

THE DOUBLE BAY-ROSE BAY CYCLEWAY

Why the Present Plan should be Changed

*Submission by the Double Bay and Rose Bay Residents' Associations
November 2021*

Strong resident opposition

There is strong opposition to the present plan by Woollahra LGA residents – on grounds of both safety and amenity. Most councillors are aware of this, but it seems that some have chosen to ignore it, reluctant to upset the cycling lobby or appear politically incorrect when the state government is encouraging 'active transport'. They forget, however, that walkers and runners are also partaking in 'active transport', and they outnumber cyclists. For many older people, the promenade provides the most accessible and level place to exercise in the area.

There is also an assumption that 'serious cyclists' will choose to ride on the narrow cycleway that is planned for the promenade. All the evidence is that this won't happen; they will continue to ride along the road where they can ride in pairs or in groups and where they are not restricted by pedestrians and slower cyclists. This is supported by statements by cycling and transport organisations (see Appendix) and experience in other jurisdictions.

The proposed cycleway will have two separate sections with different risks and disadvantages for pedestrians: a shared path between William Street, Double Bay and the promenade; and a separated path along the promenade. In this paper, we examine the safety issues of the two sections separately, demonstrate that the present plan does not adhere to best practice and explain why the Council should reconsider this plan and resolve to construct the cycleway elsewhere along New South Head Road. We believe that reluctance to do so will demonstrate a lack of concern for pedestrians' safety, especially as the present plan, as far as we are aware, is based on inadequate due diligence and does not follow international or Australian best practice for both shared and cycle paths.

Key points

Based on information we have received from Austroads, Transport for NSW and other organisations, it appears that:

- The width of the shared path between William Street and the Council chambers is not in line with Australian and international best practice, risking pedestrian safety.
- The width of the bi-directional cycleway on the promenade is not in line with Austroads' guidelines, so may risk cyclists' and pedestrians' safety.
- The Council did not commission a report on pedestrian safety before deciding on the present plan.
- It would be irresponsible of the Council to progress with the current plan without further due diligence.

Pedestrian safety on the shared path

The maximum width of the proposed shared path between William Street and the Council Chambers is 2.5 metres, with 'pinch points' down to 1.75 metres in some places. We have been told that this follows Austroads' guidelines. These guidelines recommend a minimum width of between 2.5 and 3.0 metres, increasing with traffic volume. More specifically, Austroads recommends a desirable minimum width of 2.5 metres for a local access path; 3.0 metres for a regional path which is 'part of a regional bicycle network'; 3.5 metres for a recreational path; and a 'greater width' of 4.0 metres 'where there is a high probability of conflict between users (eg people walking dogs)'. As we understand the shared path will be part of a regional cycleway, is intended to be used for recreation, and is regularly used by people walking dogs, it seems that the shared path should be at least 3.0 metres wide and probably as wide as 4.0 metres.

An Austroads executive has told us 'Shared paths are a bad solution...engineers tend to follow the guidelines blindly without understanding the context...Councils tend to build the minimum width as it's cheaper'. We understand that Austroads is expecting to update its guidelines in 2022.

Transport for NSW's senior manager, road standards and technology has said that TfNSW would not generally construct a shared path less than 4.0 metres wide and recommends a width of 5.0 to 6.0 metres where there is commuter traffic. She emphasised that parameters vary according to peak traffic volume and a narrower path could be feasible if cycle traffic is one way only. She recommended that we ask the Council to demonstrate that the proposed 2.5 metre path is fit-for-purpose based on peak traffic and that we might commission an independent road safety audit.

The Council has confirmed that 'reports on pedestrian safety were not commissioned as part of the project'. Asked about the risk to pedestrians on the shared path, it has said 'Cyclists will have to give way to them'. But what if they don't? In other jurisdictions (eg Western Australia) guidelines state that 'Cyclists should always use their bell to alert other path users that they are approaching'. But New South Head Road traffic noise will drown out any bell or warning shout and pedestrians are unlikely to be aware of cyclists coming behind them. TfNSW research showed that only 10% of cyclists slowed down when passing pedestrians and only 3% were observed to warn pedestrians before passing.

Although Council papers acknowledge that more experienced commuter cyclists may choose to continue to ride on the road, the path's designation as a shared path will attract some of them, posing a significant risk to runners and walkers, especially those with prams and dogs. As bicycles don't carry number plates, how can pedestrians trace a cyclist who has failed to give way and caused an accident? Will the Council be liable as construction of the shared path has not followed best practice?

No thought seems to have been given to the additional danger to pedestrian safety where cyclists exit the shared path at the junction of William Street and New South Head Road.

Cyclists already race at speed down the steep slope at the top of William Street; pedestrians have no time to get out of the way and collisions have occurred.

In deciding that a maximum width of 2.5 metres is adequate, the Council seems to have ignored best practice guidelines from other jurisdictions. Examples of best practice are in the Appendix.

Pedestrian and cyclist safety on the promenade

Many of the safety issues on the shared path are also relevant to the promenade. The end of the Covid-19 lockdown has not reduced pedestrian traffic significantly at weekends, as demonstrated by the heavy traffic on Sunday 24 October when groups of pedestrians, many with dogs and some with prams, spilled over onto the space allocated to the proposed cycleway.

The present plan to separate cyclists from pedestrians with a painted white line on the path, instead of the planted separation strip originally proposed by the Council, is likely to result in accidents as pedestrians and runners stray onto the cycleway and cyclists stray onto the footpath to pass each other.

In narrowing the space available for pedestrians, the Council would restrict family groups (often 4-6 people with a dog on a lead) from passing other groups and stopping to talk to friends, and would discourage residents from enjoying one of Woollahra's only level harbourside walks. It would also have a particularly adverse impact on the wellbeing of the elderly and infirm who often have few other opportunities for exercise and, as indicated in the Appendix, can be frightened by the risk of a collision with a bicycle. Transport for New South Wales research showed that 'If people do not feel safe they will not use the facility'.

A key question which doesn't seem to have been explored in detail is whether the proposed single-file, bi-directional cycleway would divert more serious commuter and recreational cyclists from New South Head Road and therefore whether it would increase cyclists' safety. The planned bi-directional cycleway would be 2.0 metres wide; this is not in line with Austroads' guidelines which specify desirable minimum widths of 2.5 metres for a 'local access path', 3.0 metres for a 'regional path' and greater widths where the number of cyclists is high. The Council's 2 December 2019 committee agenda stated: '...more experienced commuter cyclists may choose to continue to ride on the road' and this is supported by comments by cycling organisations quoted in the Appendix. If this is the case and only children, their parents and the odd slow leisure cyclist use the narrow cycleway (as they do now on the promenade without upsetting pedestrians) would it not be safer for experienced cyclists to build a wider cycleway elsewhere along New South Head Road?

The alternatives

We believe that the objectives of the proposed cycleway project must be the safety of walkers, runners and cyclists and the amenity of Woollahra residents. We have shown above that the shared path would not be fit-for-purpose. We have also questioned whether the segregated path would improve experienced cyclists' safety and have suggested it

would increase the risk of injury to all groups of users, while reducing the amenity of residents, especially the aged and infirm. We believe, therefore, that progressing with the present plan without more extensive due diligence and without proactive consultation with residents would be irresponsible.

This does not mean there should not be a cycleway along this section of New South Head Road. Indeed we support its construction provided it can be demonstrated that it will improve the safety of cyclists without increasing the risk of injury to walkers and runners and reducing residents' amenity.

There are at least three other options for the cycleway which – in view of the above findings – should be re-examined:

1. The footpath on the south side of New South Head Road

This footpath has little pedestrian traffic, so is an obvious route for a cycleway. We understand it was rejected by the Council as cyclists would have to cross driveways and road junctions, but

- There are many cycleways in Sydney and elsewhere which cross driveways and junctions without problems.
- Vehicles crossing a cycleway or footpath must give way to cyclists and pedestrians.
- Cyclists would not have to pass the busy and dangerous Woollahra Council entry/exit where vehicles often are waiting to turn right onto New South Head Road.
- Cyclists who join the cycleway from Bondi Beach via the O'Sullivan Road cycleway would not have to cross New South Head Road.
- Cyclists would not have to navigate slowly around pedestrians on the shared path, risking accidents, or choose to ride on the road and avoid this section, defeating the purpose of the cycleway.
- Cyclists would avoid the dangerous hill down the William Street footpath.

2. Along New South Head Road itself

Single direction cycleways could be accommodated on both sides of New South Head Road with a small narrowing of existing vehicle lanes (which might slow vehicle speeds but would not increase peak hour traffic congestion) and no loss of parking. These would be similar to the cycleways in O'Sullivan Road and could adopt the European system of road markings which separate vehicles and cycles successfully.

In addition to avoiding the current plan's disadvantages, single direction cycleways, with the ability to stray into an empty vehicle lane to pass other cyclists, would be more likely to attract commuter and recreational cyclists than the narrow one-way path on the promenade. Therefore, it would be more likely to achieve the Council's objective of increasing cyclists' safety and would not prejudice the safety of pedestrians or reduce residents' amenity. In this way, it would satisfy all stakeholders.

3. Restriction of cyclists at peak times

A compromise could be to prohibit cyclists' use of the promenade path at peak times for pedestrians – i.e. weekends and public holidays (and perhaps between 9.30am and 3.00pm on weekdays). Restrictions on weekends and public holidays have been adopted by Northern Beaches Council for its shared zones along Manly's Marine Parade and East Esplanade. If this compromise were adopted, the restriction on cyclists would need to be enforced by regular ranger patrols.

This solution, however, would not address the danger to pedestrians at other times on the shared path between William Street and the promenade.

Conclusion

Our aim in writing this paper is to ensure optimum safety for walkers, runners and cyclists. We believe that the present plan has unnecessary risks for all three groups and further evaluation is needed.

It seems from our research that best practice may have changed since Council's original plan was developed in 2019, and we have been told by Austroads that there may be changes to its guidance in 2022. Accordingly, we trust that the Council will undertake further research and due diligence and reconsider the two alternative options or the compromise proposed above. As part of this research, we recommend that there is an independent road safety audit, as suggested by TfNSW, including an audit of the number of cyclists, walkers and runners between Double Bay and Rose Bay at peak times (which will vary between the three groups). To ensure community support, we suggest that residents are involved in briefing the auditors and evaluating its findings so there is complete transparency.

We look forward to discussing this paper with the Council and agreeing a satisfactory way forward.

Appendix

VicRoads: 'In most circumstances, new shared user paths should be 3.0 metres wide, especially for new paths on the Principal Bicycle Network or the Metropolitan Trail Network'.

MRCagney (Melbourne transport engineers): 'It is clear that sharing of footpaths by people cycling or on foot introduces risks of cycle-pedestrian collision. People walking and riding bicycles travel at very different levels of kinetic energy and should be clearly separated. This clear separation is not possible if people bicycling and walking share footpaths that are constrained spaces designed for walking.'

Western Australia: '4.0 metres - standard minimum width for all new principal shared paths built by WA State Government and preferred for other shared paths along primary routes'. '3.0 metres - recommended for new local government shared paths, particularly those with a recreational function'. '2.5 metres – paths of this width are only suitable for local and secondary routes where volumes are low.'

Queensland: 'Where people walking and cycling are moving at speed and sharing space it is considered that a 1.0 metre width should be used on the basis of the design envelope for each person walking or riding. This means a 3.0 metre wide pathway would allow two people to walk side by side and a bicycle rider to pass with adequate operating space and clearance.'

Canberra.bike: 'Shared paths are not the best option for principal bike routes. The same space and material carries greater capacity when the paths are separated. No doubt the paths are safer too. Principal cycle routes should be cycle only paths and separated from pedestrians. Shared paths are confusing for pedestrians.'

Victoria Walks 'has significant reservations regarding shared paths and how they impact walking, particularly vulnerable walkers. Generally, slow moving recreational cyclists may be able to share paths with walkers. However, walkers do not generally mix well with commuter or sports cyclists. Recent evidence suggests that shared paths can be particularly hazardous for cyclists... For example, a study of cycling crashes in ACT found that 36% were on shared paths... Road managers should avoid converting footpaths to shared paths as they may be 'designing out' the most vulnerable road users – older walkers and those with a disability ... For older seniors, footpaths are critical to their personal mobility and their capacity to lead active, independent lives. For those aged 75 and over, walking makes up 77% of their total physical activity... In a survey of 1,128 Victorians aged 60 and over, 39% identified bicycle riders on shared paths as a moderate or major constraint to their walking.'

Living Streets Aoteara (NZ): 'We do not support shared paths replacing existing footpaths...Walking has more significant health benefits per kilometre than any other mode.'

In one survey in Sydney, 8% of pedestrians reported being knocked over by a person riding a bike and 33% reported having been frightened by a person riding too fast.'

Cycling UK: 'Minimum required width for a shared cycle/pedestrian pathway is 3.0 metres. However if flows are high (so that cyclists travelling in opposite directions frequently have to pass each other) then the minimum width should be 5.0 metres'.

UK Department of Transport: 'A width of 3.0 metres should generally be regarded as the preferred minimum for a two-way cycle track on an unregulated route...It is important to engage with disabled people and older people as they are likely to be amongst the users most concerned about shared use proposals.'

Sustrans (UK national cycle network custodian): 'Recommended effective width of shared use routes – absolute minimum 2.5 metres; desirable minimum 3.0 metres.'

Oxfordshire County Council (UK): 'Usage should dictate the width of such paths, with 3.0 metres the recommended width, 2.5 metres the minimum.'

John Parkin, Professor of Transport Engineering, University of the West of England: 'Pedestrians need to be separated from cyclists...the Dutch separate them and the Danes separate them...the cycleway needs to be 3.0 metres wide and the minimum for pedestrians needs to be 1.8 metres.' See video: The Separation of Cyclists and Pedestrians (vimeo.com).

Shared path along the Yarra, Melbourne: We have been told by three sources that there have been accidents between cyclists and pedestrians on the shared pathway along the Yarra, although we have not verified this ourselves. [Did the Council check this before deciding on its present plan?]