

Strategy for an Iconic ‘Loop the Lake’ Cycleway around Lake Illawarra

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Introduction:

Illawarra Ramblers appreciates the opportunity to discuss WCC’s strategic cycling plans with councillors and council staff involved in strategic planning for active transport. In preparing this document we have also benefited from collaboration with other local Bicycle User Groups (BUGs) and with the broader community through the Bike City Community Partners Roundtable.

The purpose of this paper is (1) to argue that WCC give much higher priority to rapid planning, construction and promotion of an iconic ‘Loop the Lake’ cycleway around Lake Illawarra; and (2) to support submissions made by other BUGs on the ‘Loop the Lake’ cycleway. While we certainly applaud council’s current cycling strategies [1, 2], this proposal will require WCC to ‘think bigger’ in terms of scale and funding sources to build an iconic cycling attraction of state or even national significance for the Illawarra.

Who we are

The Illawarra Ramblers is a local association dedicated to the enjoyment of the great outdoors. We were incorporated in 2015 and have been organising cycling events for over 20 years. With a membership of 250 (most in their 60s or older) our regular activities include cycles at least weekly beside Lake Illawarra, paddles weekly on Lake Illawarra and its creeks, and almost daily walks in the near vicinity of the lake, either with the club or as local residents. We are a member of the peak bodies Bicycle NSW and Bushwalking NSW. Our cycling activities are led by trained leaders and are fully insured. Most activities attract 20-25 riders.

The Ramblers travel widely, running longer one- or two-week holiday trips away to cycle rail trails and other classic tracks in Canberra, north east and central Victoria, the Hunter and Lake Macquarie area, the northern rivers region of NSW, and south east Queensland. As such, we are very familiar with cycling infrastructure standards across NSW and interstate, particularly in relation to ‘iconic’ recreational cycleways such as rail trails.

Benefits of cycling tourism

The economic and community benefits of ‘iconic’ cycleways are demonstrable from existing trails in NSW and interstate. They support accommodation and hospitality services, bike hire and transport services, marketing and sponsorship/signage opportunities, nature tourism (such as birdwatching) and cultural events (e.g. Arts Trails).

Lake Macquarie council notes that ‘iconic links are unique walking and cycling facilities with outstanding scenic and cultural qualities that are difficult to replicate’ [3]. The Tweed section of the Northern Rivers Rail Trail (NRRT) boosted the Tweed economy by more than \$3.7 million in its first year of operation [4]. Southern NSW’s Tumbarumba Rail Trail recorded

‘sensational’ economic benefits: visitor numbers increased exponentially, overnight stays and hospitality revenues led to opening of nine new businesses’ [5]. The Fernleigh Track in Lake Macquarie is popular for its beautiful bush and wetland areas and wildlife, as well as for relics of its industrial and railway heritage [6]. Its scenic extension, the Fernleigh Awabakal Shared Track (FAST) runs through the stunning Belmont Wetlands State Park and Belmont Lagoon Reserve and incorporates a birdwatching loop and lookout and aboriginal sculptures.

In Canberra, the Lake Circuit Bicycle Path contributes to bringing active visitors to the Jerrabomberra Wetlands Nature Reserve [7]. Queensland’s Brisbane Valley Rail Trail (BVRT) saw an 11-fold increase in private accommodation offerings along the trail in 12 months, and a 2% annual fall in regional unemployment attributable to the BVRT [8]. In seeking Federal funding for the completion of the trail, Somerset Regional Council estimated that the BVRT would increase direct tourism expenditure by \$1.5 million per annum [9].

Vision and Opportunity

The goal of Wollongong’s cycling strategy is ‘to be the place to ride’ [2]. The ICU road races, Cringila Hills MTB park, Mt Kembla MTB expansion and commuter cycle lanes in the CBD are tangible outcomes of this goal. WCC is committed to delivering ‘regionally significant cycling tourism infrastructure such as the Grand Pacific Walk and the Lake Illawarra Shared Path Masterplan’ [2]. Strategy 5 of the Lake Illawarra Coastal Management Program (CMP) includes undertakings to ‘construct new sections of shared pathway to complete the pathway linkage around the Lake’ and ‘build on the Tourism opportunities for Lake Illawarra’ [10]. Yet, early expansion of such cycleways is notably missing from the WCC Community Strategic Plan [11].

We submit that Wollongong and Shellharbour need such an iconic cycling drawcard in the Loop the Lake Illawarra shared path. The NSW Coastal Cycleway (in reality a shared pathway) from Austinmer to Kiama is already a tourist attraction, but is becoming overcrowded. Lake Illawarra is generally well served with walking and cycling tracks which allow local residents and visitors to enjoy the lake and its surrounds. Recreational cyclists in particular enjoy the ‘round the lake’ ride of about 40 km, though they take their life in their hands in doing so. Completion of an iconic high-standard recreational cycleway around the lake would offer a major tourism drawcard in the same way that cycle paths around Lake Macquarie in the Hunter region have. For scenic attraction, the path should be as close to the lake as practicable. The cycleways/shared paths would encourage the commercial development of cafés, bike hire services along the route, and meet the recreational needs of the growing population of new housing estates around the foothills of Mt Brown, and West Dapto more generally.

WCC recognises the Lake Illawarra Shared Path (LISP) as a regionally significant cycling tourism infrastructure of ‘high’ priority [2] and has completed the initial stages of a masterplan. As WCC recognises, there are two major gaps in the LISP: from Tallawarra to Macquarie Rivulet (via Haywards Bay), and from Berkeley (Hooka Ck) to Kanahooka. We

argue that closing the gaps to enable an uninterrupted scenic walk or ride around the lake, in both directions, will yield positive economic and social benefits for the communities nearby.

We discuss potential routes for these missing links below, focusing on Tallawarra. As WCC recognises, the main challenges include land ownership, flooding and inundation, (land) contamination and (preservation of) threatened ecological communities [1]. Construction of these ‘missing links’ will require the collaboration of State and local government and private landholders, possibly with federal funds. We urge WCC to undertake engineering and environmental planning work on an iconic ‘Loop the Lake’ route as an urgent priority.

Tallawarra to Macquarie Rivulet

An excellent and picturesque shared path runs south from Lakeside Dr, Koonawarra, around Tallawarra Point to Tallawarra Power Station, where it ends abruptly. Between Yallah Bay Rd and Albion Park Rail cyclists are forced onto the Princes Hwy which, although less busy with the construction of the Albion Park bypass, is a dangerous major road with heavy traffic. The walker is served even worse, with no safe path southward. Cycling north (clockwise) along this section is even more difficult. The current cycle crossing of Macquarie Rivulet using the Princes Hwy road bridge is narrow and unsafe.

Princes Hwy remains the main south exit from Dapto, and will become more congested with construction traffic and ultimately housing estates along Yallah Bay Rd. Bicycle and shared use pathways being constructed in the Northern and Central Precincts of the Tallawarra Lands will feed cyclists onto Yallah Bay Rd. Transport for NSW plans further work on M1 exits and a roundabout at the junction of Yallah Bay Rd and Princes Hwy.

The main impediment to the construction of cycle routes south of Yallah Bay Rd is the tenure of the Southern Precinct of the Tallawarra Lands. Formerly Crown Land, part of the derelict coal-fired Tallawarra Power Station, the area was sold in 2003 by the NSW Carr Government to a private company, TruEnergy. TruEnergy constructed the current gas-fired power station north of Yallah Bay Rd. The site, including the southern precinct, is now operated by Energy Australia (EA). The Tallawarra Lands Concept Plan was approved by the State government in 2013 and modified in November 2020 [12]. A Draft Planning Agreement between Wollongong City Council, Bridgehill (Tallawarra) P/L and Energy Australia was exhibited in November 2023 [13]. The Agreement envisages major commercial and residential development in the Southern Precinct, along with through roads (including from Yallah Bay Rd to Haywards Bay Rd), cycleways and footpaths. A proposed bicycle pathway is indicated along Yallah Bay Rd. WCC however noted in May 2024 that ‘the Southern Precinct will remain in the ownership of EA for the foreseeable future and there are no plans for immediate development of this land’ [14]. Yet, the threat of inappropriate development hangs over the area.

The wetlands within the Southern Precinct have high environmental conservation value, particularly for migratory bird species. The area is also well used for horse agistment and

horse riding. Informal use of the precinct – e.g. by trailbikes – is likely to increase with the construction of housing north of Yallah Bay Rd.

In our view, the overdevelopment proposed in the Draft Planning Agreement fails to respect the conservation values and recreational potential of the Tallawarra wetlands. Recreational use – walking and cycling – along defined paths is not inconsistent with conservation.

Indeed, WCC's principles for active transport in the Tallawarra area are:

‘Pathways to include multiple connection points to the publicly accessible foreshore of Lake Illawarra.

‘Link the pathway network within Tallawarra Lands to the adjoining regional and local networks’ [14].

A 2006 Environmental Study [15] found:

‘The site has a high level of natural attributes including significant conservation areas. The conservation areas include several SEPP 14 Wetlands and large areas containing Endangered Ecological Communities (EEC's). These areas require particular conservation and any future zoning of the land must recognise the need to conserve and regenerate areas of such significance.

‘The Lake Illawarra Authority has plans for a continuous foreshore link around the Lake. Linkage through the Tallawarra Lands is essential to complete this circuit.

‘The internal transport network needs to provide good, safe and direct footpaths and separated cycleways to encourage internal trips and links to key attractors outside Tallawarra.’

Dating back to 2012 and earlier, Bicycle NSW and local BUGs have argued for the importance of cycling routes around Lake Illawarra, including through Tallawarra Lands [16]. Many public submissions on the 2010 Tallawarra Concept plan commented on the omission of connecting cycleways and of recreational use such as horse riding:

‘Without a strong commitment to providing the around the lake shared use path, as indicated in the City of Wollongong bicycle plan, the project will destroy any hope of providing the tourist attractions need to grow tourism in our community and provide an environment that will benefit the health and wellbeing of the community’
(Submission from Adrian White)

Similarly, Bicycle NSW's submission commented:

‘The Tallawarra Lands Plan does not meet the goals of the City of Wollongong Bicycle Plan which was to include a North-South connection along the banks of Lake Illawarra from Haywards Bay and stretching North towards Koonawarra’ (see Figure 1).

Berkeley to Kanahooka

Following a route south from the shared path bridge over Hooka Ck or from Fred Finch Park requires cyclists to detour north via Hooka Ck Rd, west along the footpath on Northcliffe Drive. The cyclist must then either (1) take the south on-ramp to the M1, somehow merging with fast moving traffic and proceeding on the emergency stopping lane the Kanahooka Rd exit ramp; or (2) cross the double roundabout at Northcliffe Dr until they can join an interrupted shared path which proceeds on the Princes Hwy at Kembla Grange to meet Kanahooka Rd. The double roundabout is very hazardous to cross due to fast moving traffic from several directions. The share path at Kembla Grange also has several dangerous road crossings and an extremely narrow (1 bike OR 1 pedestrian width) crossing of upper Mullet Ck.

Some of these hazards could no doubt be improved in the short and medium term. What is really required for cyclist safety and as part of a scenic and direct route around the lake is a new path linking Hooka Ck and Purrah Bay Reserve, Kanahooka, where a popular cul-de-sac path already exists. This would require traversing private lands across the 'tank trap' (perhaps across an existing old bridge) and across Mullet Ck, where a new pedestrian/cycle bridge would be required (see Figure 3). Both of these creeks are attractive scenically and for their wildlife and deserve to be opened up for cyclists and walkers.

Recommendations

We support proposals made by Kiama BUG in relation to the Lake Illawarra shared path [17].

We recommend that WCC pursue the following objectives for cycling infrastructure along the western side of Lake Illawarra area over the medium and long-term:

Medium-term (1-3 years)

- Widen the Duck Ck bridge on the Princes Hwy at Yallah Bay Rd by adding a parallel pedestrian/cycling deck.
- Formalise the cycle route from Yallah Woolshed to Haywards Bay, by utilising the section of old Princes Hwy.
- Establish a cycle route from Yallah Bay Rd to Yallah Woolshed using the existing eastern (old railway) bridge across Duck Ck.
- Engage a consultant to plan a network of feasible and environmentally responsible cycling and walking paths through the Tallawarra Lands Southern Precinct.
- Engage a consultant to plan a network of feasible and environmentally responsible cycling and walking paths between Hooka Ck, Berkeley and Kanahooka (Kanahooka Rd and Jerretts Point/Purrah Bay).
- Improve safety for cyclists riding along Northcliffe Dr from Hooka Ck Rd to Princes Hwy, Kembla Grange.

Long-term (3-7 years)

- Construct a direct cycle path through the Tallawarra Southern Precinct connecting Yallah Bay Rd and Haywards Bay.
- Ensure that any development in the Tallawarra Southern Precinct includes bicycle infrastructure to accommodate both commuting and recreational bicycle activities.
- Construct a new cycle/pedestrian bridge across Duck Ck to link the eastern and western sections of the Southern Precinct. This is shown as a potential route in the Draft Planning Agreement [13], and was, we understand, the alignment of an elevated pipeline in the past. It is at a point where Duck Ck narrows.
- Encourage the NSW government to reserve the Tallawarra Southern Precinct as recreation and conservation area, perhaps through resumption and designation as a State Conservation Area.
- Investigate a new cycle crossing of Macquarie Rivulet from Haywards Bay to the Arboretum/Macquarie Shores Reserve. Rather than a new standalone bridge, this could be a footway/cycle deck attached to the existing road or railway bridge.¹
- Construct new cycleway linking Hooka Ck, Berkeley and Purrah Bay Reserve, Kanahooka.

¹ This engineering solution is quite common in Europe. For example, see <https://invisiblebordeaux.blogspot.com/2018/06/pont-de-cubzac-many-lives-of-eiffels.html>

Figure 1 Original WCC Cycle Plan (circa 2010)

City of Wollongong - Bicycle Plan

The current City of Wollongong City Bicycle Plan includes the following diagram indicating the strategic plan to provide a bicycle path along the edge of Lake Illawarra in Yallah. This plan requires the crossing of at least two water channels at Yallah Bay Rd and Duck Creek (a wider crossing).



Comment: Bicycle NSW included this map in their 2011 submission on the original Tallawarra Lands Concept Plan. The Duck Ck estuary crossing is probably less attractive from an engineering/cost/environmental point of view than a crossing higher up where the creek is narrower and lacks waterbird colonies (immediately north of the word 'Yallah' on the map).

Figure 2. Proposed and potential shared pathways in the Southern Precinct (Tallawarra Planning Agreement 2024).

ANNEXURE I: OPEN SPACE AND RECREATION LOCATION PLAN



Comment: The proposed east-west and north-south roads in the Plan would also provide dedicated or on-road cycle routes.

Figure 3. Possible new cycle routes connecting Berkeley (Hooka Ck) and Kanahooka (SGJ 2025)



Comment: Red: Route identified by WCC as 'Future Proposed Network' [1]. This is the most direct and also a scenic route. Magenta: Alternative routes using Saltwater Reserve or down the peninsula towards Currumbilla Point. Dark blue: Littoral route. Very scenic but probably more challenging in terms of engineering, cost and environmental impact.

References

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