The report to Council included a combination of survey data and comments from various citizens and stakeholders. The report concluded that:

A majority of respondents is supportive of the proposal. On this basis, it is recommended that the project proceed to design development. The design should be developed in response to the feedback received (Environment Committee May 2006: 8).

The report also noted that the community should be informed of the outcomes of the consultation process and further project development. The Environment Committee accepted the recommendation, and did not discuss the issue further. A media release was then produced on the 19th May 2006, outlining the findings of the survey.
Comments on the Southbank Boulevard consultation

In making their recommendations, Council staff placed considerable emphasis upon the outcomes of the community consultation process. As such, it seems worthwhile to reflect upon the objectives of the consultation process and whether these were achieved, bearing in mind that good engagement practice (as outlined by the IAP2 spectrum) should involve clear aims and objectives; a consistent message to the public; and tools that are appropriate for the policy problem being addressed.

It can be argued that the aims of the Southbank Boulevard consultation and subsequent messages to the public were somewhat contradictory. On the one hand, it is clear that there was considerable support for the project from within Council (both staff and Councillors) and DSE (including the Minister for Planning). Therefore, the value of consultation was in discovering community and stakeholder views about some of the more detailed aspects of the project, but it was not designed to fundamentally challenge whether the new park (modified or not) would be built. This view is reflected in the second aim in the consultation plan, which was to ‘understand the nature, severity and implications of any concerns, and the extent to which these are shared.’ It is further matched by the survey questions, which asked for opinions about a range of issues related to the project, such as parking and park use. However, contrary to the first object of the consultation plan—to ‘gauge the level of support for the project’—residents were not asked whether they supported the proposal through a question such as ‘do you think the Southbank Boulevard linear park should be built as currently proposed’. Similarly, respondents were not alerted to its estimated cost on the internet or as part of the survey. This is vital information when citizens are asked to make an informed assessment. This point was considered by one staff member involved in the project, when he said:

So I think they are the two hurdles that the project has got to get over, there has got to be an actual demand, a value perceived in spending all this money in providing this open space, and the costs involved in achieving that have to be acceptable (Design and Culture, 2005/06).

For these reasons, the recommendation from Council staff that the project should proceed to design stage because ‘the majority of respondents is supportive of the proposal’ could seem confused or even disingenuous (Environment Committee May 2006: 8). It also ignores the important role that planning staff have in providing their expert opinion to Councillors about the validity of any proposed project.
Although there was confusion about the role and importance of consultation in the recommendation to Council, it is clear that one objective of the Southbank Boulevard consultation process was to inform and consult (rather than ‘collaborate’ with or ‘empower’) the community, as the IAP2 spectrum indicates. The aims of the project should, therefore, have been quite specific and related only to the second consultation aim - to identify the members of the community and understand their views about the key questions in the survey. The first issue was addressed when a number of target groups (or preferred participants) were nominated in the consultation plan. The groups identified included six categories of stakeholders. These were:

- City of Melbourne residents living on or adjacent to Southbank Boulevard
- Other City of Melbourne residents
- City of Melbourne commuters
- City of Melbourne businesses on or adjacent to Southbank Boulevard
- Other City of Melbourne businesses
- Visitors

These groups were identified either by their proximity to Southbank Boulevard and the City (in the case of residents, nearby residents/businesses and visitors) or a particular interest they share (commuters and transport). A range of other ‘stakeholders’ or ‘corporate citizens’ were also listed under a range of headings, and included:

- Government agencies (e.g. Department of Sustainability and the Environment)
- Transport related industry (e.g. RACV)
- Professional Associations (e.g. Planning Institute Australia (Vic)
- Community groups and associations (e.g. Bicycle Victoria)

Having identified the target population(s), it is clear that a number of choices were made regarding how these groups would be informed of the opportunity to participate, and how input would subsequently be assessed. As suggested above, many of the stakeholders in the second list were specifically selected and then contacted to discuss the proposal by telephone or face to face. As such, Council was almost guaranteed of obtaining feedback from these stakeholders, who came from a variety of institutions with differing perspectives on the issues involved. Obtaining the input of the other six groups of citizens identified in the first list, however, involved self-selection. That is, residents, businesses and visitors were informed through a variety of means about the opportunity to attend the public meeting or visit Council’s website to learn more about the proposed plan. The central concern, as the Council’s consultation guidelines suggest, was to provide an opportunity for participation, rather than ensure
that those attending were representative of the target populations. So who took up the opportunities provided, and what was the role that each consultation mechanism played in determining community opinion?

As the description of the consultation process indicated, the public meeting was the first opportunity for residents and ratepayers to be informed about the proposal and provide their feedback. Following the invitation to all Melbourne residents, ratepayers and visitors (through the MX), and the letter to nearby residents, 21 people chose to attend the public meeting. According to the attendance list, the majority of participants were residents, while a small number were representing local businesses. Although no demographic information was obtained, it was clear from observations of the meeting that Council had successfully engaged older residents or ‘empty nesters’, while participation from younger residents was extremely limited.¹

The primary role of the public meeting was to inform the community about the project, and obtain verbal feedback (or qualitative information) from those who attended. This is a frequent use of the public meeting, given they are:

*...familiar, established ways for people to come together to express their opinions, hear a public speaker, or plan a strategy. They can build a feeling of community and attendance levels provide an indicator of the level of interest within a community on a particular issue (URP Toolbox 2006).*

The view that the public meeting provides an indicator of interest was also one shared by some Council staff, although what level of attendance indicates high or low interest is clearly very subjective and may depend upon factors such as the timing of the meeting, recruitment methods and the nature of the proposal. Importantly, although the public meeting elicited differing views and suggestions, it did not provide a way for Council staff to quantify community feeling. It was also difficult to assess who was putting forward particular views:

*There were some things that people said where it was relevant whether they were a resident or not. I made some notes about who it was that was saying something. But by and large there is not going to be that correlation between what was said and who said it. We have got a list of attendees but you can’t really correlate between them. There are three that I know of that were non-residents and two others that I don’t know what their status is at the moment (Design and Culture 2005/06).*

¹ Only two participants appeared to be in their 30s, with the remainder seemingly 50 or above.
As this staff member suggests, it would have been preferable to know who was providing input, particularly given that great care taken was taken to outline the desired participants in the consultation plan.

At the public meeting people were also invited to fill out a survey or consider the issues further and fill it out on-line. Of the two methods used, the survey therefore, provided the best way of quantifying or assessing who was contributing to the consultation, and what their views were – that is, determining community opinion.

Seven attendees filled out the survey after the public meeting, while twenty two internet surveys were completed. According to Council staff, many of the internet responses also came from people who attended the public meeting, although there can be no certainty about this. Seven verbal responses (from stakeholders) were also received, and to the extent these answered the survey questions, they were included in the report to Council. The survey data asked people about their role in relation to Southbank (local resident and worker, local business or institution, road user, other) and their contact details, although no demographic information (such as age or gender) was sought. The data reveals that a mix of people contributed to the survey results, represented in table 3. It is clear that Council staff had obtained input from twenty seven local residents and workers and five local businesses. As such, they had successfully gained the majority of the input from local people as they had hoped. Three people identified as road users and three chose ‘other’, one of whom was a resident of another suburb within the City of Melbourne.
Table 3: Survey respondents and role in relation to Southbank Boulevard

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role in relation to Southbank Boulevard</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local resident or worker</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local business or institution</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Road user</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: where people stated they fitted two categories, they have been included in the first named.

Another way of looking at these results is to compare the target populations outlined in the first list of the consultation worksheet, with those who actually contributed to the survey. If we assume that the ‘local resident or worker’ and ‘local business’ category (in the survey) is equivalent to ‘on or adjacent to Southbank Boulevard’ (as suggested in the first target group), then Council obtained survey feedback from the following of its target populations. Table 4 illustrates that while the consultation was able to obtain local views, only one Melbourne resident outside the local area provided input. Furthermore, no input was received from other Melbourne businesses or visitors to the City. In this regard, Council could be a little disappointed they were not able to obtain the views of these groups, although the degree to which this affected the survey outcome is an open question.

Given the survey was used to quantify public opinion, the size of the sample and the characteristics of those who responded are also worth consideration. It is generally accepted that sample sizes of around 400 are required to give a response that is statistically reliable for large populations, while a sample of around 100 is adequate for much smaller populations (such as that of the 670 nearby residents). As such, it is unlikely that the small sample obtained in the Southbank Boulevard consultation would have accurately

Table 4: Target populations reached

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target Population</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Residents living on or adjacent to Southbank Boulevard</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other City of Melbourne residents</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City of Melbourne commuters</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Businesses on or adjacent to Southbank Boulevard</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other City of Melbourne businesses</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visitors</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Consultation on the Southbank Boulevard Linear Park

represented community opinion on the range of issues raised. Consider for example, that 16 people (or 62.5%) responded ‘yes’ and 12 (38.5%) responded ‘no’ to the fifth question, which asked ‘would the proposal improve the experience of travelling by foot, bicycle or car along Southbank Boulevard?’ This would appear a key question, given a primary aim of the proposal was to create a more pleasant environment for pedestrians and cyclists in particular. Yet if two people had expressed a different view then the response would have been 50% suggesting an improvement, and 50% suggesting either no improvement or perhaps (given the structure of the question) a deterioration in the travelling experience. Had six people moved from ‘yes’ to ‘no’, then only 36% of people would appear to have supported this important aspect of the project. It is also worth noting that one person responded to the survey twice, showing how easily responses could have been manipulated.

Concentrating on the actual participants and what we know about them, it seems likely that the majority of survey respondents were recruited from the public meeting. As a consequence, the majority of survey respondents were probably residents that fall into the ‘empty nester’ category identified in the Inner City Apartment Residents’ Survey (Metropolis 2004), although without some more detailed demographic information (which could have followed the survey questions), it is impossible to know for sure. Nevertheless, very few would appear to have come from the other main population groups identified in this survey and the 2000 Census, being university students and young professionals. For some surveys it may not be important to obtain a representative sample of the relevant population – be it the 670 residents and ratepayers on or adjacent to Southbank Boulevard, the estimated 7000 residents and ratepayers of Southbank, or the estimated 60 000 population of the City. In this case, however, it seems that a persons’ age and residential status may have increased the chances of them holding a particular view about the proposal. As a report commissioned by Council discovered in 2000, ‘older residents were less likely to make regular use of the City parks and gardens, as were owner occupiers, compared to renters’ (BIS Shrapnel 2000). It seems that Council can, therefore, have some confidence that the group they consulted were potentially the least likely to favour the Southbank Boulevard proposal, given the concerns expressed about the amount of use the park would receive. The more important point to consider, however, is that opinions are likely to vary between population groups on these issues and that obtaining a more representative sample of the population may have produced a significantly different result. This
also makes it vital to know who has contributed their views.
Improving community consultation

Drawing any conclusions from one case study clearly has limitations, as it is unlikely this case is representative of all consultation undertaken within Council. It is also worth noting that no consultation process is ‘perfect’ as community consultation is an inexact science, and many variables are often beyond the control of those organising the consultation process. Nevertheless, this case does raise a number of issues that Council should consider in the future when consulting with the residents of Southbank and the broader population of the City.

Irrespective of the role citizen opinions were to play in the recommendation to Council, it is clear that there was a desire to obtain input from a wide variety of the citizens and stakeholders about the project. This may have been driven by a concern expressed in the consultation manual that everyone affected by the proposal should have the opportunity to take part, or the initial unease that those with negative views would ‘be the loudest’. Either way, the process chosen was only partially successful in achieving its goals, with some significant sections of the population unwilling or unable to participate, and the possibility that those who did take part were the least likely to use the new facility. Although the reasons for the non-participation of many individuals are unclear, a number of key issues do not appear to have been adequately considered in the consultation methodology, and which would have improved the chances of gaining a better understanding of ‘community’ views.

What are the goals of consultation and are they consistent?

Perhaps the most fundamental issue that Council must address when undertaking community consultation is whether consultation processes are created or their results used, to legitimise decisions that have already been made. While different staff within Council are likely to hold varied views about the rationale for consultation processes, one commented when interviewed that ‘nine times out of ten the decision has already been made’. Consultation may, therefore, simply be used to learn about specific aspects of a policy or project, but its results will be unlikely to alter whether the project takes place. This is a legitimate use of public consultation, as citizens and stakeholders can provide local knowledge and a new perspective on projects and policies. The key, as the IAP2 spectrum demonstrates, is to provide a clear and consistent message to the public about the role of the consultation process in making a decision.

Developing a clear a consistent message requires Council to know
why consultation is required and how the information obtained will be used in any recommendations to Councillors. As the Southbank Boulevard case illustrates, it is important to not only outline consultation aims, but also ensure that they do not lead to confusion when research questions are developed. For example, each of the Southbank Boulevard consultation aims could have lead to a vastly different process being developed. The aim of ‘understanding the nature, severity and implications of any concerns, and the extent to which these are shared’ was responsible for the type of questions asked in the survey, which ‘tested’ whether the park would be used for recreation, walked to and so on. Moreover, given these questions did not fundamentally challenge whether the park was to be built, staff may have been satisfied to hear from the small and unrepresentative group of participants at the public meeting, and obtain a low survey response rate from an equally unrepresentative ‘public’. If the aim, however, was to ‘gauge the level of support for the project’, then arguably a different group of questions should have been asked. It would also have increased the importance of obtaining a more representative sample of participants, particularly if different sections of the population are more likely than others to use the park (or perhaps, drive a car or ride a bicycle).

Does it matter who participates?

A key question linked to the identification of the goals of any consultation process is whether it matters who participates. For some issues, Councillors and staff may feel obtaining the opinions of any citizen or stakeholder would assist in achieving the project aims, on the basis that citizens may have thought of issues, problems or solutions that have not been previously identified. Thus consultation may be ‘additively valuable’, given people may think of information that a single individual or staff member may not have. Alternatively, if discussion takes place then consultation may also be ‘multiplicatively’ valuable, enabling creative solutions to be found through discussion and reflection (Fearon 1998: 50).

In the case of Southbank Boulevard, it seems that staff regarded the opinions of key stakeholders as particularly important, and thus they were contacted individually to discuss the project. Furthermore, given the large range of target groups identified in the consultation plan, it seems staff certainly hoped that their other desired participants (such as non-local City of Melbourne residents and visitors) would take part. Nevertheless, they were also aware there was a low likelihood that they would achieve their consultation aim of widespread participation. As one staff member stated about public meetings:
It’s hard to predict who will turn up or what they will say. In my limited experience you don’t get many people to these things, one I was involved with earlier this year we got 6 people along and yet 18 had RSVP’d. I think we will get between 10 and 60 people, not sure who they will be (Design and Culture 2005/06).

The focus groups with a broad cross-section of staff (held in June and July 2005) demonstrated awareness about the limitations of consultation processes such as public meetings, including the low attendance of groups such young adults, students, and people from a non-English speaking background. The Southbank Boulevard case is another illustration that methods such as public meetings will only provide Council with the opinions of those willing or able to participate in a meeting – they will not give any indication of what the remainder of the population thinks about an issue. For this reason, staff should carefully consider how important it is to engage a wide variety of people, particularly if meetings are used as a way of obtaining further participation (through a survey or some other means) from those who choose to attend.

Who should participate?

Assuming it is important that particular individuals or groups participate, Council should then identify the desired target population, recognising that there can be multiple ‘publics’ that may be consulted. The Southbank Boulevard consultation process is an excellent illustration of this, given numerous target populations were identified. It does not appear, however, that staff decided which of these ‘publics’ should be recruited or represented, and how many participants were required to satisfy their project aims. For instance, was it more important to obtain views from the 670 residents and ratepayers living on or near Southbank Boulevard, rather than a percentage of the 60 000 City of Melbourne residents? Similarly, how many of the City’s daily visitors and workers should have been consulted, if at all, given they may not be citizens but may use the facilities at a new park? While it can be difficult to obtain the views of some target populations, making a judgement about issues such as these ensures that consultation methods can then be devised to increase the chances of participation from the relevant segments of the population.

How should views be considered or evaluated?

Another question that arises from Southbank Boulevard and needs to be considered when consultation processes are designed is how the input of various groups or individuals should be assessed. It is clear that the analysis of the survey results treated all responses in the same manner. But this does raise the issue whether for instance, the opinion of a local resident should be given the same weight as the owner of a business
with hundreds of employees who work near the park - particularly if results are to be quantified and ‘public opinion’ is being sought. Importantly, there are alternatives to the choice made for the Southbank Boulevard consultation in both the analysis of consultation outcomes and the creation of the process. For instance, one option is to analyse any results by separating the views of individuals from those claiming to represent certain interests, such as a ratepayer association or business. Alternatively, some consultation practices create a working group of the various stakeholders or interest groups, and use their input to shape a subsequent community consultation process in which individual citizens are the sole target group. This can help to engage stakeholders and build a commitment to the process, while ensuring that stakeholder views have been taken into account before citizens have an opportunity to provide their input (Rowe and Frewer 2004).

What is known about the target population to assist consultation strategies?

If particular groups are being targeted for consultation or a representative sample of the population is being sought, it is important to gain a good understanding of the characteristics of citizens and stakeholders. Staff that already work closely with specific communities (such as place managers) will have an excellent understanding of the characteristics of its residents and the key associations and groups, or may choose to use a more formal stakeholder analysis tool such as is CLIP (see DSE’s Community Engagement Planning workbook). However, for some consultation types, obtaining more detailed demographic information may also prove beneficial. While the Census may prove extremely helpful in some more established suburbs, its utility is likely to decline in the years following publication, particularly in Southbank which is growing rapidly. It is perhaps for this reason that in 2005 Council jointly commissioned the Inner City Apartment Residents’ Survey, which provides some excellent information about the residents of Southbank and other inner city areas. Using this information alone, Council staff would have been able to aim towards a representative sample of residents (or representatives) knowing for instance, that:

- The majority (53%) of Southbank/ St Kilda Road residents are young adults aged 20-35 years
- Middle aged and older adults (46-75 years) make up 20% of the population

The information contained in this report (and the Census) could also have been useful for developing consultation strategies by providing further insight into the characteristics of the people living in inner city apartments. While this requires making some assumptions
about the behaviour of individuals and groups, knowing the following about Southbank residents may have assisted in shaping consultation strategies:

- 22% of residents over 15 years are studying full time
- 46.7% of residents speak a language other than English at home
- 76% have internet access at home, yet 73.9% never access the Council website
- 69% of residents have lived at their current address for less than 2 years
- 58% of residents are professionals or associate professionals
- Only 18% do not have a qualification past year 12

As the report and this information suggests, Southbank is made up of a large student population, many of whom are from overseas. The other main population groups are young professionals and a group of middle aged and older residents referred to as ‘empty nesters’ in the Inner City Apartment Residents Survey. People generally do not stay at their current residence very long, although often they remain in other inner city areas unless they are returning overseas or perhaps intending to have children. The levels of formal education are very high and the majority of residents are professionals or associate professionals. It is probably for this reason that the 2001 Census found that people in the City of Melbourne worked much longer hours than the wider Melbourne population (Brackertz, Zwart et al. 2005, Appendix). Importantly, while internet use is high, very few people ever access Council’s website.

These and other characteristics available in the survey and the Census (as well as past experience) can alert staff to the likely success of particular consultation strategies. For instance, while a public meeting will often obtain the input of older residents, visitors or younger residents would seem much less likely to take part in this form of consultation. The long hours worked by many residents could also reduce the likelihood some people (such as young professionals) would participate in an evening public meeting.

Similarly, although internet use at home is high, the low visitation to the Council website could indicate that some other means of delivering the survey (such as a Census-style drop off and pick up arrangement used by for the Inner City Apartment Resident survey) may be necessary. Alternatively, incentives (such as movie tickets) may also be required to encourage a good response rate. Clearly, the choice of mechanism will depend upon the resources available (including funding, staff time and experience), however, there is no shortage of engagement mechanisms that can be used for different purposes and with different groups of people. For instance, DSE’s Community Engagement Planning workbook has 68 different community
engagement strategies. The key is to find strategies that are appropriate for the exercise being undertaken and the groups being targeted, as stated in the DSE community engagement manuals and City of Melbourne consultation guidelines. For extremely costly projects such as Southbank Boulevard, using the best available strategies would appear easy to justify.
Conclusion and recommendations

The consultation undertaken at Southbank Boulevard provides an opportunity to discuss a range of issues that impact upon the ability of Council to effectively engage with its residents. These may be viewed as quite specific to the new and rapidly expanding suburb of Southbank. However, analysis of the consultation practices used for Southbank Boulevard does allow for broader consideration of how Council consults with all its residents, ratepayers and visitors that make up a diverse population with a plurality of interests and voices.

Community engagement can be seen to involve a range of different activities, depending upon the aims and objectives established by Council. A number of models have been created to describe these aims and the degree to which the active involvement of the public is desirable. One such framework is the IAP2 ‘spectrum’ that categorises community engagement on a five point scale from ‘information’ to ‘empowerment’ (and is used as the basis for DSE’s community engagement workbooks). Community consultation is one category, which primarily involves first informing the public and then obtaining public feedback on any given proposal. From the focus groups and interviews with staff, it also seems that informing and consulting the community are the most common forms of community engagement used at the City of Melbourne.

The IAP2 spectrum has been used to place the aims and objectives of the Southbank Boulevard consultation process in context, as it was clearly an exercise in community consultation (rather than collaboration or empowerment). As a result, it should have solely aimed to inform the public, and obtain an understanding of community and stakeholder views in relation to a number of aspects of the proposal. This was important given the significant changes that were planned, including the widening of the current park and associated loss of the surrounding road, which will undoubtedly have a big impact on road users, pedestrians and visitors to the park.

The predicament with Southbank Boulevard is not that information was provided and input sought from a wide variety of citizens and stakeholders, but the way in which this was undertaken. Perhaps the most fundamental issue that needed to be addressed and which is central to every engagement process Council undertakes, is why community engagement is necessary. Comments made by some Council staff in relation to Southbank Boulevard and other consultation processes have suggested there is a need to be ‘seen’ to consult, even if Council is not genuinely interested in the results. This is unfortunate, as the
City of Melbourne does not need to be concerned about a perceived need to consult or even empower citizens, as any engagement should be determined solely by the policy problem at hand. Given citizens are engaged in an appropriate way and the reasons for this are explained, they should be satisfied with (or at least tolerate) the opportunities that are provided. What may not be tolerated and which may harm future attempts to engage citizens, is a situation in which Council (or DSE) does not deliver a clear and consistent message about the role citizens will play in any decision-making process. In this regard (and while the timing may have been unfortunate), DSE’s decision to consult again on Southbank Boulevard in July 2006, after a decision was made by the City of Melbourne to go ahead with the project, raises questions about why the consultation was being undertaken and whether it was necessary. This is particularly salient given previous claims that the project would go ahead on the basis of community views.

The more detailed aspects of the consultation process are covered above and do not require further elaboration. However, a number of conclusions or recommendations do follow that the City of Melbourne may like to consider.

**Planning community engagement**

The Southbank Boulevard process raises a number of issues regarding how Council plans its community engagement activities, and who undertakes such planning. The survey and focus groups held with Council staff in June and July 2005 revealed that Council is committed to community engagement, and collectively has used a large variety of practices to engage its residents and ratepayers. Among these are a range of traditional techniques such as public meetings, but also some more creative methods such as the use of on-street interviewing of residents, workers and visitors to the city; drop-off and pick-up surveys; informal consultations through social activities; and paid interviews. There is therefore, considerable expertise within Council regarding the best ways of achieving particular community engagement objectives, which is backed by consultation guidelines that assist staff to develop good processes. What is important for Council is that the expertise developed within each area of council about community engagement practices is shared, to improve the chances that the aims and objectives of each community engagement process can be achieved given the resources and time available.

Related to the importance of sharing knowledge is the issue of who is currently responsible for ensuring engagement is carried out in the best possible manner. Although responsibility would appear to rest with each project manager, the reference in Council’s consultation guidelines to the
advice provided by Marketing and Communications Advisors on areas such as issues papers or information provision (which should be seen as a first step in any consultation exercise) does suggest a central role for the marketing staff in developing strategies. Importantly, expertise in marketing (informing the public or selling an idea) is a different exercise from consulting, involving, collaborating with or empowering the community. This should not be seen as a criticism of the marketing staff, but merely an observation that marketing is only a subset of community engagement and that project staff could benefit from discussions with other suitably qualified individuals to help with other areas of community engagement (such as place managers for stakeholder analysis).

The consistent use of multi-disciplinary teams to discuss and implement community engagement strategies should, therefore, offer considerable benefits including the opportunity for a thorough discussion of consultation aims. Some organisations, such as the Victorian Department of Sustainability and Environment and the Western Australian Department of Premier and Cabinet, have taken this further by creating specific community engagement units. These units have successfully developed some excellent community engagement manuals and processes, and provide a valuable resource to the organisation by informing and training staff, and taking an active role in conducting engagement exercises (OCC 2006; McLellan 2006). The development of such a unit could have similar benefits for the City of Melbourne, as council should be satisfied that the staff (or teams) that have responsibility for engagement understand the differences between engagement exercises and can develop strategies that are appropriate for each policy problem.

Community engagement training

Council staff would not only benefit from consistently working in multi-disciplinary teams, but could find training in community engagement improves their broader appreciation of the issues involved. In Victoria for instance, DSE claims that:

*Community engagement is increasingly a 'must have' competency for anyone running projects or programs that impact the broader community, or require the involvement of many stakeholders for project success. It is integral to how government, and, consequently, how DSE works, and is considered key to both project success and risk reduction.*

As a consequence, DSE currently runs two day courses (at the beginner, intermediate or advanced level) about community engagement. Similarly, Port Phillip City Council (also an industry partner in this research) conducts
community engagement training with all new staff. The City of Melbourne may wish to create a similar program or build on existing training programs to incorporate the most important aspects of community engagement. A first step in creating such a training program would be to review the current community consultation guidelines and determine whether they provide adequate direction for staff.

The Citizen Panel

Finally, the difficulty in gaining the input of some sections of the population was mentioned in the focus groups with staff, and is highlighted by the Southbank Boulevard consultation process. People have a right not to participate in any form of community engagement, and the predominantly young, transient and busy population of Southbank may choose to accept this right more often than Council would like. The key for Council is to establish when the input of some groups is critical, and to think creatively about the best ways to engage these citizens or representatives. Where a diverse range of views and interests need to be heard, one model that Council could consider is the citizens’ panel. This model involves the creation of a panel of citizens of a sufficient size to enable a reasonably accurate representation of community opinion, allowing Council to engage with many or some of its members on a range of issues. Panels vary in size between 500 and 2500 people, and members can be asked to fill out surveys or take part in other face-to-face engagement methods. The manner in which the panel is used will clearly impact upon its effectiveness, and requires considerable effort to maintain and renew the database of participants. Nevertheless, it is a model with sufficient merit to be used by a number of Councils overseas and in Victoria and may provide some real advantages for the City of Melbourne.²

² For example, another partner in this research project, the City of Boroondara, has recently introduced a community panel called the Boroondara ‘Community Voice’.
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