



Merri-bek
City Council

Merri-bek City Council

Becoming Merri-bek – a new name for our City Council

7 December 2022

A request to meet – October 2021



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Email from community member, 15 October 2021

“On behalf of a diverse group of respected citizens including Elders of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung, I am conveying their request for an appointment for a small delegation to meet with the CEO, and hopefully also the Mayor, to alert them to a matter of significant concern involving the City, prior to widespread public awareness of this matter.

The purpose of this meeting is to personally alert the City to this issue, **a confronting example of ingrained racism of historic origin relating to the City that involves ongoing insensitivity**, and to discuss possible actions to respond to and redress this matter, which may be quite disruptive.

Revelation of this **'hidden in plain sight'** example will provide the City with an opportunity for truth-telling, acknowledgement and healing, in the spirit of the forthcoming Yoorrook Justice Commission”.

23 November 2021 - Meeting with Wurundjeri Elders and other community members



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Letter of request from Wurundjeri Elders and other community members

‘There are some uncomfortable facts ingrained in the City of Moreland’s current identity. Recognising Council’s strong support for respect and reconciliation, we wish to assist the City to use addressing this regrettable inheritance as an opportunity to enhance awareness, acknowledgement and healing.

‘The name ‘Moreland’ contains disrespectful insensitivity through direct association with both slavery and dispossession. It was introduced locally in 1839 by speculator Farquhar McCrae who participated in the catastrophic early land privatisation that swept the Indigenous occupants of millennia from most of the present municipal area in less than two years. McCrae then named this tract ‘Moreland’ to commemorate the large Jamaican slave plantation that his family had helped operate’.

‘In June 1994 the state government amalgamated the former Cities of Coburg and Brunswick to form a new municipality under appointed commissioners. The name ‘Moreland’ was decreed for the new entity, despite its racist associations being raised at the time.

Robust evidence now readily available clearly confirms the details and magnitude of these connections with brutal enslavement globally and mass dispossession locally.

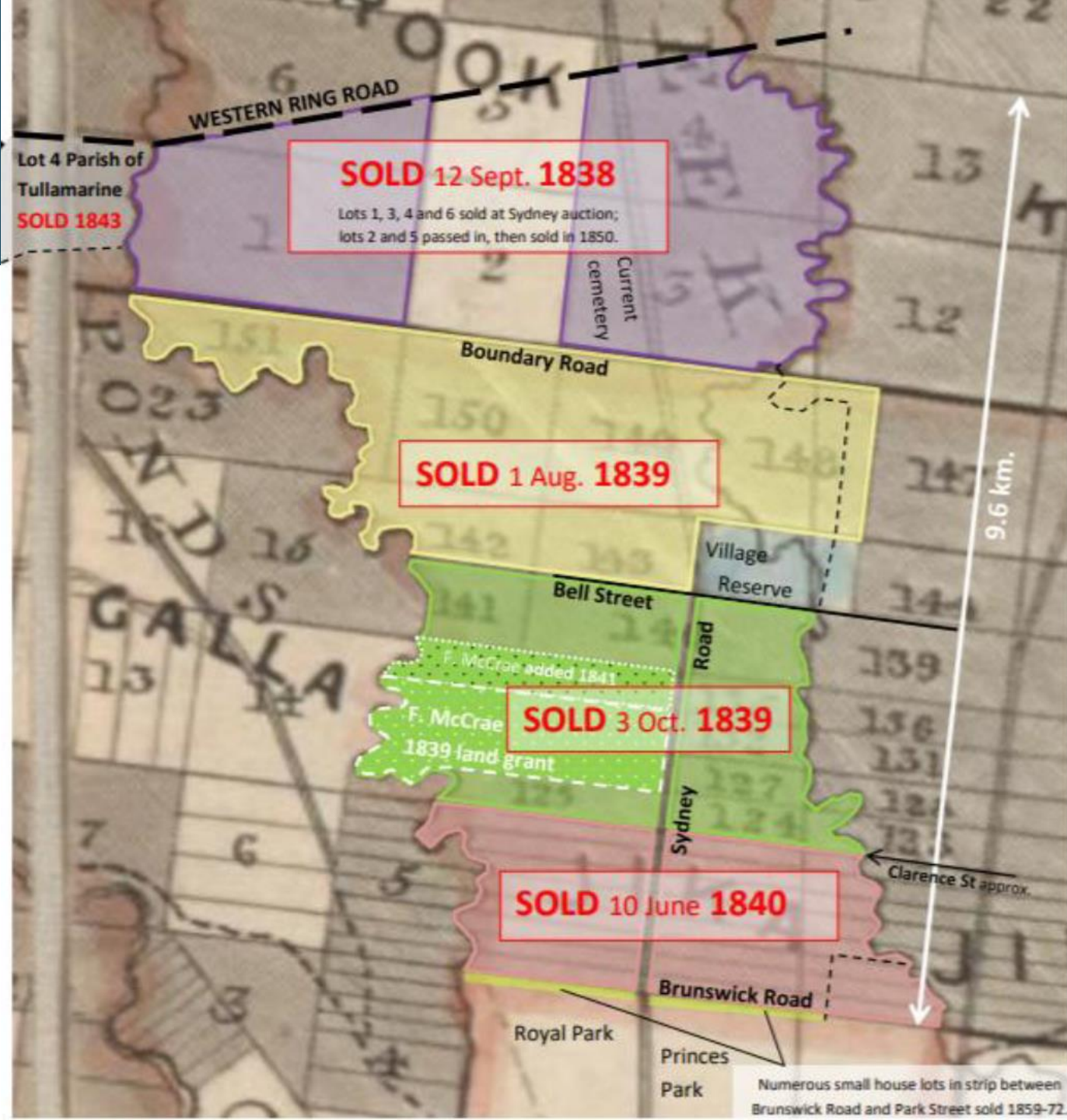
Retention of this name for the principal civic body for a diverse community of 200,000 citizens is untenable.’

The request

We request Council to make the following commitments at its next meeting:

- Partner with stakeholders in a respectful process to select a suitable new name during 2022
- Initiate and implement actions that acknowledge the impact and consequences of dispossession, encourage respectful understanding through truth telling, redress injustice, and heal racist hurt.

* The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation has indicated its expertise and capacity to advise Council in designing a process for identifying options for a suitable name that reflect local Indigenous place names and language.



Our considerations



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- The name “Moreland” is associated with slavery, dispossession and racism. What does this mean?
- Can we continue with a racist name?
- How does this fit with Council’s Statement of Commitment to the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities?
- Wurundjeri Elders are formally asking this of us



What happened?



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- Council resolved in principle to change the name in December 2021, and co-design a community engagement process
- In May 2022, following a smoking ceremony, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders provided options of three new names in Woi-wurrung language for community consultation
- Community consultation took place on the three names, in a community survey. People could also express objections.





Consultation outcome May-June 2022



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Preferred option	No. of surveys	%
Wa-dam-buk (renewal)	824	13%
Merri-bek (rocky country)	3,739	59%
Jerrang (leaf of tree)	1,368	22%
None - prefer no name change	384	6%
	6,315	

Why Merri-bek?

- Community members were asked to provide a sentence about why they had chosen the name they chose

Reason	Number of comments
References Merri Creek, the creek is important to them	2,069
People relate to the meaning of “rocky country”	1,106
Just like the name/it sounds good	831
Name is easy to say or simple, easy to write	657
Prefer to keep a name starting with ‘M’	277
Word Merri has a long history in the area	143
Other two names were not preferred/too hard to say	113
Neighbouring councils also named after waterways	91
Link to English alternates “merry” meaning happy, or “beck” meaning creek or stream	81
Other comments unable to be interpreted	52
Link to name for Brunswick “bek”	16

Date	Milestone
November 2021	Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation requests Council to change its name in 2022.
December 2021	Exchange of letters with Minister for Local Government
December 2021	Council meeting resolves in principle to change name, and to start a codesign process for community engagement around new names
March 2022	Council meeting receives and adopts co-designed community engagement process, to be Woi-wurrung language names only
May 2022	Ceremony - Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders offer three Woi-wurrung names on a paperbark scroll
May-June 2022	Community engagement on the three names, with opportunity to object to renaming
July 2022	Council meeting adopts preferred new name Ceremony – announcement and celebration of Merri-bek as new name Formal request to Minister to change name
Sept 2022	Order in Council and gazettal
26 Sept 2022	Celebration – Elders, Minister for Local Government, Councillors, staff.

Key reflections



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- Everyday racism can have a profound impact
- Use of language and naming matters
- It's not hard, but it is hard
- Not just Council's name
- Partnerships and how we work together are critical



Stronger Partnerships with Traditional Owners



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- Relationship with Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Traditional Owner community had strong foundations and a level of trust built on 20 years of Councils commitment to reconciliation
- The important role local government has to partner with Traditional Owners and Aboriginal Victorians to celebrate, understand, and embed Aboriginal cultural heritage and foster trust and respect
- Listening closely, listening often – how we worked together
- Reflecting and challenging our structures and ways of doing and being



Language and naming matters



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- What things are called matters
- Many places around Australia are being renamed
- Renaming and reflecting Woi-wurrung language in everyday life is part of an important global movement
- There is enormous community interest in Aboriginal culture and language across all ages and cultures



Resources and understanding



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- First Australians – ‘Freedom in our Lifetime’ (episode three)
- Neville Bonner speech (‘how dare you’) from 1998 Constitutional Convention
- ‘ABLAZE’ – The True Story of the First Aboriginal Film maker Bill T Onus (By Tiriki Onus and Alec Morgan)





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Welcome to Merri-bek

One community, proudly diverse