

Response from the Aireys Inlet & District Association (AIDA)

1. Summary

AIDA believes that the development of any strategy regarding the possibility of increasing infrastructure and facilities for long vehicles visiting the Surf Coast must take into account the strong support for preserving our natural coastal environment demonstrated by residents, ratepayers and visitors to the area, and equally take into account their relative aversion to increased infrastructure such as long vehicle parking and caravan parks.

The number and size (particularly in the case of camper vans) of long vehicles have greatly increased over the past decade, and these vehicles have significant negative impacts including impeding traffic, blocking views and requiring provision of significant amounts of hard surface infrastructure for long vehicle parking and overnight accommodation. Further increases in the number of long vehicles would exacerbate the already dangerous situation on the Surf Coast stemming from the severe lack of exit routes from the Surf Coast in times of bush fire emergency.

Like most if not all areas of the Surf Coast, the coastal communities of Eastern View, Fairhaven, Moggs Creek and Aireys Inlet have limited capacity to accommodate more long vehicles without degrading the natural environment and diminishing the experience of residents and tourists alike. A recent example has been the outraged response of the community when a proposal was made to site long vehicle parking on the Great Ocean Road (GOR) in a location such that views of the beautiful Painkalac Valley would be endangered. In that case a solution was found by locating two long vehicle parking spaces on the GOR in the ‘bottom shops’ area of the Aireys Inlet township. In response to future demand it should be possible to add two more such spaces in the same location.

The lighthouse precinct of Aireys Inlet has suffered years of increasing congestion with cars, buses, caravans and camper vans, leading to the perception that much more parking needed to be provided, particularly for long vehicles. In fact, after 15 years of consultants reports, community activism and collaboration with local councillors and the shire’s planning and infrastructure departments, the recent solution turned out to lie in improved traffic management, and in particular in implementation of revised directional and regulatory signage on the GOR – see “A case study – management of long vehicle traffic and parking in the Aireys Inlet lighthouse precinct” (Section 4 below).

AIDA believes that encouraging touring with long vehicles by providing increased infrastructure will not add to the economy of the Surf Coast, but risk degrading its landscape and threatening its value as a tourist destination. Attracting tourists travelling by car or public transport to stay longer on the Surf Coast, particularly in the ‘off-seasons’, would provide much greater benefit to the local economy - see “Nature-based tourism in Aireys Inlet” (Section 5 below).

2. Our organisation

AIDA is a voluntary organisation devoted to preserving the natural environment and character of the area of the Surf Coast that lies between Eastern View and Urquhart Bluff, including the coastal communities of Eastern View, Moggs Creek, Fairhaven, and Aireys Inlet. AIDA members include ratepayers, residents, their families and others who share a love of our district. Our membership varies between 300 and 400 individuals, representing more than 200 households.

AIDA's aims are listed on attachment A. Relevant to this response are the following subset of our aims:

- to generate and support respect for the unique character of the Aireys Inlet area
- to strongly support environmentally sensitive residential and commercial development by contributing to the formulation and upholding of the guidelines embodied in planning documents such as the Aireys Inlet to Eastern View Strategy and the Neighbourhood Character Overlay of the *Surfcoast Planning Scheme*
- to support an environmentally and aesthetically sensitive policy for traffic and parking management and road and pathway construction
- to support the conservation of the beaches, dunes and cliff areas in co-operation with the foreshore management authorities
- to support conservation of the Painkalac Creek Valley and its environs, including the wetlands, freehold and public land
- to preserve the timbered hills surrounding the residential settlements by supporting strict control of further urban growth
- to promote Aireys Inlet as a destination for nature-based tourism that offers a variety of walking experiences including our beaches, cliff platforms, wetlands, estuary and river, and bush trails in the National and Forest Parks of the hinterland

A major purpose of AIDA is raising community awareness of, and canvassing the community's views on, issues of significance in the district. Over the nearly fifty years of AIDA's existence, the community has displayed remarkable constancy of opinion on the importance of preservation of our natural environment and the desirability of retaining and conserving the special rural-coastal character of our settlements and their environs. In response to this robust and consistent community feedback the Shire has developed planning tools such as local provisions and neighbourhood character overlays, which in conjunction with current zoning regulations has largely protected the existing low key character of our residential communities and two small commercial zones, and preserved views of the pristine environment, which is of great tourism and heritage value.

In 2012 AIDA was very pleased to learn that our community's strong support for preservation of our natural environment was closely mirrored by the results of community consultations and surveys performed by the Great Ocean Road Coast Committee (GORCC) during development of their Coastal Management Plan (CMP), which overwhelmingly supported preservation of our natural coastal environment. When asked what they value about the coast, a majority of respondents (which included residents, holiday home owners and visitors to the area) nominated various aspects of the natural environment, including its visual beauty, native wildlife and the seclusion and escape it offers. The lack of or limited amount of development along the coastline was another significant response. When queried on their vision for the coast, most respondents described their perfect coast as not significantly different from today – clean, accessible, undeveloped with natural values protected and advanced. When respondents were given tokens to be allocated across various options, the 'natural environment' received by far the highest number of tokens. 'Access', 'infrastructure' and 'community involvement' received moderate numbers of tokens, while 'caravan parks', 'cultural heritage' and 'commercial activities' received the smallest numbers of tokens. A more detailed report of the GORCC consultations is provided in an article published in the AIDA Newsletter in July 2012 (see attached, Appendix B).

3. Responses to questions and issues raised by AECOM

Overall impression of long vehicle use in the region?

- The number and size (particularly in the case of camper vans) of long vehicles have greatly increased over the past decade, likely due to government campaigns to attract visitors to the GOR tourist route, the growing populations of Melbourne and Geelong, increasing numbers of baby boomer retirees, and the opening of the Geelong ring road.

Issues and concerns surrounding the use of long vehicles in the region

- Long vehicles have significant negative impacts including impeding traffic, blocking views and requiring provision of significant amounts of hard surface infrastructure for long vehicle parking (including the large sweeps of road required for access and egress due to their large turning circles) and overnight accommodation. Many if not all towns and tourist areas on the Surf Coast have limited space for such infrastructure, or if they have the space, it may not be usable without degrading the natural environment and diminishing the experience of Surf Coast residents and tourists alike. Given the difficulties in it ever being possible to cater for the expected increased influx of large vehicles to the Surf Coast, AIDA believes it will be crucial to provide accurate information on tourism websites to alert potential travellers before they set out as to where they can expect to find long vehicle parking and where such parking is likely to be very limited, especially during peak times or peak periods.
- The project overview notes that tourists using tour buses and minibuses rarely spend much time or money in the Surf Coast Shire, but seems to suggest that encouraging overnight stays of caravans and camper vans would add substantially to the local economy. AIDA disagrees with this supposition since apart from relatively inexpensive overnight fees in caravan parks, tourists choosing to travel in caravans and camper vans frequently do so to avoid the costs associated with hotel, motel or rented accommodation and restaurant meals. Encouragement of tourists travelling by car (or public transport) to stay longer on the Surf Coast, particularly in the ‘off seasons’, would have much greater economic benefits (see Section 4 “Nature-based tourism in Aireys Inlet” below).
- The growth in numbers of large and very large camper vans in recent years has magnified the problems facing the shire. An advantage of caravans is that on a multi day visit the van can be left in the caravan park while the owners tour the area and visit tourist hot spots where parking is at a premium. The original minibus-sized camper vans, still frequently in use by younger travellers, can be accommodated in normal car spaces. However, even when several days are spent in an area, large camper vans (except for the very few luxury versions that tow a small car) have to be driven to every destination, from the supermarket to tourism sites, thus crowding out car travellers and increasing demand for provision of expanded parking infrastructure.

Constraints that contribute to or exacerbate the problem

- A major constraint is that much of the GOR is nestled between the ocean and the National and Forest Parks of the hinterland. Any expansion of long vehicle parking or caravan parks on the GOR have a very high likelihood of degrading the natural environment and spoiling the iconic views that are the greatest draw cards of the Surf Coast. New sites for development of infrastructure for long vehicles in townships are essentially nonexistent and extremely limited in the hinterland. Even sites in the hinterland would have to be well shielded to avoid spoiling the environmental values,

and the effect on local residents of streams of large vehicles traveling between these sites and the GOR would have to be carefully considered.

- A second major constraint is the severe lack of exit routes from the Surf Coast in times of bush fire emergency, or even just on code red days, when visitors and residents alike are urged to leave the area. Encouraging increased numbers of long vehicles into the area would greatly exacerbate this problem.

Opportunities and solutions

- For opportunities, please see “Nature-based tourism in Aireys Inlet” in Section 5 below.
- For ‘solutions’ please see the case study in Section 4 below.

4. A case study – management of long vehicle traffic and parking in the Aireys Inlet lighthouse precinct

The Split Point Lighthouse in Aireys Inlet is accessible only via residential streets. Over recent decades, government campaigns using the lighthouse as a focus to attract visitors to the GOR tourist route, coupled with growing population pressures, increasing numbers of baby boomer retirees, ever larger numbers and sizes of caravans and camper vans and finally the opening of the Geelong ring road resulted in the lighthouse precinct becoming ever more congested with cars, buses, caravans and camper vans, an unpleasant situation for residents and visitors alike. Despite the commissioning, starting in 1999, of a series of traffic management plans from independent consultants, little progress was made until a GORCC-chaired group involving representatives of the Surf Coast Shire, AIDA, the Aireys Inlet Tourism and Traders Association and a local representative generated an admirable set of objectives in 2007:

- Reduce vehicle traffic in the whole precinct
- Manage tourist traffic so it does not spread throughout the Precinct (by providing clear direction to tourist traffic about where to park)
- Provide a designated area for long vehicle parking (buses and cars with caravans) in the vicinity of the Skate Park and bottom shops
- Maintain access for local traffic
- Encourage low vehicle speeds and shared use of roads
- Reduce aesthetic and physical impacts of roads, parking and vehicles on coastal reserves and estuary margins
- Reflect the findings/outcomes of the Citizens Jury, SPLTPAC and other recent processes to leave the roads unsealed in the Precinct.

A traffic consultant then prepared a revised Traffic Management Plan that largely ignored these objectives, so in April 2010 AIDA took the unusual step of not just commenting on the revised plan, but actually proposing their own traffic management plan for the precinct. A modified form of this plan was unanimously accepted by council on 25 August 2010. The resolutions are reproduced below (see in particular Resolutions 4 and 9):

1. Note the Split Point Lighthouse Precinct Traffic Management Plan.
2. Remove all existing lighthouse vehicular directional signage from the Noble Sanctuary entrance to Inlet Crescent North and also from the Lighthouse Road intersection and, except for disabled and pedestrian signage, from elsewhere within the precinct.
3. Redevelop the skate park car park providing increased car parking and also long vehicle and coach parking taking into account the needs of the local community and their use of this precinct.
4. Prohibit buses, vehicles towing caravans and trailers from entering the precinct and direct all traffic to the redeveloped skate park car park whilst providing new Great Ocean Road signage at and before the Noble Sanctuary entrance to Inlet Crescent North confirming same.
5. Request Great Ocean Road Coast Committee (GORCC) that any redevelopment of the Step Beach car park

should avoid impact on existing flora and fauna, be limited to a maximum of 25 spaces on an unsealed surface, with no provision of long vehicle parking or of overflow parking in Eagle Rock Parade.

6. Consider the potential to increase disabled car and minibus parking at the foot of the lighthouse.

7. Use installations and planting to prevent vehicles parking on the side of the road in Federal Street

8. Subject to Aboriginal midden protection, allocate up to 15 well-defined but unsealed parallel parks in Inlet Crescent South.

9. Provide signage prohibiting long vehicles from entering Inlet Crescent South.

10. Advise tourists, bus companies, tourist operators of above and keep the community informed.

CARRIED 9:0.

These resolutions were implemented in stages over the following years, with the final stage being the revision of directional and regulatory signage on the GOR and within the lighthouse precinct in the weeks following Easter 2013. AIDA played an important role throughout this process in providing feedback to the shire's infrastructure department as plans were developed for each stage. AIDA will meet with the shire after Easter 2014 to review the outcome of the project, but it is already apparent that the effects on traffic in the precinct has been extremely beneficial, with a significant advance being the much increased numbers of tourists who are using the designated car parks at the Aireys Inlet Reserve (aka the Skate Park) and on Inlet Crescent South and then walking to the lighthouse and other beautiful destinations in Aireys Inlet. This change in behaviour has been greatly supported by the completion by GORCC in 2012 of the Surf Coast Walk, which passes through the Aireys Inlet Reserve, and the sensitive redevelopment of the Reserve, which has now become a central starting point for visitors to explore the area, with paths leading to the various beaches, along the inlet to the lighthouse and the cliff top walk, and beside the Painkalac Creek.

Most relevant to this report has been the extremely beneficial effect of the revised management of **long vehicle access and parking**. Previously, outdated signage on the GOR directed large vehicles into the precinct with the promise of non-existent parking facilities. This led to buses, caravans and camper vans roaming the precinct and traversing unsuitable roads in an attempt to get as close as possible to the lighthouse. Many of these vehicles ended up parking on Inlet Crescent South along the inlet shore, blocking iconic views of the inlet and ocean mouth, and also on the nature strips on the other side of the road.

The absence of any suitable sites for long vehicle parking within the precinct led to the development of plans to provide long vehicle parking spots just outside the precinct, initially within the Aireys Inlet Reserve car park (but this proved impossible because of the very large portion of the grassy recreation area of the reserve that would have to be sacrificed to provide suitable turning circles and/or entry and exit sweeps for long vehicles) and subsequently on the GOR. A plan involving the siting of four long vehicle parking bays extending along the GOR from the reserve towards the Painkalac Bridge had to be abandoned because of community outrage at the impact that this would have on views of the Painkalac Valley. AIDA's suggestion at this point was that long vehicles should be parked on the GOR adjacent to the V-line bus stop opposite the eastern end of the bottom shops, where no iconic views would be spoilt, where already established vegetation would screen vehicles from the houses, and where alighting passengers would be given the opportunity to contribute economically to the community by visiting the bottom shops as well as the lighthouse. Subsequently two long vehicle parking bays have been installed, one adjacent to the V-line bus stop beside the westbound lane of the GOR and a similar bay on the other side of the road beside the eastbound lane. In the year since their installation it has become apparent that although the parking bays are well used by long vehicles, their capacity is by no means saturated, so there is no immediate pressure for increased long vehicle parking in the area. It seems that the removal of outdated signage inviting long vehicles to detour into the lighthouse precinct has diminished the demand for long vehicle parking.

Management of bus traffic has involved signage prohibiting the entry of buses over 6 m in length from all but one of the entry points into the precinct. The remaining entry point at Inlet Crescent South is also closed to large buses during the gazetted Christmas and Easter school holiday periods. At other times large buses are permitted to enter the precinct via Inlet Crescent South for drop off only, before exiting the precinct via Inlet Crescent North and if desired, utilising the long vehicle parking spaces on the GOR. Permanent signage within the precinct at the base of Lighthouse Road prevents these buses from accessing the upper portion of the precinct and the lighthouse itself.

Since the introduction of the new signage it has been noteworthy that there has been a significant reduction in the numbers of caravans and large camper vans entering the precinct. We suspect that a major reason for the reduction is the revised signage on the GOR, which directs long vehicles to the parking bays on the GOR, rather than into the precinct. Smaller camper vans, which can utilise car parking spaces, continue to enter and be accommodated within the precinct.

During the controversy about proposed long vehicle parking on the GOR impacting the Painkalac Valley, some local residents put forward the possibility that an area west of the Painkalac Bridge, on the downstream side, could be developed in the future as an additional parking site for long vehicles. This site could provide longer term parking with easy access to the Surf Coast Walk for extended visits, and for brief visits, to glorious views of the inlet and the lighthouse from the viewing and fishing platforms already built on the inlet by GORCC. AIDA forwarded this suggestion to the shire's infrastructure department for consideration. The site would only be acceptable if it could be suitably screened from local residents and from passers by on the GOR, and if there would be no impact on views from the GOR to the inlet and the lighthouse. Initial feedback from the shire indicates that there may be difficulties of access and egress for long vehicles, especially for those travelling east from Fairhaven to Aireys Inlet.

In the meantime, AIDA believes that when there is evidence for additional demand for long vehicle parking it would be feasible to add two additional spaces opposite the bottom shops upstream of the existing space and the V-Line bus stop on the westbound lane of the GOR. AIDA proposed three long vehicle spaces in this location in a submission to the shire in early 2012, but a decision was made to construct just one space on each side of the road.

5. Alternative approaches to economic development involving long vehicles – “Nature-based tourism in Aireys Inlet”

As discussed above, attracting tourists travelling by car (or public transport) to stay longer on the Surf Coast would provide much greater benefit to the local economy than encouraging greater visitation by travellers in caravans and camper vans.

Call it “nature-based tourism”, “ecotourism” or “slow tourism”, Aireys Inlet and the surrounding district have all the attributes required to attract visitors for a multi day holiday, not in the summer season when the area is crowded and accommodation fully booked, but throughout the rest of the year when the area remains exquisitely beautiful but accommodation is plentiful and facilities are underused.

As noted previously, one of AIDA's major aims has long been “to promote Aireys Inlet as a destination for nature-based tourism that offers a variety of walking experiences including our beaches, cliff platforms, wetlands, estuary and river, and bush trails in the National and Forest Parks of the hinterland”. To this end AIDA has been very active in promoting the development and maintenance of a network of walking paths and unsealed shared roadways that link all parts of the township to the coastal and hinterland walking trails. In particular the

Aireys Inlet Reserve provides a central starting point for visitors to explore the area, with paths leading

- to the various beaches: the longest beach (from the inlet mouth below the lighthouse to the end beyond Eastern View) provides a 10 km round trip on firm sand; other lengthy beach walks involve some fun rock hopping except at low tide;
- along the inlet shore and to the lighthouse, providing picturesque views across the inlet, and some of the best views in the district across to Lorne - with the possible extension along the ~3 km cliff top portion of the Surf Coast Walk;
- over Painkalac Creek to the Fairhaven portion of the Surf Coast Walk;
- to the shorter (and flatter) loop around Inlet Crescent including the inlet shore, Bark Hut and the Noble Sanctuary wetlands;
- to the River Walk along the bank of the Painkalac Creek - with extensions to Bambra Road and marked bush trails from the Distillery Creek Car Park.

All this without any need for a car. Add to this menu of walks a variety of other activities – lighthouse tours, rock pooling, canoeing on the Painkalac Creek and on the inlet, horse riding in the bush and on the beach, and if desired, day trips to Lorne or to Anglesea, Bells Beach, Jan Juc or Torquay using the V-Line buses that pass through Aireys Inlet in both directions several times a day. The township offers an iconic pub and a variety of restaurants and cafes, and accommodation ranging from the motel to bed and breakfast establishments, cabins in the caravan park and rental units and houses, again all within walking distance.

These holidays could be advertised with brochures and web pages, for example linked to the Aireys Inlet Tourism and Traders and www.visitgreatoceanroad.org web site. The information should include the full list of possible activities and a map showing the various walking trails and activity centres, as well as locations for restaurants and cafes, and locations and contact details for accommodation options. Target markets for these holidays would be varied – among them the increasing pool of baby boomer retirees with an interest in walking and nature-based tourism, other adults with no school age children who can holiday outside school holiday periods, foreign students during university breaks, and overseas visitors who would not be satisfied with a one day, whistle stop tour along the GOR to the Twelve Apostles and back to Melbourne, with just a passing glance at the Split Point Lighthouse along the way.

An intriguing possibility, which could unlock economic benefit from day tour coaches, is to investigate whether any of the tour companies might be interested in offering their clientele the option of interrupting their tour with a stay in Aireys Inlet for a flexible number of days, after which they could resume the day tour and return to Melbourne.

APPENDIX A

AIDA's Policy & Aims

AIDA's overall policy is to encourage and support the planned use of the region between Eastern View and Urquhart Bluff, together with the adjacent hinterland, in a manner that is sympathetic to the environment and conserves as far as possible the special character of the area.

AIDA's specific aims are:

1. to generate and support respect for the unique character of the Aireys Inlet area
2. to strongly support environmentally sensitive residential and commercial development by contributing to the formulation and upholding of the guidelines embodied in planning documents such as the Aireys Inlet to Eastern View Strategy and the Neighbourhood Character Overlay of the *Surfcoast Planning Scheme*
3. to support an environmentally and aesthetically sensitive policy for traffic and parking management and road and pathway construction
4. to support the conservation of the beaches, dunes and cliff areas in co-operation with the foreshore management authorities
5. to support conservation of the Painkalac Creek Valley and its environs, including the wetlands, freehold and public land
6. to preserve the timbered hills surrounding the residential settlements by supporting strict control of further urban growth
7. to promote Aireys Inlet as a destination for nature-based tourism that offers a variety of walking experiences including our beaches, cliff platforms, wetlands, estuary and river, and bush trails in the National and Forest Parks of the hinterland
8. to encourage the appropriate location of public facilities and recreational amenities
9. to support environmentally sympathetic fire protection measures for the district
10. to support the control of feral and domestic animals and noxious and environmental weeds
11. to support planning controls that preserve the visibility of the night sky by limiting artificial lighting on building exteriors

In addition to promoting the foregoing aims, AIDA is engaged in the following related activities:

- raising community awareness of, and canvassing the community's views on, issues of significance in the district
- supporting environmental, sociological and other studies and surveys performed by the Surf Coast Shire or other bodies
- preparing or supporting publications aimed at promoting a better awareness of the Aireys Inlet district and its history, beauty and challenges for the future.

APPENDIX B

GORCC surveys support community desire to preserve our coastal environment

(published in the AIDA July 2012 Newsletter)

The Great Ocean Road Coast Committee (GORCC) recently released its draft Coastal Management Plan. AIDA committee member Gary Johnson served on the Community Reference Group, which provided community input during preparation of the draft plan, and other AIDA committee members are providing feedback during the community consultation period that finishes on 29th June 2012.

AIDA was very pleased to learn from the draft document that community consultations and surveys performed by GORCC during development of the plan yielded findings that closely mirror those of previous surveys performed over past decades by AIDA and by the Surf Coast Shire (notably the Aireys Inlet to Eastern View Neighbourhood Character Study of 2004) in overwhelmingly supporting preservation of our natural environment.

Of the 183 community members involved in GORCC's current study, ~60% were permanent residents of the GORCC-managed coastal region (from Point Impossible west of Torquay to Cumberland River south of Lorne), while the remainder listed permanent addresses predominantly in Melbourne or Geelong and their respective surrounding suburbs.

When asked **What you value about the coast?**, a large number of respondents nominated various aspects of the natural environment, including its visual beauty, native wildlife and the seclusion and escape it offers. Opportunities for recreational activities such as walking, surfing, swimming and fishing were also highly valued, as was the lack of or limited amount of development along the coastline, and the sense of being part of a connected community.

When queried on **Your vision for the coast?**, most respondents described their perfect coast as not significantly different from today – clean, accessible, undeveloped with natural values protected and advanced. Other lesser, but still popular, themes that emerged were necessary infrastructure being sensitively built, of high quality and low impact to the environment, and coastal users being more aware of environmental issues and helping to care for the coast.

When **What areas of management are most important to you?** was queried by giving respondents tokens to be allocated across various options, the 'Natural Environment' received by far the highest number of tokens. 'Access', 'Infrastructure' and 'Community Involvement' received moderate numbers of tokens, while 'Caravan Parks', 'Cultural Heritage' and 'Commercial Activities' received the smallest numbers of tokens.

To answer **What would you like to see happen on the coast?**, respondents were asked to nominate 'actions' under each of the management options listed above. The option attracting the highest number of nominated actions was 'Access'. The types of actions nominated were diverse, the most popular relating to maintenance of existing facilities, and use of natural materials and protection of the natural environment when building access facilities. 'Community Action' received the second highest number of nominated actions, with the majority suggesting either that GORCC should increase consultation opportunities and community involvement in general, or that the community should be better educated in order to promote better coastal behaviour. 'Infrastructure' came next, with the most popular types of suggested actions being either that infrastructure should be limited or reduced on the coast, or that some additional infrastructure should be provided, such as toilets or bins. Finally, although 'Natural Environment' received only the fourth highest number of nominated actions, the strongest degree of community consensus was achieved in this area. The majority of suggested actions were in support of protection of the natural environment, with more of these types of actions recorded than any other type of action under any other area of coastal management.

Mary-Jane Gething