

Unleashing healthy lifestyles in local areas



Providing parks and open space that cater to the needs of different user groups is one of the challenges facing Local Government nationwide. A strategic approach to the design and use of open space can maximise its usage and benefits for individuals and the broader community.

The Nillumbik Council of Victoria recognised this when it engaged in a two year process of preparing and implementing a masterplan for a major area of open space, the Eltham Lower Park. The Park has a large number of users and diverse groups and is of high regional significance.

"One of the main goals of the masterplan is that it be acceptable to all users. What emerged through our consultation is that while there are a number of structured formal groups, (i.e. sporting teams and leisure groups), there were also a large number of unstructured groups like walkers with dogs."

Darren Bennet, Nillumbik Council

Benefits of maximising open space and existing user space

- Well planned open spaces encourage exercise and networking opportunities
- Creates opportunities for local residents to engage actively in their community
- Motivates and increases social activity between different user groups

The Council determined it would be vital to consult with all user groups to ensure their needs were adequately met. Fay Gravenall is the President of the Eltham Recreational Walkers Group, and she notes, "A surprising amount of young mums come down to the park with toddlers, prams and dogs. Dogs give these mums a companioning service whereby they can move through a public space and feel secure."

"Owners with dogs are more likely to speak to others," she continues "and the regular contact between the individuals provides mental stimulus, a vehicle for sharing community interests and support for those facing the grittiness of their everyday lives. A dog is also a perfect fitness partner."

Through the robust community consultation, the Council grew to understand the importance of an area that could be specifically utilised by walkers and their dogs.

"After we interviewed the walkers with dogs group, we came to see the networking opportunity they provided to the community," said Darren. "A lot of society's problems stem from people being socially isolated. It's in the Nillumbik Council's mandate to motivate our community into social activity."

As part of the masterplan, the Council decided to create an area that was highly dog friendly, providing the dogs with a drinking fountain, water bowls, and a rotunda. Other dog friendly inclusions include leash free ovals and some divided paths that cater to walkers and bicyclists separately.



"Experiences like these foster the skills needed for citizens to take part in constructing the wider community environment."

Fay Gravenall, Eltham Recreational Walkers Group

Tips

- Thorough community consultation that includes unstructured groups ensures the needs of all user groups are met
- Water, shade, seating, leash free areas for dogs and community education help to ensure public spaces are popular and responsibly used

Web Links

Nillumbik Council - www.nillumbik.vic.gov.au