



## Disaster and Emergency Services Project

### Melbourne Water | Stony Creek Recovery and Rehabilitation

The engagement process for the Stony Creek Recovery and Rehabilitation project sought community input into recovery from the most significant waterway pollution event in Melbourne in almost 30 years.

Stony Creek is an urban waterway that flows through Melbourne's western suburbs to the Yarra River. On Thursday 30 August 2018, a warehouse in West Footscray housing toxic chemicals caught fire and burned for two weeks. The fire had a catastrophic impact on the popular creek and adjacent Cruickshank Park in Yarraville. The toxic fire runoff that washed into the creek resulted in a significant loss of flora and fauna, including approximately 2,500 dead fish and other animals. For several days after the creek exceeded safe guidelines for human health. The incident also created outrage and frustration in the community.

The huge impact that the incident had on both the environment and the community required a matching response. As one community member stated, "It is an unprecedented event so it requires unprecedented action, not just feasible and in line with existing policies."

#### Objectives:

In the immediate aftermath of the destruction caused by the fire, Melbourne Water and its partners had urgent and complex objectives to address – how to inform the public, how to ensure community safety and how to clean up the site as quickly as possible.

The longer-term objectives of the project were to:

- Restore and rehabilitate Stony Creek in line with local community expectations, values and aspirations.
- Support the local community and help them move beyond outrage to a positive position of collaboration and inspiration.
- Increase community awareness of Melbourne Water's leading engagement practice, strengthen stakeholder and community relationships through the co-design process and embed a new rehabilitation engagement model for waterway planning and management.

In designing an approach to involve the public in these complex questions and decisions, we sought to:

- Work collaboratively with partner agencies and key project stakeholders to ensure a united approach to recovery and rehabilitation efforts.
- Inspire innovation and adaptability by engaging with community in new and different ways.
- Respond to concerns that the community may have about environmental impacts on Stony Creek.
- Enhance Melbourne Water's brand and reputation and improve public awareness of our role as custodians of Melbourne's waterways.
- Keep the community informed of progress with on-ground recovery works and rehabilitation planning, and how their input will be used to create a long-term rehabilitation plan for the future of Stony Creek.
- In the weeks following the fire, Melbourne Water and its partners held two community meetings to answer questions and respond to concerns, participated in live chats via Facebook, provided web and social media updates and held a Community Day at Cruickshank Park which was attended by about 200 people. This provided an opportunity to seek input from participants in designing how they could be involved in the development of the rehabilitation plan. We heard a lot of concerns from the community in the incident and recovery stages, but we also heard that people wanted to help and get involved.

The scale of the disaster, the high level of community outrage following the fire and the fact that Stony Creek is a highly valued community asset in Melbourne's inner western suburbs called for nothing less than a collaborative approach. Working with leading facilitator Max Hardy, we designed an approach to motivate, inspire and involve the local community with a comprehensive multi-channel communication and engagement program that provided the public with an opportunity to share their values and aspirations for the rehabilitation, identify and prioritise outcomes and have input into actions to achieve those outcomes.

# Case Study



## Describe some of the key challenges faced:

The very nature and extent of the contamination made this a challenging project. The recovery efforts were highly complex, with a key challenge being to ensure the health and safety of employees and the community. We used a multi-channel communication strategy to keep the public informed during the first days and weeks after the fire, including direct conversations with nearby home owners, public meetings, social media updates including Facebook live chat, website updates, media releases, door knocking, letterbox drops and leveraging community relationships.

We began this process facing a high level of community outrage. The size of the fire and level of contamination caused wide-spread anxiety and concern, and residents were feeling ignored and disappointed that senior members of the Victorian Government were not offering any visible support. People were reporting that they were suffering from headaches, migraines, sore throats and itchy eyes. They wanted answers, they were frustrated, and they were questioning their trust in community leaders.

We gave people the chance to voice their concerns and be heard through community meetings which provided a forum to acknowledge the problem, but also to discuss what had already been accomplished to overcome it. The engagement process we designed built in a high level of transparency and accountability for the agencies involved and it gave the community back some control. It also helped to reframe the issue by focusing on the future of the creek and the community's opportunity to effect change to their local environment.

Another key challenge has been the coordinated response that this disaster recovery effort has required. With multiple agencies involved in the initial incident management, recovery and rehabilitation planning, the project has required regular and close collaboration to ensure an effective and efficient response to clean-up efforts and community concerns. A coordinated incident response taskforce was established across multiple agencies to provide confidence to the community. Through this we have ensured consistent messaging and clarity of roles and responsibilities, and we have been able to present a united front in all communications and at community events.

## Using public participation to change the narrative about Stony Creek:

The response, recovery and rehabilitation effort rather than just being about rectifying the environmental damage to Stony Creek, instead became an opportunity for the community to articulate what Stony Creek meant to them and consequently what it could be. Through the 'Your Say' digital tool the community was given an active opportunity to tell stories about what the creek meant to them.

The stories the public told changed what the rehabilitation meant, for example:

- 'It has been a delight to see the fruits of our hard work with birds, frogs, plants increasing in numbers over the years, and seeing the community gravitate to this oasis in the suburbs'
- 'I enjoyed seeing children from the local daycare center playing and exploring by the water. This is so very needed in a time when we are becoming glued to technology'
- I love that this is a place where the locals can connect with each other and with nature. This is my slice of country life when I can't get to the country'

Using a story telling approach was an innovative way to promote sustainable decision making by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of participants. It gave us a richer insight into the community values of the creek, and the data collected from the digital engagement tools allowed us to gain a sense of peoples' priorities and ideas which were explored further in the deliberative workshops. All feedback received on the Your Say page and from community events is being used in the development of the rehabilitation plan.