

## [Are we walking tall but not thinking big?](#)

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In the context of a major Metropolitan Activity Centre (MAC), is a 51 story residential tower or a 28 story commercial building to be built by Vicinity Centres in Box Hill, Melbourne really surprising?

With the confluence at Box Hill of train, tram, bus, the Suburban Rail Loop (SRL), and a major shopping and restaurant precinct outside their doors, what better place to concentrate city dwellers?

Local authority Whitehorse Council recently granted permits for Vicinity's big-tower development. The vote was only 7:4 in favour – a close call. Those against were mainly worried by the height – the visual impact from nearby leafy suburbs like Mont Albert – and the less-than-normal car parking allowance.



Image credit: Vicinity Centres – Artist Impression

The choice is not whether Box Hill becomes an MAC – it's well and truly on its way – but whether it's a well designed, interesting and desirable place to live and work, a CBD with a rosy future.

Successful cities in the world these days are being built and rebuilt around accommodating the needs and desires of people on the ground, not around accommodating the needs of cars – think Paris, Barcelona or New York where the attraction is the 'vibe' of the big city, not being stuck in traffic.

I can hear to doubters now: "But Box Hill is not like those places!"

Of course it's not, but it could be its own version of a really desirable CBD. It's only the imaginations of the folk in diverse cities like York (UK), Oslo, Helsinki, New York, Amsterdam, Barcelona and a great many others that has led to them banning or radically reducing car use.

So it's unfortunate that building height, and lack of car parks dominated the discussion, rather than pushing for better people-centred access into and through the Box Hill MAC at ground level.

It's been several years now since Whitehorse City started to develop a new Structure Plan for Box Hill to ensure that the future the developers are giving the city is one that the residents actually want. There have been plans, hearings, and forums of interested people with a vision for the MAC and for transport integration. But still there is no framework. It's well and truly overdue.

It's within this context that it's very disappointing that of the conditions placed on Vicinity's plans there was nothing to ensure the maintenance of an effective north-south active transport route through the CBD and over the railway line. The only safe existing link will soon be cut off by Vicinity's imminent development, leaving adjacent highways – Station St and Elgar Rd – as the only options to use. Suicide potential for experienced riders, let alone a young person wanting to get by bike to major Box Hill swimming and sports precinct south of the rail line. Academics tell us we have a big deficit in the amount of physical activity undertaken by all, and especially our youth. Let's make it easier, not harder or impossible.

All the forums and meetings about the Box Hill of the future have universally agreed that an additional new bridge over the railway is essential for the active transport needs of the future. Vicinity agreed too and will, as part of this planning application, transfer a small parcel of land to the Council to enable this to be practically built at some future time. But the future is now coming quickly, and the bridge is not.

Pedestrians still have the option to traverse through the foodcourts and arcades of the station precinct and shopping centre to travel north-south. But that's like demanding that in the City of Melbourne all north-south foot traffic must go through the many arcades and food courts, and banning the use of pedestrianised Swanston and Elizabeth streets. Possible but totally impractical and undesirable.

At a time when the Box Hill MAC should be being regarded as a blank canvas upon which to creatively build a city for the future, have we let our visions be clouded by how we perceive the past? Have we let the inertia of bureaucracy lead to the mundane, and to locking-in of the unattainable?

Add the uncertainties of the SRL development and its effects plus the lack of direction and planning by the State Government about the Box Hill station itself, about a bus interchange that meets the community need, or shared, safe and desirable active transport links towards Blackburn and Mont Albert.

It makes all the Government talk about 15 or 20 minute cities sound hollow.

Planning for the next stage of Vicinity's development over the station and across to Carrington Rd is imminent. Let's make sure that an arcade-type-shopping-mall-foodcourt route is **not** foisted upon the through-traffic pedestrians, and those using transport aids – even low speed bikes. People of Box Hill deserve much better vision than that.

And here's a way to speed up delivery of that universally agreed bridge. SRL plans to eventually make the existing south lanes of nearby divided Whitehorse Rd into a vibrant pedestrian, cycling and open mall area. It's a brilliant and visionary idea. And it will make an east-to-west active transport route via Box Hill MAC possible by utilising the proposed new bridge if it ever gets built.

Let's turn "eventually" into a "do-it as a first priority" of the SRL project.

A commitment by the Victorian State Government to build that bridge now, rather than in some uncertain future, will show their true colours.

And it might influence a few precious votes too!