

Victoria Walks: a new model for creating walk-friendly neighbourhoods and cities

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Abstract:

This paper will highlight the challenges of walking advocacy within the Australian context of a culture dominated by urban sprawl and private car based travel. It will describe the enormous health, social, environmental and economic costs of Australia's car dependency. The paper will articulate the decision by the *Victorian Health Promotion Foundation* (VicHealth) to fund the establishment of *Victoria Walks* as an independent walking-for-transport health promotion body to (charity) provide leadership, promote walking and support local action.

It will outline the strategies Victoria Walks is enacting to convince governments, communities and individuals of the need to take action and bring about significant, sustained change and create walking-friendly environments. These strategies are built on the premise that in safe, attractive and vibrant communities, people are more likely to walk and be physically active and experience a better quality of life.

The paper will describe in detail the benefits and challenges associated with the approach taken by Victoria Walks to encourage and support communities to establish 'walking action groups' (WAGs). The WAG model centres on supporting communities to undertake local walking promotion and advocacy in their neighbourhoods, with the overall goal of creating more walkable communities.

The paper will showcase the opportunities provided by the WAG model. It will also outline how the Victoria Walks has garnered significant support from local councils and key government departments for its activities. This model for action has enabled Victoria Walks to gain a significant leadership and advocacy profile within a relatively short period.

Victoria Walks envisages vibrant, supportive and strong neighbourhoods and communities where people can and do choose to walk wherever possible.

Ben Rossiter has a background in cross sectoral partnerships, research, policy and program development, community development and health promotion. He has a long interest in walking, sustainable communities and cities. He has presented papers and published articles and book chapters on walking and urban experience. The theme of his doctoral dissertation was walking in urban environments.

Victoria Walks: a new model for creating walk-friendly neighbourhoods and cities

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Background

Australia is one of the most highly urbanised and car dependent countries on earth. Not surprisingly, it is also becoming one of the most physically inactive and obese populations. Increasing the level of physical activity among the population has become one of the most pressing health issues for Australian governments at all levels.

The challenge for car dependent cultures like Australia is to significantly increase the level of walking, particularly for every day purposes. However, underpinning this challenge is a strong need to create more walkable environments. A further challenge lies in introducing the notion of walking advocacy in an environment that is largely unfamiliar with the concept.

This paper will outline the learnings from the first 18 months of operations of Victoria Walks—an independent walking health promotion body in Victoria, Australia. It will reflect on the effectiveness and challenges of establishing an overarching walking health promotion body, and consider in detail the task of mobilising local action to create walk-friendly environments.

Victoria Walks is funded and supported by the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (VicHealth). It was developed and established by VicHealth in response to an identified need for a walking promotion body that could represent the needs of walkers and increase the level of walking in the Victorian community.

Victoria Walks envisages vibrant, supportive and strong neighbourhoods and communities where people can and do choose to walk wherever possible. Its mission is more people walking every day. It aims to achieve this by:

- Providing state-wide leadership through submissions, resource provision;
- Influencing policy development and research;
- Encouraging participation in walking and public discussion about walking; and
- Support local action to increase walking and create walk-friendly environments.

Physical inactivity and Australian cities

Walking has substantial physical and mental health benefits and is the most prevalent moderate-intensity physical activity of adults (Armstrong 2000). Yet despite this, there has been a dramatic decline in the level of walking across the Australian population in recent decades.

Numerous factors have influenced the decline in walking for transport, health or recreation:

- poor urban form and amenity resulting from low density urban sprawl;
- poor infrastructure to support walking;

- the time constraints of individuals, which relate in part to changes in family structures and work patterns;
- inadequate and infrequent public transport;
- general concerns of safety, including the hazards posed by speeding traffic;
- individual's perception of convenience and/or love of the car; and
- an absence of local destinations relevant to everyday life.

The decreasing number of children walking independently is indicative of the massive task walking promotion faces.

Since the early 1970s there has been a significant decline in the rate of children walking to school. Between 1971 and 2003, the percentage Australian children aged 5-14 who walk to school has more than halved (van der Ploeg 2008). This has serious consequences in the short term: lower activity levels are linked with higher rates of childhood obesity and a range of preventable diseases. In the longer term, this trend is concerning because childhood patterns of inactivity tend to persist and carry into adulthood (Thomson 2009).

A similar drop in the level of walking to work has also occurred. In 1976, 9% of trips to work in Victoria were walked (ABS 1994), but by 2001 less than 4% were walked. By 2006 walking to work had slightly increased to around 4.5% (DOT 2010).

The decline in walking is extremely significant as physical inactivity and obesity rise at alarming rates. The total cost of obesity to the Australian economy is estimated to be \$37.7 billion pa (Medibank 2010). This is a worrying figure in a country which, although large in geographical area, has a relatively small population of 22.5 million people, of which nearly 90% live in urban areas (ABS 2010).

Apart from physical inactivity costs, there are numerous other costs associated with private car dominated travel. In the Victorian capital of Melbourne, the cost of traffic congestion (including private time costs, business time costs, the extra cost of operating vehicles and the cost of air pollution) is projected to rise from \$1.2 billion in 2005 to \$3 billion by 2020 (BTRE 2007). The economic cost of road trauma is more than \$4 billion a year – which does not include the emotional effects of road trauma on families and communities (TAC 2010).

Walkability in a car dominated culture

Walking has the potential to be a key antidote to an unsustainable, unhealthy culture: increasing walking, particularly for everyday purposes, should be a national priority.

Clearly, creating behaviour change – changing the habits of individuals in large numbers – needs to be a focus. But it is important to consider why those habits of inactivity have become entrenched in our communities – and that involves analysing and working to change the factors that conspire to discourage walking in our communities.

Victoria Walks' mission is 'more people walking every day'. Achieving this will require more than encouraging individuals to walk more. It will require governments, communities and individuals to be convinced of the need to take action and bring about significant, sustained effort to create environments that *people want to walk in*.

There is a clear link between neighbourhood walkability and the level of walking (Bentley 2010). People are more likely to walk and be physically active in safe, attractive and vibrant communities, and experience a better quality of life (WHO 2006).

The key four obstacles to neighbourhood walkability in Victoria, as identified by Victoria Walks, are outlined below.

Low density housing

Australia's attachment to low density housing is a key obstacle to walkability, because it greatly increases the distances that individuals need to travel to fulfil their daily tasks: travelling to and from work and school, shopping, visiting friends etc.

Low-density housing also reduces the provision of public open space, working on the assumption (and reinforcing the attitude) that people would prefer to use their own backyards, rather than shared spaces, for leisure and recreation. It is well documented that those living in more walkable neighbourhoods with higher density, better connectivity and public spaces walk more than those who do not (Owen 2007; Van Dyck 2009).

Speed limits

High speed limits in suburban streets create a major hazard for walkers, and walkers respond accordingly – by preferring to drive. Higher speeds also give force to the belief that it is generally quicker to drive for short trips than walk.

Although the default speed limit for built-up areas in Victoria dropped from 60 to 50 km/h in 2001, this speed is far too high for most suburban streets. A 40 km/h limit is in place in a small number of major shopping strips, and has been introduced around schools at school travel times; however the speed limits on most surrounding streets remain at 50 km/h or higher.

After extensive local community consultations and large scale traffic slowing treatments, a few inner-city councils have successfully lobbied the roads authority to lower the speed limit to 40 km/h in some local areas.¹ Yet in other areas of consistently high pedestrian traffic – such as Melbourne's central business district – speed limits remain at 50 km/h or more.

Vehicle-centric road, transport and safety policy

Victorian transport and road policy is heavily weighted towards vehicle, rather than pedestrian, imperatives. For example, Victorian has relatively low standards of driver duty-of-care. In contrast to many European and Asian countries, in which drivers must anticipate pedestrian and cyclist errors and take evasive action to avoid a collision, Victorian drivers are generally not considered to be at fault in a casualty crash if they are obeying the road rules. In more

enlightened countries 'the onus is on drivers to prove no-fault when in collisions with pedestrians and cyclists' (Garrard 2008:7).

¹ The City of Yarra now has 40 km/h speed limits on 75% of local roads in the municipality.

Traffic management in Victoria is similarly driver-focused, prioritising the movement of the greatest number of vehicles between traffic lights, rather than supporting a high volume of pedestrians on crossings.

Even the Victorian approach to road safety centres on vehicles. For example, the State's road authority has a specific objective of reducing the number of pedestrian fatalities – but with no objective of increasing the number of pedestrians.

Rather than reducing road danger by placing pedestrians at the heart of road safety, Victoria's official road safety strategy *arrive alive* seeks to protect pedestrian safety by encouraging 'safe walking practices', imposing 'penalties for illegal pedestrian behaviour', and introducing control measures to prevent pedestrians from getting in the way of vehicles.

The onus is clearly on the pedestrian to stay safe rather than legislating for and encouraging a pedestrian-friendly driving culture.

Policy links between walking, health and other outcomes

Walking is clearly an activity that needs to be supported by – and has significant benefits across – other policy areas.

Although the increasing focus on walking for health is welcome, stronger links must be made between walking and road policy, urban and commercial planning, public transport provision, strategies to increase social cohesion, and reducing the economic cost of a car-based culture². Some recent important legislative changes and policy developments such as the *Transport Integration Act* (2010), and *Urban Design Charter*, and the *Pedestrian Access Strategy* indicate better outcomes for active transport, however whether they lead to sustained change remains to be seen.

The Victoria Walks approach

Clearly, there is a paradox at work. People are walking less – at least in part because the environments in which they live and work becoming less walkable over time. However, as people walk less, the environment has shifted to accommodate their practices: that is, communities become more supportive of car-based travel.

Recreating the culture and practice of walking in Victorian communities is no small task. It depends at least in part on communities becoming more walkable. This requires state intervention: governments and policy makers need to move away from the car-centric perspectives of recent decades, and look to walking as a solution to a number of serious societal challenges.

At the same time, though, individuals must be encouraged to walk. Individuals, and then groups, will only come to value walking by experiencing it. Once they value it, they are more likely to support – and actively advocate for – government efforts to improve walkability.

² Organisations such as the Heart Foundation have played a leading role in initiatives like *Active by Design* (creating environments that support active living) and its collaboration with local governments (and now Victoria Walks) in the Safe Speed Interest Group to promote 30 km/h speed limits in built environments.

Further, people *reward and encourage* governments for investing in walking-friendly policy by walking. If governments move to create walking-friendly environments, and no-one uses them for walking, they are less likely to continue to invest. Victoria Walks strongly believes that, for change to happen, action must be taken at both ends of the equation: walkable communities and people who walk.

Advocacy and partnership with government

Governments need to be encouraged, through public conversation, to consider walking as a key consideration across a range of policy areas.

This has already started to happen in Victoria: there has recently been recognition within Government in general, and within the transport arena in particular, that walking has been neglected in transport policy and investment, and that there is a lack of clarity in the roles and responsibilities between various state agencies and local governments.

In fact, Victoria Walks recently contributed to the development of the Victorian Government's *Pedestrian Access Strategy*, and will play a central role in its implementation. The organisation is speaking with and influencing policy makers across a range of portfolios, including health, roads, employment and trade, urban planning and community development.

Working with community

Victoria Walks is well aware that 'the community' is essentially a collection of individuals or small groups with varying levels of interest in, support for and commitment to walking. Victoria Walks employs the model depicted Figure 1 below in planning and carrying out its work with the community. Table 1 summarises our analysis of each of these segments.

Figure one: Community segmentation by population size and commitment

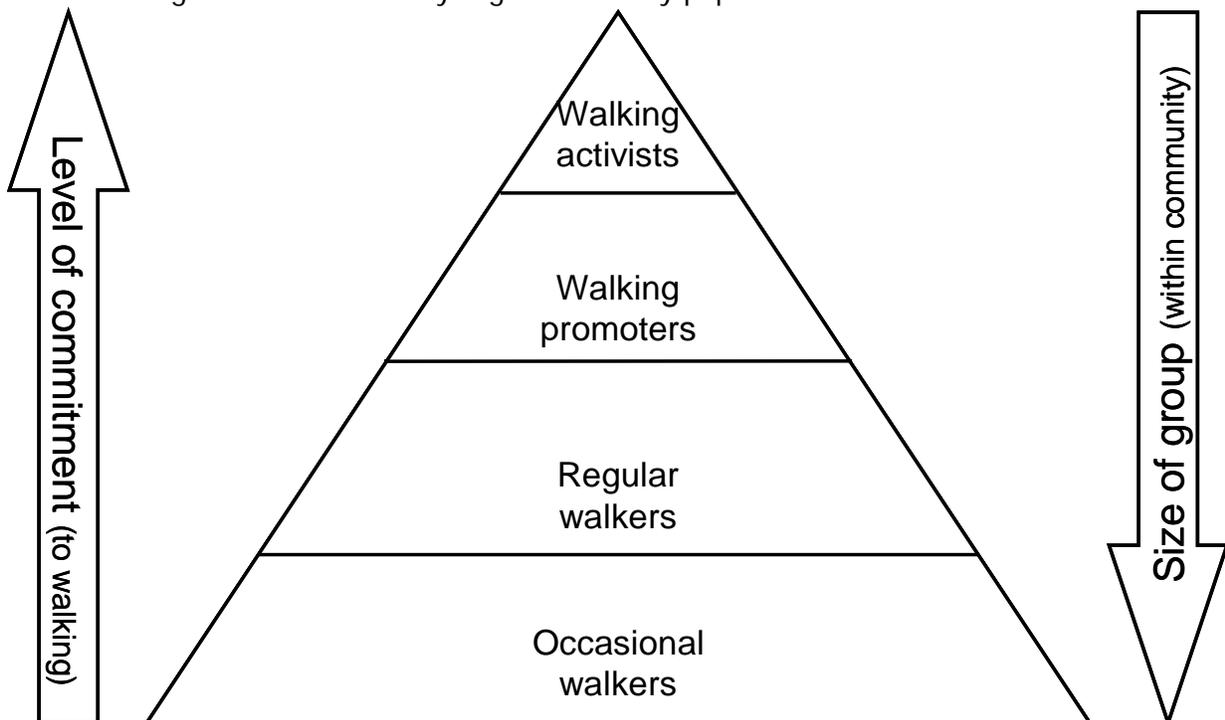


Table 1: Analysis of community segments

Group	Size of group	Participation level	Commitment level	Potential for change
<i>Occasional walkers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very large 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occasional, largely unconscious walkers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uncommitted, possibly resistant 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased participation • Possibility of increased commitment
<i>Regular walkers</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Large 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular walkers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personally committed • Unconcerned about other's walking habits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased participation • Increased commitment, especially to others' walking
<i>Walking promoters</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular walkers • Group organisers, supporting or promoting walking in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personally committed • Committed to promoting and supporting walking in the community 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translate commitment to walking in the community to walkable communities
<i>Walking advocates</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Very small 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular walkers • Possibly group organisers • Advocates for walking and walkable communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highly personally and socially committed • Committed to promoting and supporting walking in the community • Committed to creating walkable communities (generally locally) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Harness, support and encourage commitment to creating walkable communities • This group has the greatest potential to influence policy and practice at the local level

Many of the activities Victoria Walks is undertaking to increase participation in and commitment to walking in the community have been modelled on the successful approaches in other jurisdictions.

These activities, which largely target the first three segments outlined in Table 1 include:

- Giving people suggestions on how to incorporate walking into their busy lives through a range of mechanisms;
- Focusing on letting people know where they can walk. In development is an on-line mapping utility to map walking routes around Victoria, which will enable users to search maps by location, distance, difficulty and suitability of walk for certain purposes (e.g. transport, recreation, with children, for older people), upload their own walks, share photos taken along the walks, and rate or comment on posted walks or routes;
- Creating an online forum for individuals to use to find, join or start a walking group, and converse about walking generally;
- Establishing a strong presence on social media such as Facebook and Twitter, including running campaigns and competitions, and developing specific applications to build on and promote walking;
- Developing a substantial workplace walking related intervention for employers to implement and evaluate;
- Undertaking media advocacy and seeking opportunities to speak publicly about the importance of walking;
- Creating strategic alliances with complementary bodies, such as sustainable transport, health promotion, community and local government networks; and
- Promoting and supporting walking events organised by third parties – and seeking their endorsement in return.

Of course, messaging designed to encourage walking is central to these activities.

Also messaging which introduces the idea of walkable neighbourhoods, what they might look like, and how they might be achieved is also used, because of its potential to change community attitudes towards walking, and raise awareness among individuals about the importance of walkability to the social, economic, environmental, and health of the whole community.

But these messages have already been internalised by one key segment of the community. As a result, one of the central – and most innovative – pillars of Victoria Walks work focuses on targeting, encouraging and supporting the small group of people in the community who have the greatest opportunity to make a difference to the whole population: walking activists.

Walking Action Groups

Victoria Walks believes that identifying and encouraging Walking Action Groups (WAGs) – small, committed groups of individuals who are seeking to improve a particular aspect of walking in their own communities – has been a critical factor in its success in advocating to government, gaining a profile in the broader community and earning the authority to represent the needs of walkers.

The central focus of this activity is to encourage and enable communities to increase their control over their health and improve their health by developing the knowledge and skills to promote walking and walkable environments.

The approach is based around a central website, which guides groups as they work to transform their local communities into walk-friendly environments. The site includes:

- tips on community and government advocacy;
- tools and guidelines for running awareness and profile-raising campaigns;
- information on assessing walkability and identifying specific problems;
- guidance on community engagement;
- specific information about the mechanics of running a group – such as running meetings and adopting charters and objectives; and
- case studies, resources and news.

WAGs are also given the opportunity to develop their online presence through the use of micro sites attached to the Victoria Walks website.

WAGs in action

The first WAG was formed when the Victoria Walks website went live in May 2009. Over the course of the first year, 12 WAGs were formed and started work to address issues including:

- Safer crossings for pedestrians;
- Supporting slower speed limits (40 km/h) at a local shopping strip;
- Closure of a local street to car traffic to promote more walking to local shops;
- Promoting greater appreciation and awareness of local features and landmarks;
- Finding ways to improve access to local community facilities; and
- Making local streets more walkable through art, improved traffic design and improved amenity.

WAGs' activities have also included advocating to local councils about specific local concerns, conducting walking audits, organising community meetings and community walks, participating in community consultations, collecting petitions and presenting at an international conference.

Members of one local community had unsuccessfully lobbied for a crossing at a major roundabout for over 20 years, before they formed a WAG and conducted a successful campaign for a \$245,000 signalised crossing (www.victoriawalks.org.au/east_ivanhoe/).

While the numbers are small, the impact of WAGs is potentially enormous in local areas: they have paved the way for a new, collective community voice on walkability issues.

The activities that target the more populous groups represented in Figure 1 (page 7) have the potential to make significant differences in the lives of *individuals*. However, Victoria Walks believes that WAGs represent the strongest single opportunity to transform *communities* because of their commitment to walking.

This belief is borne out by the fact that WAG members were the main community consultation for the Victorian Department of Transport's recently released *Pedestrian Access Strategy* (DOT 2010).

Individual local councils around Victoria have also actively sort to consult with WAGs and other registered Victoria Walks website users when developing walking, active transport or other related strategies.

Benefits and challenges of the WAG model

Victoria Walks has observed enormous benefits in concentrating resources on the establishment of WAGs.

These groups legitimised and elevated the organisation's broader advocacy and promotion activities. The model was highly regarded by a number of government departments and local governments, and was a key contributor to the decision by policy makers to invite Victoria Walks to participate in national forums and workshops and sit on government advisory committees.

Along with Victoria Walks' overarching promotion and advocacy activities, the WAG model contributed to Victoria Walks being invited on both the Working and Steering Groups for Victoria's walking-for-transport *Pedestrian Access Strategy*.

And clearly, WAGs are already starting to make a real difference to the walkability of their own local communities, which can only serve to encourage walking.

However, despite the benefits of the model there are some challenges or limitations with such an approach.

Participating in a WAG requires a level of time and commitment which the majority of the community do not, or cannot, offer. The target audience for this sort of activity is a very small proportion of the population.

It also requires enormous resources to 'recruit' people to start or join a WAG. The average member of the public – the vast majority of people – would not be motivated to join or start a WAG unless they already possessed a high level of commitment to walking as a concept, or were strongly concerned about a particular local issue.

The way forward

We need more walkable communities and we need more people walking in those communities. Achieving one without the other is unlikely to secure the level of policy and cultural change required to attain the social, health and economic outcomes we desire.

Victoria Walks' approach is to work simultaneously towards both ends. Our government advocacy and continued commitment to supporting and encouraging WAGs will hold the key to changing our communities so that they better meet the needs of pedestrians.

Our work to encourage and increase participation and commitment among occasional walkers, regular walkers and walking promoters has the potential to significantly increase the number of people who walk. These activities will also serve to build a mass supporter base – both for walking and for Victoria Walks.

Partnerships will continue to be important in our efforts to create a public appetite for change. We need to find ways to re-introduce the idea of everyday walking to a car centred population that at best does not value walking and at worst is anti-walking.

Victoria Walks is a fledgling organisation working towards major cultural, policy and behavioural change with has very limited staff and budget resources.

In its favour, the organisation does have a number of significant assets, including support from some significant influencers inside government and interest from potential industry partners, funders and supporters. With all these issues in mind, over the next three years, the organisation will:

- Focus on creating maximum impact and exposure by focusing on online, event, partnership and 'piggybacking' activities, rather than advertising or media promotion.
- Positioning itself as a source of information, guidance and expertise about walking;
- Reach audiences on their own terms by developing a good understanding of the interests, influences, concerns and information sources for each segment of the community, and making the best use of this information to develop activities that increase their participation and commitment; and
- Leverage the 'expert' status of the organisation, and the growth in community participation in and support for walking, to maximise advocacy opportunities with stakeholders and potential partners.

As an organisation, Victoria Walks has the potential to influence individuals, small groups and major stakeholders (such as government).

Success in influencing stakeholders will be significantly amplified if there is community support for change: in other words, as more individuals embrace walking, they will become more aware of and concerned by the barriers to walking (for themselves and for others), and more likely to support or even advocate for change.

They will not do that if they don't walk, or don't care about walking – so creating an appetite for walking among individuals, families and groups in the community has to be a key focus for the organisation. With that in place, Victoria Walks can effectively address issues such as the built environment and housing density, speed and a hierarchy of road safety based around pedestrians.

There is no doubt that, for a relatively small but growing organisation, the WAG model provided an initial impetus and profile upon which other activities and further development could be based. However, it is clear that marrying this targeted approach with activities that develop a mass supporter base will be critical to Victoria Walks success, and to the future of walking in Victoria.

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