

Community Participation

Within the Ringwood Transit City Project

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Monday, 16 May 2005



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Acknowledgements:

The Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCCC) acknowledges the support and expertise provided by Dr. Glen Chandler of Springboard Social Planning in assisting in the formulation of this report.

Additionally the Ringwood Transit Community Coalition (RTCCC) would like to thank all members and individuals that provided input into the formation of this report.

1.0 Introduction

The Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCCC) was established on the 17th of January 005 as a direct response to the lack of meaningful and direct community consultation within the Transit City Project.

Since this time Maroondah City Council and the State Government through the Ringwood Transit City Advisory Committee (RTCAC) have taken steps to rectify the lack of consultation and community participation through the use of ongoing listening posts and more recently the formation of the Ringwood Transit City Community Reference Group (CRG).

The Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCCC) acknowledges the steps undertaken by both Maroondah Council and the State Government (through the Department of Sustainability and Environment) in improving the level of participation and consultation within the Transit City project. It must be noted however that as per Appendix A of this report, the community still holds a significant degree of scepticism into the current level of participation and consultation provided.

This document suggests various strategies to ensure the aim of wider community participation and consultation within the Transit City Project. Through achieving this aim the community will hold greater confidence in the future of Ringwood and more likely to accept a reasonable degree of change that will inevitably occur within the future.

Should any further information or discussion be required please contact Alexander Makin on mobile phone 0409 136 213 or via e-mail on alex@rtccc.info.

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2.0 Ringwood Transit City Community Reference Group

The Ringwood Transit City Community Reference Group (CRG) was officially inaugurated on the 19th of April 2005. While the nomination process was open to the Maroondah community the nominees were appointed through a closed selection process. Alex Makin and Sandra Hardiman from the Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCCC) were successful in their application to the CRG.

The objectives of the CRG include¹:

- To provide an inclusive place for the communities of Maroondah to have direct input into the process of creating a collaborative vision for Ringwood and the Ringwood Transit City Project;
- To provide information and education about all aspects of the Ringwood Transit City program;
- To provide a place for creative ideas and solutions to be generated;
- To provide a forum to respond to concerns and issues raised by the community;
- To assist the Ringwood Transit City Advisory Committee in understanding local community issues and concerns; and,
- To inform the diverse communities about the program's progress and gain feedback through the memberships' network and organisations.

To ensure the maximum effectiveness of the CRG it is crucial that meetings follow a cohesive manner and that direct avenues of two-way communication are provided. This will ensure direct communication between the decision makers and decision influencers (consisting of government and councils) and the community comprising of various groups, businesses and individuals.

This section discusses issues relating directly to the operation of the CRG.

2.1 Communication and Governance Structure

While the governance structure applicable to the CRG is relatively fixed the communications structure must ensure that direct channels of communication exist between decision makers and decision influencers, including the Ringwood Transit City Advisory Committee (RTCAC) and relevant government departments, as well as maintaining active communication within Ringwood and the broader Maroondah Community.

The current governance structure of the CRG is demonstrated in figure one on the following page.

¹ Source: Maroondah City Council and Department of Sustainability and Environment (www.maroondah.vic.gov.au)

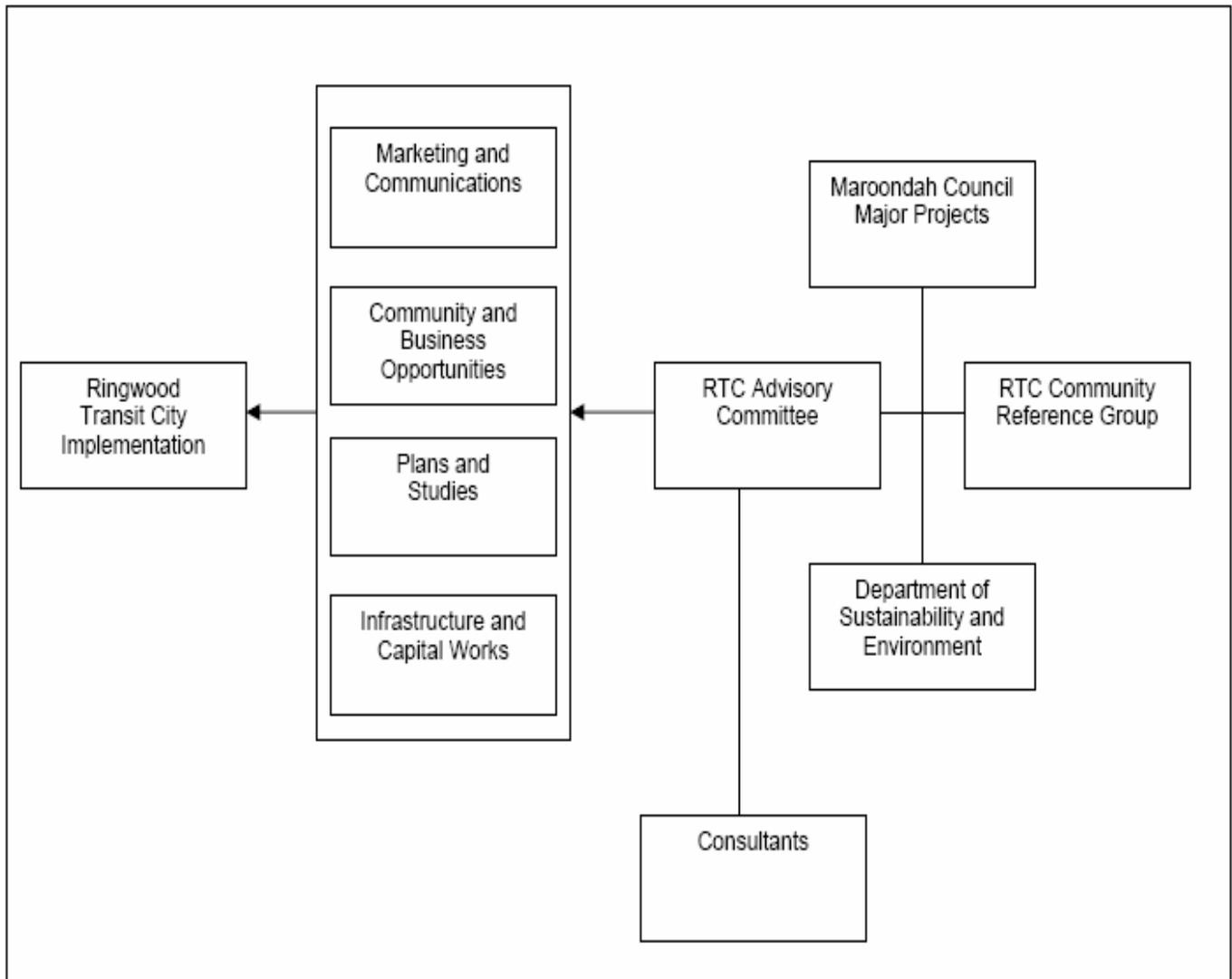


Figure 2-1 Current Community Reference Group Governance Structure²

A number of potential problems emerge if the communications structure follows the same format as the current governance structure:

- The lack of recognition and inclusion of two-way communication between the CRG and the broader community;
- The ambiguity of communication between the CRG and the Ringwood Transit City Advisory Committee, Maroondah Council and the Department of Sustainability and Environment, including the fact that two-way communication has not been specifically provided;
- The lack of direct communication with any external consultants that report to the RTCAC;
- The lack of direct input and feedback into the components required for the implementation of the Transit City program (such as further plans and potential marketing strategies);

² Source: Maroondah City Council and Department of Sustainability and Environment



To rectify these potential issues the Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCCC) recommends the following communications structure, as depicted by figure two on the following page.

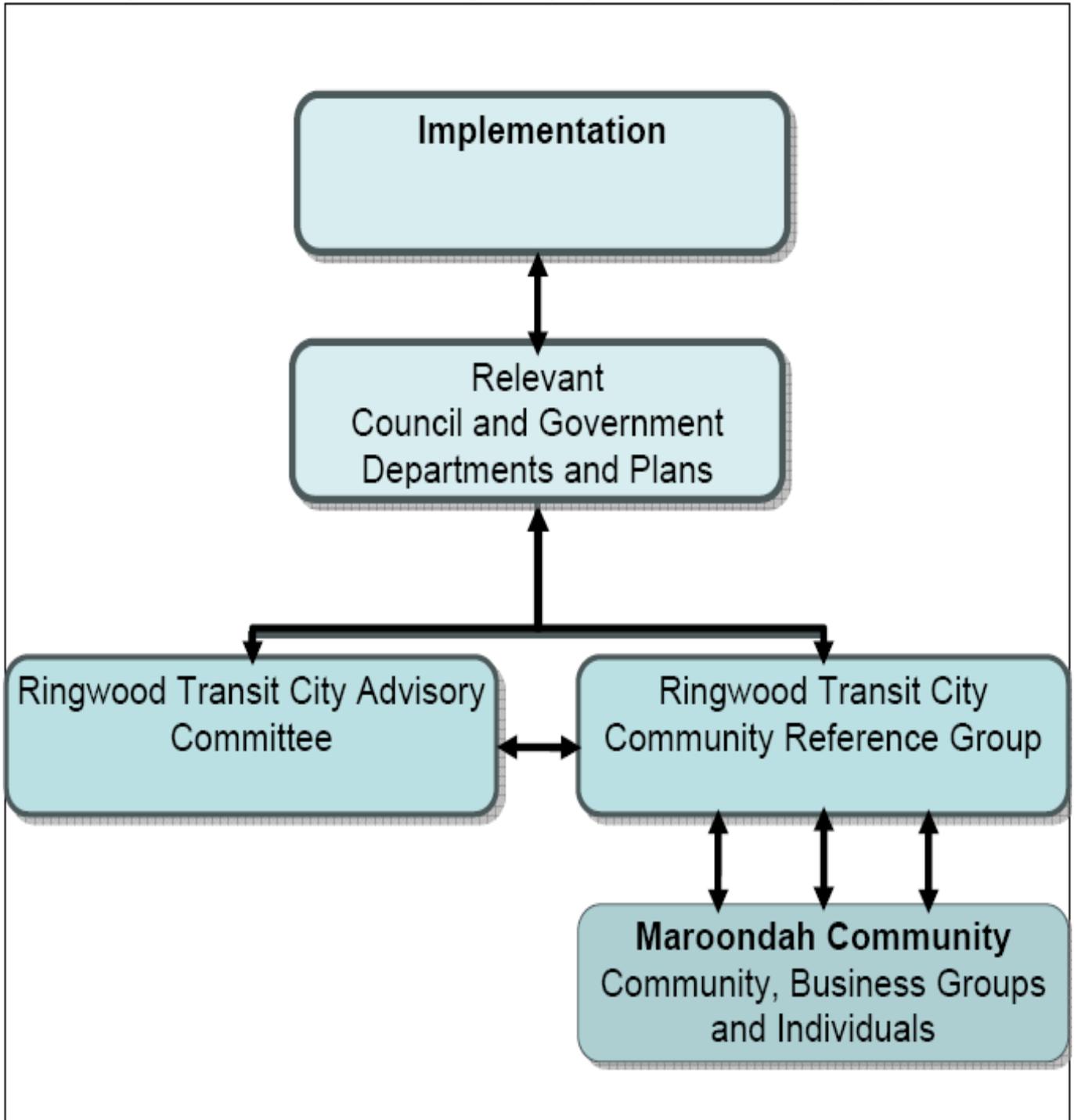


Figure 2-2 Proposed communications structure

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The proposed communications structure as recommended by the Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCC) provides the following advantages:

- **Direct two-way communication between the Maroondah Community (comprising of various individuals, businesses and groups) and the Community Reference Group.** This will require the representatives on the CRG to report on any issues as raised by their relevant interest groups at each CRG meeting. Feedback boxes and contact details should be made available at key locations to ensure that the broader general community can also raise any relevant concerns.
- **Direct two-way communication between the Ringwood Transit City Advisory Committee and the Community Reference Group.** This will ensure that both entities are aware on a direct and first-hand basis on their respective proceedings. This would result in the streamlining of communication between these entities and will minimise miscommunication and potential any conflict. This can be achieved through ensuring that a member of the RTCAC is present at CRG meetings within an observational capacity. In addition detailed minutes of RTCAC proceedings must also be made available to the CRG.
- **Direct two-way communication between relevant council and government departments and both the Community Reference Group and the Ringwood Transit City Advisory Committee.** It is crucial that the same level of information (subject to any confidentiality limitations) is made available and readily accessible for both entities. This can be achieved through ensuring all groups receive copies of planning amendments, feedback and the outcome of any studies that are commissioned into the Ringwood Transit City Project.
- **Feedback from implementation is documented and distributed throughout the governance structure.** This will ensure that all entities remain informed as to the progress of the Transit City Project and are aware of any potential or future issues that a emerge within a timely manner.

It must be noted that this proposed communications structure could be enacted without changes to the underlying governance structure.

2.2 Community Reference Group Meeting Format

In order to ensure that issues are explored within sufficient depth it is recommended that each CRG meeting adopt a specific theme to allow issues to be investigated in a comprehensive manner.

Relevant themes should be determined in advance at a meeting prior to when the issue would be discussed. This will ensure that any recommendations are considered as an informed opinion allowing the community to view the function of the CRG as useful and positive role for the Ringwood Transit City Project.

This in turn will ensure that all entities that utilise the findings of the CRG will be provided with accurate and relevant information. Likewise other entities will be under greater encouragement to consider these findings if detailed discussion and informed recommendations are provided.



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Meeting proceedings should be conducted on a round-table basis to ensure that discussion is encouraged. Minutes must be provided and must accurately reflect the proceedings and key points of each CRG meeting.

Specific experts should be invited to discuss the concepts of a particular meeting theme if such expert knowledge is likely to result in better information and thus more informed recommendations. Likewise any groups or individual that may be affected by the consideration of a particular theme or decision should be invited to attend and provide comments, subject to attendance approval from the CRG.

While specific themes are at the discretion of the members encompassing the CRG, the Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCCC) suggests the following for consideration:

- Community Participation (this should be the first theme as it will impact future decisions);
- Transport and pedestrian access;
- Accessibility (both in terms of transportation and the built environment);
- Environment and Open Space;
- Youth and Ringwood;
- Facilities and entertainment in Ringwood;
- Planning and development (including housing densities).

Time should be allocated at the beginning of each meeting to briefly address any immediate issues that fall outside the scope of the designated theme. It is otherwise expected that each meeting would adhere to the discussion of the chosen theme. The only exception to this would be where an issue of utmost importance has arisen in which case in depth discussion of this issue would require the approval of the individuals within the CRG.

As a guide the Ringwood Transit Community Coalition (RTCCC) recommends the following meeting format as reflected within table 2-1:



AGENDA ITEM

1. Meeting Opens

- 1.1 Feedback from representatives from their respective organisations.
 - 1.2 Feedback and information from RTCAC and other entities.
-

2. Other business or issues arising

- 2.1 Issues arising.
 - 2.2 Noting of any issues requiring future consideration.
-

3. Specific Theme

- 2.1 Introduction of any relevant guests or speakers.
 - 2.2 General Discussion in relation to the theme under consideration.
 - 2.3 Summation, recommendations and follow-up actions.
-

4. Discussion of next theme

5. Next meeting

Table 2-1 Proposed CRG meeting format

This potential format will allow each theme to be discussed comprehensively within the time allocated for each meeting while also ensuring that any other issues that fall outside the scope of the theme may be discussed within a brief and efficient manner.

2.3 Composition of the Community Reference Group

While the initial composition of the CRG was ultimately determined through the applicants that nominated, consideration must be made to allow for any future representation that might be required. This means that established guidelines are required to ensure that should any potential gaps emerge within the composition of the CRG or should there be a case when an organisation wishes to seek representation then the expansion of the CRG can be accommodated.

The Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCCC) recommends that provisions be made to accommodate any future groups or community segments, either on a permanent or temporary basis, which is in need of representation on the CRG.



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2.4 Availability of Contact Details

To facilitate community involvement and discussion the contact details of the Community Reference Group members needs to be made available to the general community in a widely accessible manner, such as inclusion within the next edition of the Maroondah Focus and on the Maroondah Council website.

While it is understandable that some CRG may be reluctant to provide telephone contact details, email addresses should be readily provided for the wider community. This will allow the wider community to contact, either via telephone or email, representatives on the CRG to encourage wider participation and involvement within the Transit City Project.

All correspondence between members of the CRG and the wider community must be raised at the next CRG meeting.



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3.0 Strengthening Community Participation

This section considers the methods and tools available to strengthen community participation within the Ringwood Transit City Project. This is required to reduce the high degree of scepticism that currently exists within the community in regard to the Ringwood Transit City Project.

3.1 Newsletter and Notices

Newsletters such as the *Maroondah Focus* and council sponsored advertisements within the local media should inform the community about the current activities and issues examined by the CRG. Feedback boxes and contact details need to be provided for residents or groups that may wish to add input into an item being discussed. Any advertisements need to be positioned so that the reader can readily notice them and include appropriate identification such as Maroondah Council and State Government logos.

It is recommended that Maroondah Council maintain a regular feature page within the local press similar to the Knox Horizons segment of Knox City Council. This feature would outline current activities and the outcome of community feedback.

3.2 Surveys

Any surveys or any variant that includes qualitative or quantitative research (such as the current listening posts) need to provide publicly available information updated at regular intervals. Compiled results (excluding confidential information) should be provided so that the community can gain a greater insight into the concerns that are being raised through the listening posts and to demonstrate the usefulness of this form of consultation. Additionally this data needs to be provided to the CRG so the concerns of the community can be taken into account.

Where possible such data should be independently verified to ensure its accuracy and thus reduce any potential scepticism that may exist. Likewise compiled results should be made available in tabulated form and not sanitised as part of a press release. While it is fair to assume that the collated data would be utilised within a press release or media kit the survey data must also be made available as a separate and unaltered appendix to such associated items.

3.3 Focus Groups

Focus groups should be utilised to investigate specific concerns that require specialised knowledge or where there would be benefit in involving individuals that are directly familiar with the situation. These focus groups must report to the CRG and other entities as appropriate to ensure that all relevant groups are aware of the progress of such focus groups and any action that is being sought. It is crucial that focus group are provided with strict terms of reference to ensure that the issue they are considering is examined in full detail without unnecessary diversions.

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Focus groups would be appropriate to target specific segments of the community, such as Maroondah's youth or specific projects such as the redevelopment of Ringwood Station.

3.4 Public Forums

Public forums provide an open communication channel to address a wide variety of community concerns. It is advised that public forums be established around a broadly defined theme to allow some guiding structure and to provide scope for relevant speakers.

Time must be allocated to ensure open discussion and this must be reinforced through the availability of personnel with the appropriate authority to answer any questions. Public forums should generally not exceed a time limit of two and a half hours (including 30 to 60 minutes of open discussion).

It is crucial that public forums are managed through the use of an independent and impartial chair to ensure that all points of view are expressed.

3.5 Public Exhibitions

Public exhibitions should be readily availability within locations of high pedestrian traffic such as major shopping centres or areas relating to the function of government such as civic centres. These public exhibitions should include a 3D model of the proposed rendition of the Transit City Project and include locality maps so that any concerned residents can identify geographical areas of interest.

3.6 Feedback Boxes and Contact Details

Feedback boxes and the contact details of relevant personnel should be made available alongside any public exhibitions. This will allow individuals to make appropriate enquiries into areas requiring further discussion or depth. All feedback boxes must be attended to regularly and prompt replies (not exceeding a fortnight) are required so that the negativity experienced with a non-reply does not occur. Where required further communication channels may be required should the individual request additional information upon the answering of an enquiry.

3.7 Community Organisations

The opinions of relevant community organisations should be sought where an issue may be of direct relevance to a particular organisation. Specific discussion should be provided to allay any concerns that may arise from an organisation in regard to the Transit City Project.

Likewise members of the CRG should report on any issues or concerns arising from the respective organisations that they represent.



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3.8 Websites

Any applicable website content should be maintained and updated regularly to ensure the distribution of information within a timely manner. Furthermore such web content must be easy to navigate and understand and also adhere to web accessibility standards. Contact details including email, telephone and address details must be readily available to allow for any follow up discussion.

3.9 Other Suggestions

This list is by no means exhaustive and discussion should be encouraged within the CRG to discover further methods of strengthening community participation within the transit city project.

4.0 Responding to Feedback

It is crucial that where the relevant department or personnel respond to community concerns it is done so within a timely manner (generally not exceeding a fortnight) and that responses are provided with ‘plain English’ explanations.

Where suggestions have been made the reasoning behind the adoption or rejection of such suggestions and any relevant outcomes must be clearly stipulated.

An example of such feedback is seen within table two:

Item Description	Outcome	Reasons

Table 4-1 Responding to Community Feedback

As suggested by Dr. Glen Chandler of Springboard Social Planning, the following method should be adopted:

An outcome might be that Council has recommended an action that is later rejected. In the first advice to the community the ‘Outcome’ column will state something along the lines “*recommended to that*”. If later rejected the item reappears with an outcome that it was “*rejected by.....*” and the reasons why.

Likewise if a community wish has been incorporated it is also important to state how, and why. This is because no community recommendation is likely to have 100 percent support. Furthermore the ‘how’ may not have been in line with the intention of the community.

It is also recommended that Maroondah Council maintain a regular feature page within the local paper to outline current activities and the outcome of community feedback. This feature should be made available on a fortnightly or monthly basis depending on the level of current activity and any reportable outcomes.

This newspaper feature would complement the Maroondah Focus which would expand upon the content available within the newspaper feature.



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5.0 Conclusion

It is crucial that the Ringwood Transit City Project gains wide acceptance within the Maroondah Community to ensure its successful implementation. In order to secure this acceptance community participation must be strengthened so that avenues are readily provided to facilitate discussion allow for any applicable responses and action upon any relevant concerns.

The Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCCC) as a diverse body comprising of various community groups is willing to cooperate where appropriate to ensure the successful future of Ringwood and the creation of a vibrant, sustainable and liveable suburb.

The Ringwood Transit City Community Coalition (RTCCC) welcomes further discussion in regard to this submission. As such please contact Alexander Makin on 0409 136 213 or via e-mail on alex@rtccc.info should any further discussion be required.