

# Brimbank Rising

## From a History of Failed Local Councils, Officers and Administrators Promote and Support Sunshine Rising

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**The suburban municipality of Brimbank is strategically located across key transport corridors serving Melbourne's rapid western and northwestern expansion. Brimbank Rising steps through local prehistory and history with attention to planning events from Hoddle's 1840 survey to the recent Regional Rail Link which shape the area. Across five periods, this history sees planning as a contributory process to city shaping, with specific plans as snapshots in time of endorsed intentions, all through the lens of complexity, connectedness and contingency. Recent geological and ecological history had been productively harnessed by the Wurundjeri before all were disrupted by the arrival of unauthorised settlers from Tasmania and their livestock focused on serving markets in and using methods more appropriate to the other side of the world. Following colonial separation and the discovery of gold in 1851, the second part follows the expansion of heavy rail and the multifaceted influence of leading industrialist H V McKay's Sunshine Harvester Works through and between the booms of the 1880s and 1920s. Postwar flooding of the Harvester Works, and of the region with migrants, demanded major infrastructure investment and municipal capabilities which were consistent with wider suburbanisation and growing dominance of road transport without challenging the area's politically safe status. The penultimate section is focused on concurrent events in 2009 and how they play out through council in administration's Sunshine Rising campaign to capitalise on the local potential of Sunshine's rail upgrade and complementary infrastructure investments. Finally there is discussion of current state policies and planning which relate to Brimbank and which the council and community need to continue to work with and advocate for further Rising to ensure Brimbank's potential as service corridor for the Growth Areas is realised.**

**Keywords** — *infrastructure; municipal; industrial; migration.*

### INTRODUCTION: DISPLACING THE CARERS FOR THE COUNTRY

While the point we are aiming for here is about the transformative effect on the City of Brimbank of a suite of Victorian government planning decisions announced together in 2009, this will be seen in light of constraints arising from a specific planning history dating back to Hoddle's 1840 survey map of the Port Phillip colony as well as key environmental factors and infrastructure networks.

Across tens of millennia of oscillating ice cover and sea level, the spread of people around Sahul reached and found a

highly productive living on the newly formed, and in places still forming, Victorian volcanic plains that extend from now suburban Merri Creek to the coast of southeastern South Australia. Archaeological digs have exposed evidence of human activity around the Maribyrnong valley from long before the final sharp descent of sea level towards the global maximum extent of ice around 20,000 years ago. Discovery of the Keilor cranium in 1940 provided the first evidence settler society recognised of ancient occupation by first peoples. But it has taken until very recently for us to start to recognise the rich complexity of the relationship between aboriginal nations and the country they cared for, exemplified by the actively cultivated wildflower-rich grasslands. [Inherit Earth, 2011]

Between the first peoples' migration from Sabah to Sahul, and the final descent towards maximum ice, the vast plains now beneath Bass Strait were intermittently inundated, never completely cutting the land bridge but putting pressure on coastal populations to adapt. What is less easily recognised is that neither the vast lowland in central Bass Strait nor the smaller lake in what is now Port Phillip would have normally had outflows to the ocean. Rather, like Lake Corangamite today, surface evaporation exceeded inflow until they shrunk to a point of balance. In Bass Strait this persisted until it was flooded completely after the ice maximum, isolating Tasmania. In Port Phillip, this recurred more recently when Nepean Bay Bar closed and was not breached until 1,000 years ago, flooding what had been productive grasslands and challenging then established clan boundaries within the Kulin nation. [Holdgate et al, 2011]

Today's City of Brimbank is contained entirely within a gently sloping region of volcanic plain with only the deep valley of the Maribyrnong and the shallower valley of Kororoit Creek providing much vertical relief prior to the deployment of urban infrastructure. The lava covering the plain flowed primarily from larger eruption points to the northwest. The only eruption point identified within the City of Brimbank is the modest Mount Derrimut towards the south west corner which long housed the University of Melbourne's agricultural field station and more recently Sunshine Golf Club. [Rosengren, 1994]

What John Batman saw as ideal sheep pasture was in fact a long cultivated food production system which maintained soil permeability with assistance from now endangered or worse burrowing animals. Delicious murnong (*Microseris lanceolata*) invited human harvesting of mature tubers and replanting of daughters, and it was only one of several species whose flowers carpeted the plains in season. [Gott, 1982] This was callously disrupted by settlers interested only in production of raw materials for imperial industries on timetables out of kilter with those of the original people and the land, creating a world-leading immigrant metropolis within half a century of first settlement. Much of Melbourne's transport and industry poured through what would become the City of Brimbank.

After Matthew Flinders confirmed the separation of Tasmania from the mainland by Bass Strait, initial exploration of Port Phillip quickly followed with the 1803 Grimes expedition. On 6 February 1803, the first European, James Flemming, went up (Stony) Creek about a mile and a half; it was salt, and ended in a swamp; a run from (Keilor) Plains comes into it in wet weather. [Flemming's journal]

*Before enclosure, major rain events would have dumped slow moving sheets of water across the near flat plain between the Maribyrnong and Kororoit without strongly defining watercourses that would drain St. Albans and Sunshine.*

After a failed attempt to set up a penal colony at Sorrento it was not until 1835 that the wealthy and connected Port Phillip Association staged an invasion led by John Batman, deliberately out of sight and against the instructions of colonial administration in Hobart and Sydney, gaining time in which to cement their illegal claims.

In the space of just eight years, 12,000 Europeans had arrived with one hundred thousand head of cattle and one and a half million sheep. [Barwick 1998 p.16]

By 1840 with colonial rule reasserted, crown surveyor Robert Hoddle had produced a map of mostly waterways on

mile to the 0.2 inch square graph paper oriented to then magnetic north, a clearly standard technique for defining parcels of rural land for sale. [Fig. 1] The lines on that chart mostly became roads, eventually defining much of the boundaries of the City of Brimbank and its internal arterials. [Fig. 2]

Systems for feeding the first peoples developed over tens of thousands of years were quickly trampled by imported livestock and frontier wars rapidly escalated. Then just as Victoria officially separated from New South Wales in 1851, a gold rush began largely centred around Ballarat and Bendigo, the main routes to the goldfields passing through what is now the City of Brimbank, with the train line to Bendigo opened on 21 October 1862. Population of the colony exploded from 75,000 to over half a million in the first decade of separation.

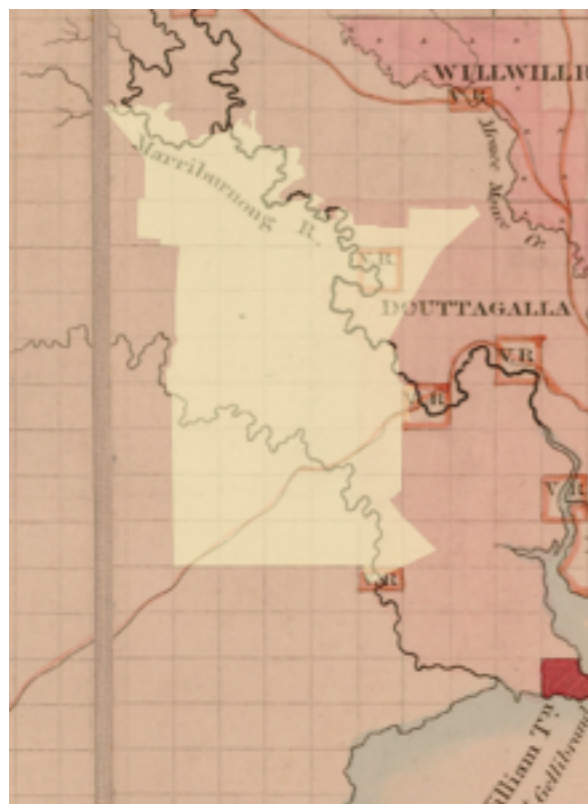


Fig. 1: Section of John Arrowsmith's [1841] rendering based on Hoddle's 1940 survey map with modern plan of City of Brimbank superimposed. Systematic drift of alignment especially in northern section is understandable given it was produced in London so quickly.



Fig. 2: City of Brimbank indicating neighbouring cities, railways with main stations and destinations, internal road alignments which still closely follow Hoddle's grid, as do boundary sections, the Maribyrnong River and Kororoit Creek within Brimbank with Stony Creek diversions into them shown as arrows.

## CRISSCROSSED WITH TRANSPORT CORRIDORS

The track between Geelong and Melbourne shown on the Hoddle map sample [Fig. 1] crosses the "Mariburnong River" at Rocks Across which marks the limit of tidal influence on Salt Water River between today's Canning Street, Avondale Heights, and Burke Street, North Sunshine. (Each of the three municipalities which today converge at that point have conflicted heritage overlays in that area, with the crossing also referred to as Canning or Solomon's Ford, the latter incorrectly.) With the first rail connection to Ballarat opening 11 April 1862 via Geelong, Melbourne to Bendigo line stations opened at Sydenham, then called Keilor Road, 1 March 1859 and Albion 5 January 1860.

Wishing to do something about English settlers' discomfort with the unfamiliar natural environment, the Acclimatisation Society of Victoria was established in 1861 to introduce and acclimatise more familiar species. The "success" of rabbits

were just the start of the problems, beyond the damage wrought by unsuited livestock, the volcanic plains were soon colonised by a range of plant species, some deliberate introductions and others accidental, plus numerous other exotic animals. There were also a few native species that prospered as a result of ecological disturbances, becoming seen as agricultural pests.

Rail development renewed in the boom of the late 1880s, with Bendigo line stations opened at Braybrook Junction on 7 September 1885, to serve the new route being constructed to Ballarat via Bacchus Marsh, and St. Albans on 1 February 1887. The direct Ballarat line opened to Kororoit on 2 April 1884, which would be renamed Deer Park in 1889, and was completed to Ballarat in December 1889. Meanwhile a freight line between Sunshine and Newport was opened on 24 September 1887 to provide direct access to the port of Williamstown for freight from northern and western parts of the state, Point Gellibrand having been the landing place for those of the Port Phillip Association heading for the Keilor Plains.

Having built and patented a stripper-harvester on his family farm north of Bendigo in 1885, then 19 year old Hugh Victor McKay opened a factory in Ballarat in 1888 and would become Australia's leading industrialist of the era. In 1906 he started moving his Sunshine Harvester Works to Braybrook Junction.

*The Braybrook Junction Progress Association submitted a petition to the Railway Commissioners on 15 May 1907, asking that the Station be renamed 'Sunshine'. The change was granted and came into effect from 15 July 1907. The local council (Braybrook Shire) supported the name change and the suburb took on the new name of 'Sunshine'. [Rigg, 2008 p.5]*

Also during 1907, McKay was embroiled in a dispute with unions over what was "fair and reasonable" wages, the "Harvester case" which would underpin the minimum wage system that would rapidly become the backbone of Australian industrial relations. That dispute does not appear to indicate deep adversity between MacKay and his workers as he was concurrently investing in quality local housing for his workforce. But things in booming Sunshine did not always stay on script. At 10:50 pm on Easter Monday, 20 April 1908, a steam train carrying holiday crowds back from Bendigo crashed into the back of a similar train from Ballarat that had been briefly delayed at Sunshine station, killing 44 with approximately 500 injured, the worst rail disaster in Australia before Granville in 1977. [ibid. esp. p.1]

*The McKay housing subdivisions were part of a suburb created by Australia's leading industrialist, H.V. McKay, and a milestone in the development of the industrial suburb, under the influence of the Garden City movement. Sunshine's generous suburban estates were atypical of working class housing of the early 20th century and became a yardstick for planning and housing reformers, with H.V. McKay being regarded as an expert on planned industrial housing. The McKay estates mark a crucial phase in the development of Sunshine, housing the resident work force which promoted further industrial development. [City of Brimbank, 2009] [Fig. 3]*

Suburban train services were electrified to St. Albans in 1921 and a rail freight bypass line between Albion and Jacana was opened in 1929 with lower grades for heavy freight traffic than the Essendon-Broadmeadows line, the new line requiring landmark bridges across the Maribyrnong and Moonee Ponds Creek.

## POST WW2 BOOM TESTS CAPACITY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

At the end of World War II, the surrounds of Sunshine Harvester Works housed the only significant suburban settlements within what is now the City of Brimbank, still well separated from greater Melbourne's suburban edge. The then Shires of Braybrook and Keilor contained slivers of housing on that suburban edge but otherwise remained predominantly rural, though with industrial estates in parts of Braybrook. Keilor village had few houses but provided services to many market

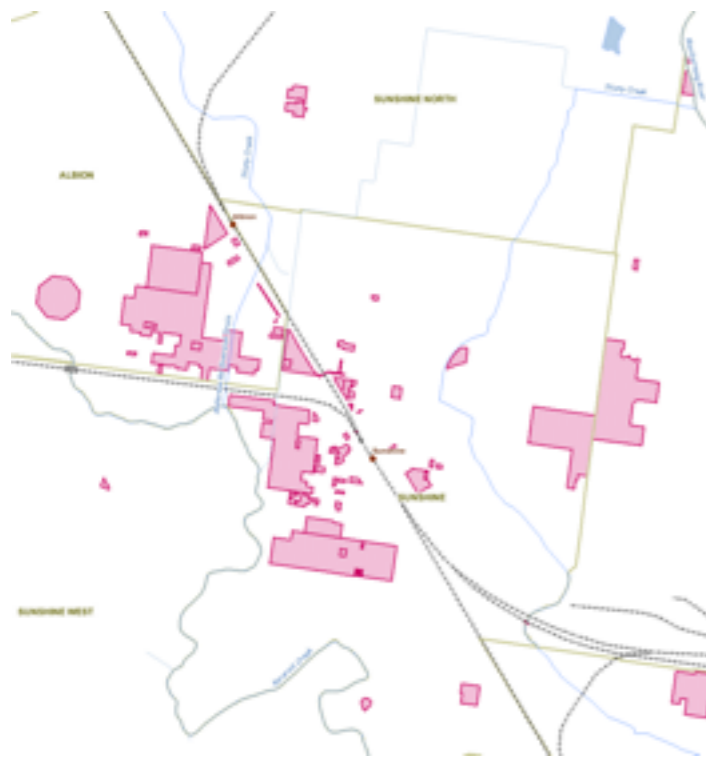


Fig. 3: Grab from Planning Maps Online showing Heritage Overlays, including the large irregular HO23 and HO24 either side of the Ballarat line which are significant tracts of McKay's industrial housing, and the Stony Creek diversion drains.



Fig 4: Land sale poster featuring Alfred Padley's 1888 subdivision plan for central St. Albans with its distinctive Crescents and Victoria and Albert Crescents cut by the railway line.

gardens on the Maribyrnong River flood plain. Deer Park had a few company houses serving the vast ICI explosives factory with heritage back to gold mining and more recent neighbours across Ballarat Road, the Commonwealth Government explosives factory which has since become Cairnlea and Victoria University's St. Albans campus. Only St. Albans had a bit more housing, though not yet close to filling out Alfred Padley's grand plan. [Fig. 4] But post war immigration and returning servicemen starting delayed families that would become the baby boom were about to change all that.

Stony Creek was dammed just west of Anderson Road to provide water for cooling Sunshine Harvester factory's air compressors. The dam also became the main site for water delivery during fires. Immediately post war, the creek flooded following heavy rains, vast areas being covered in water. In the 1960s, a tunnel was bored under Anderson Road to divert flood water into nearby Kororoit Creek. Later a larger diversion tunnel under Kororoit Street similarly diverted the main flow of the creek from above where the dam had been while a similar diversion intercepted tributaries further east and diverted their flow into the Maribyrnong. [See figs 2 & 3, Smith 2014] This increased flooding and engineering response was due to the extreme reduction in permeability and thus increase in stormwater run off due to urbanisation. Since learning the value of retaining water in the landscape, there is now a project to naturalise the stretch of Stony Creek north of the Albion-Jacana line in an area that shows little evidence of a significant prior natural watercourse but was rather a constructed storm water channel. [City of Brimbank, 2016]

Within 20 post war years the gap between Sunshine and the western edge of metropolitan housing had been bridged, hostels in Maribyrnong and Brooklyn making nearby areas appealing to migrants. "In 1950 St. Albans (...) population was about 800. Within a decade it was 10,000." [Maynard 2014 p.82] That growth spread out in all directions "from Padley's beautiful street plan" [ibid.] including south of Boundary Road (now Main Road) with the station being moved south of the crossing to reduce opening and closing of the gates. There were still paddocks surrounding St. Albans but

it had become the main growth area of the Shire of Keilor beyond similarly developing suburbs spreading outside the boundaries of the old City of Essendon. High voltage powerlines commanded significant easements across the area while water supply, sewerage, gas supply, sealed roads and footpaths gradually caught up. Street and stormwater drainage was diverted to buried concrete pipes which still fed back via decreasingly open channels towards natural watercourses where they existed or to floodways where flow across the near flat plain could be contained.

Having been incorporated as road districts in the early 1860s, Braybrook and Keilor became shires in 1871, but with Braybrook changing its name to Sunshine and beating Keilor to being proclaimed a city by a decade. Another decade on, the Whitlam government signalled Commonwealth realisation that suburbia had become important and support for a broader role for local government essential. Both long Labor strongholds, the still young cities of Sunshine and Keilor butchered the opportunity, the Victorian state government lost patience with their elected council's performance and dismissed first Keilor then 16 months later Sunshine for "many reasons ... financial mismanagement" [Ford, 2012, p.516], either side of Whitlam's own dismissal. In 1994 as part of state premier Kennett's wholesale reorganisation of local councils, each had their eastern suburbs amalgamated with their respective inner city neighbours and the balance of the two were merged to form the City of Brimbank, named for a then recently created metropolitan park on the Maribyrnong River adjacent to Keilor village. The new city was central to the western region of Melbourne, sharing boundaries with seven other western municipalities. Beyond simplifying the relationships of both airports which had previously been half in the City of Keilor with a boundary on the former Lancefield Road, now Melrose Drive, much of the fine tuning was in the corners with respect to balancing industrial and residential rates income streams, Brimbank retaining industrial portions of Brooklyn, East Keilor and Tullamarine. Not learning from their own history, in 2009 Brimbank Council was placed in administration for seven more years during which its future prospects changed dramatically.

There had been many subdivisions planned over the years when road construction and other basic services were to be paid for by purchasers, but one basically rectangular 1920s subdivision at the north end of Sunshine North remains an issue today, especially after the Albion-Jacana rail freight line opened in 1929 sliced it in half. The original subdivision was into residential blocks but in the 1960s it was rezoned industrial in the hope of a better fit with the adjacent North Sunshine industrial estate. The more accessible half, west of the railway, while still only served by dirt tracks, steadily filled with what might best be described as junk yard operators, though with significant renewal since its streets were more recently paved and serviced. Meanwhile the eastern half, often noted as only 10 km from the centre of Melbourne, remains as it was but locked off to deter dumping and protect endangered species in what is now recognised as a significant remnant of volcanic plains grasslands. It now has state funding for council to develop a masterplan to reintegrate the 435 lots and pay off 120 remaining owners with proceeds from a single sale aimed at mixed development of the southern portion with the northern portion set aside for environmental purposes. Rebadged as Solomon Heights, that half of that historic subdivision is now listed as one of the City of Brimbank's handful of strategic sites. [See also Taylor et al, 2015, Laskie, 2017.]

#### NO LONGER END OF LINE AS CENTRE OF GRAVITY MOVES WEST

North of St. Albans, Keilor Downs and Taylors Lakes rapidly filled the gap between Keilor and Sydenham across the 1990s, with suburban development similarly building out other spaces in what became the City of Brimbank. During 1995-97, 17 km of the Western Ring Road was opened through the new municipality from Boundary Road, Derrimut, to Melrose Drive, Tullamarine, encouraging rapid growth of road-based freight throughout the region. Electrification of the St. Albans train line was extended to Sydenham in January 2002 with naming rights to the new terminus going to the adjacent Watergardens shopping centre and a new station at Taylors Road named Keilor Plains. Initially the line there still went through the middle of a large roundabout on Taylors Road, but that was replaced by a road-under grade separation in 2007 well before such projects became commonplace.

On 7 May 2009 the Victorian Ombudsman reported on an "Investigation into the alleged improper conduct of

Councillors at Brimbank City Council” leading to the appointment of Bill Scales to monitor the council for three months and report back to the minister for local government. Meanwhile then Brimbank CEO Nick Foa put a cross on a map at the geographic centre of the municipality and found it was close enough to Errington Reserve in Main Street East, St. Albans, that he would make the Reserve his preferred site for a new civic centre aimed at tying together the remnants of two municipalities which had once been divided by a boundary the length of Main Road. However St. Albans History Society had already dealt with a proposal by McDonalds to acquire part of the Reserve, diverting them to a better for passing traffic site on St. Albans Road, and were fully across of the history of Alice Errington’s bequest of the Reserve to the people of St. Albans. On 12 June and 3 July Josie Taylor’s [2009] reports on the community battle to retain Errington Reserve went to air during the main 7:00 pm ABC TV newscast.

Meanwhile in mid June the Victorian state government had unveiled a suite of big plans for the western suburbs:

- extensive permanent reserves to protect and recover volcanic plains grasslands
- major expansion of designated urban growth boundaries
- Regional Rail Link (RRL) to separate V/Line tracks from Metro tracks from Southern Cross station towards Bendigo, Ballarat and Geelong with the latter rerouted via Sunshine and a new line serving growth areas in northern Wyndham
- planning and reservation of an Outer Metropolitan Ring (OMR) road and rail corridor

On 29 June an information session on these initiatives came to Victoria University Sunshine campus for interested locals.

On 15 July the City of Brimbank held a public consultation about the civic centre proposal at Errington Reserve Community Centre which focused local opposition but also provided an opportunity to raise the implications of the RRL and growth areas expansion for the future role of Brimbank as central to the western region, a chance to move on from the end of line reputation that Sunshine and St. Albans had developed. On 25 August Errington Reserve was officially removed from list of civic precinct candidates. Following an unfavourable report from Bill Scales [2009], on 12 November the Victorian Parliament passed an Act to dismiss Brimbank Council leaving the council to be operated by State-appointed administrators for almost seven years through to the regular 2016 council election date.

After a year in the job, the administrators decided they needed more local intelligence to inform their deliberations and chose to set up advisory committees to consider particular areas of council responsibility. The first quarterly meeting of Economic Development and Transport Committee was held in May 2011 and within six months that committee progressed to receiving a presentation from the authority charged with delivering the RRL and from council officers on a market oriented project they had been developing: Sunshine Rising. Council advocacy helped ensure some good outcomes for the Sunshine Station precinct though never helped by a change of government forcing cost cutting measures on the project for other purposes, one result of which was to eliminate the planned rail-rail grade separation of the inbound RRL track from the outbound Metro track and moving the merging of Bendigo V/Line and Sunbury Metro lines closer to Sunshine. Metro electrification was extended from Watergardens to Sunbury in 2012, well before the RRL opened in 2015, with the party that had originally conceived a more future proof project back in power at state level and having to pick up such lost opportunity costs.

Meanwhile the Council in Administration had determined that a site it already owned in the heart of Sunshine would be an ideal location for a landmark multistory building to house the new civic centre, as well as providing an anchor for Sunshine Rising. And they had been encouraged by a multimillion dollar contribution from St. Albans Community Centre Co-operative to concurrently redevelop the tired Community Centre at Errington Reserve as a performing arts venue.

Elimination of the Main Street St. Albans level crossing had long been high on wish lists with several false starts on planning it before the recently one term state government committed funds. While they lost office the incoming

government had made level crossing removal across Melbourne a core policy commitment and kept Main Street at the top of the list while adding nearby Furlong Road which had a comparably bad history so that both could be completed with a single set of line closures.

With important foundations in place, the administrators were succeeded by a new look council elected in October 2016. The new councillors presided over the occupation and opening of the new civic centre and start on redeployment of the separate vacated civic premises in the heart of Keilor and well hidden in Sunshine, as well as opening the St. Albans Community Centre. Two locally raised artists who made their fame overseas but whose parents still live locally were honoured in those projects, the theatre at STACC being named for the late Leigh Bowery and John Kelly being commissioned to sculpt Man Lifting Cow for the wide footpath opposite the civic centre. Regional umbrella group LeadWest became an early tenant of the new Sunshine building. By the middle of 2017 those two priority level crossings were but a memory and work had started on removing the Melton Highway crossing at Sydenham.

## FUTURE NOT PRECLUDED BUT HAS TO RECOVER FROM SHORTCUTS

Planning for the City of Brimbank cannot be isolated from the many levels of context in which it is embedded, from regional to global. At the other end of the scale, it cannot neglect the property owner where much of the initiative is generated, nor community expectations with respect to common shared amenity. So Council and planning staff necessarily continue to facilitate the local and advocate re wider needs. At the larger end, there is already much in the pipeline with detail to be worked on and steps beyond to be contemplated.

Critically, Sunshine has been designated as a National Employment and Innovation Cluster [Plan Melbourne Strategy 2017 p.32] and the municipality faces confidently forecast strong ongoing population growth, not as much within its own boundaries as in the designated urban growth hot spots which are serviced through Brimbank, particularly Sunbury, Melton and northern Wyndham. [Victoria in Future, 2016] On the transport front, much hinges on the recently commenced Melbourne Metro Rail mega project which will greatly increase capacity between Sunshine and Dandenong, some of which is slated to serve Melton electrification and Melbourne Airport during the 2020s. Even there, and definitely further out, there are clouds due to Melbourne’s widely acknowledged historic planning deficit. VicRoads is the one agency that maintained a semblance of planning for growth while cost saving became doctrine across government, but they haven’t seen the west as more than greenfield sites for ring road experiments. Critically, they admit no plans for Melbourne’s world-leading tram network to be extended into the west, and have critical north-south arterials such as Palmers Road corridor from Point Cook to Calder Park along Brimbank’s western boundary which they now claim is not due to be built to design capacity for 40 years.

While there is a Public Transport Victoria [2012] Network Development Plan for metropolitan plus intercity heavy rail, it leaves many questions unaddressed, especially in the areas of freight, long haul and extended passenger services, all of which are entangled with the ongoing slow and inevitably partial retrofitting of what was once an entirely broad gauge network as standard gauge. Of particular relevance, Rail Futures [2016] and others are proposing that Airport Rail should include more suitable to travellers diversions of Bendigo V/Line services to also achieve full RRL separation, with eventually the Shepparton line similarly diverted via the OMR. These lines are currently broad gauge, but likely candidates for gauge conversion as others nearby are integrated into the increasingly standard gauge freight system. Standard gauge passenger trains from Sydney and north eastern Victoria already pass Sunshine station, but without a platform to stop at for the all lines interchange that Rail Futures envisage evolving there. At least the station rebuilt for RRL appears to be capable of adding all the extra platforms that might eventually be needed, given the already pressing need to accelerate the planned electrification along the RRL route to Wyndham Vale. Of course that will require restituting the rail grade separation immediately north of Sunshine station between the increased lines to Albion and Ardeer, with quadruplication likely to at least the junction between the Geelong and Ballarat lines west of Deer Park.

Melbourne Water's renewal of their Healthy Waterways program is being driven by Catchment Collaborations across their five major sub-catchments with the Maribyrnong running first as a prototype. Rivers of the West has been launched to ensure the September 2017 legislation of legal protections to the Yarra will be replicated for the Maribyrnong in due course. [Lucas, 2018.]

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