

Restore the Rail Corridor – Surrey Hills and Mont Albert

Bruce Harvey

The rail corridor running through Surrey Hills and Mont Albert, historically hemmed with peppercorn and gum trees, used to have a delightful rural aspect. It is now an industrial wasteland.

Apparently, this was the price to be paid to remove the boom gates on Mont Albert and Union Roads. Who can deny that they had to go. However, the execution of the project and restitution of the corridor leaves a lot to be desired. We were promised heritage tones, natural textures and extensive tree planting, but the results are skeletal.

While the re-vegetation effort is welcome, there is a lack of density and variety in the new planting and a lack of urgency in restitution. A year after remedial tree planting commenced, many gaps remain along Sunbury Crescent, Beresford Street, Lorne Parade and Churchill Street. The hectares of raw concrete walls, ground surfaces, unusable toilet blocks, menacing 1950's vintage infrastructure and industrial-grade crash barriers resemble a Soviet cityscape



Little attempt has been made to soften industrial edges or tailor things to the leafy green context of Surrey Hills and Mont Albert. Among the few oases are the Mont Albert Village Plaza, Union Road terraces and the over-engineered flood retention rock garden at Lorne Parade Reserve, albeit at the loss of shady open space for impromptu ball games.



What really irks is the lack of collaboration and action by any of the responsible authorities to listen to locals, fix defects and restore neighbourhood character.

Whitehorse and Boroondara Councils are apparently prevented from restoring rail corridor nature strips by a LXRP two-year contract defect period. Beyond its gaunt planting, the LXRP simply refuses to do anything. We are experiencing governance breakdown, in effect an unaccountability system. It is not even clear if the defect period has started, and it could be years before things are sorted out and Councils can undertake streetscape work along the rail corridor.

In this hairball of countervailing regulation and avoidable accountability, the only solution is for locals to get on with things themselves. The Mont Albert Village Gardening Group has commenced this work. As a registered Landcare organisation with over 70 members, it seeks to:

- curate gardens on Mont Albert Plaza consistent with the heritage values of the restored station building and Mont Albert Village;
- revegetate road and rail nature strips with native species;
- provide habitat for local wildlife, in particular native birds;
- set up a community garden that will provide herbs and edible leaves that can be available for community member purposes, and
- bring community members together to work in a supportive way.

Grant money and materials have been provided by Bendigo Bank, MASH Rotary, Bunnings, Yarra Valley Water and private donors. Whitehorse Council and Metro have both declined grant applications. A considerable effort has gone in to remaking the gardens on Mont Albert Plaza, the associated produce gardens in Beresford Street, substantial tree planting along Churchill Street and the commencement of additional planting along Lorne Parade. More will follow as additional money is raised.

Unknown 'graffiti busters' have cleaned up all confronting graffiti in public areas such as the cycleway behind Hamilton Street shops. Much of it goes back many years when the buildings and fences ran beside the rail tracks. Keeping graffiti off concrete walls and other surfaces happens despite the lack of support from Councils, Metro and private property owners, and in some cases the denial of access permits. For obvious reasons graffiti in the rail trench cannot be accessed.

In addition to environmental and aesthetic neglect, there is a lack of urgency to rectify pedestrian, cycleway and road safety in Mont Albert Village. The lack of urgency extends to the re-purposing of Mont Albert Heritage Station building. Following restoration and re-positioning it has remained unoccupied for a year, and it looks like it will remain that way for another year.

In all fairness, with the major re-development at Box Hill and the Suburban Rail Loop doing whatever it is doing, Whitehorse Council has insufficient bandwidth to pay much attention to the west of Elgar Road. The message is clear: if we want the ambiance of heritage Mont Albert and Surrey Hills restored and maintained, we need to organise it and undertake the work ourselves. Many people welcome this, and the Mont Albert Village Gardening Group is open for volunteer members and contributions.

To learn more about the Mont Albert Village Gardening Group, click here
<https://www.montalbertvillage.com/gardening-group> or scan the QR code here:

Photos

Churchill St Industrial landscape

Mont Albert Produce Gardens