

Alexander Avenue shopping precinct revitalisation

Engagement Summary

September 2022



Introduction

The City of Whittlesea established the Town Centre Revitalisation Program 2021-2025 to have a structured approach to revitalising local and neighbourhood centres. The program addresses the key action of *“Design and upgrade local streetscapes and shopping precincts to make it easier to move about, celebrate local culture, heritage and character, and connect people to the natural environment”* identified in Council’s Community Plan 2021-25.

Alexander Avenue, Thomastown has been recognised as a high priority site in the Town Centre Revitalisation Program, with opportunities identified to improve social spaces, walkability and connectivity, safety, and greening.

In May 2021, the Alexander Avenue Enhancement Group made up of community members, traders and the Principal of Thomastown East Primary School, together with Bronwyn Halfpenny MP, Member for Thomastown met with Council Directors and staff to share their concerns for the area. Key concerns raised included a lack of investment in the area, poor perceptions of safety and a lack of safe pedestrian crossings for young people (and the general public) crossing between the school, park and shops. Following this meeting Council committed to investigate improvements in the area. Since then Council has:

- Undertaken surveys to analyse traffic movement and the movement of school students in the area.
- Following feedback from local traders, car parking hours have been altered in some areas around the shops.
- Engaged with other business areas across Council to help the project team to understand the project scope, challenges and opportunities.

The community will be consulted on the revitalisation of Alexander Avenue shopping precinct and Nick Ascenzo Reserve in three phases:

- Phase 1 – capturing challenges and opportunities of the site - COMPLETED
- Phase 2 – presentation of concept design options for feedback – First half of 2023
- Phase 3 – construction process – Second half of 2023

How we engaged you

The Alexander Avenue shopping precinct revitalisation program consultation was open for community feedback from 1 to 31 August 2022.

During this period the project team held 1-on-1 conversations and conducted a survey of Alexander Avenue traders, a workshop and site visit with Thomastown East Primary School student leaders and Principal on 26 August and a community pop-up stall on-site from 3-7pm on Friday 26 August to capture Friday night trade at the take-away stores. Visitors were informed of the consultation and the project team captured feedback on their experiences with the reserve.

Residents within 700m were letterbox dropped in early August to inform them of the consultation and encourage them to share their feedback through the community consultation by attending the community pop-up or on the project page on the Engage Whittlesea platform.

Visitors to the shops were alerted to the consultation through posters that were placed in the windows of Alexander Avenue businesses.

The community consultation and community pop-up was shared on Councils social channels including Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The seven posts (three on Facebook) were viewed by a combined total of 23,452, with 1,563 of these people interacting with it in some way (sharing, commenting or leaving a reaction).

Subscribers to the Engage Whittlesea platform that had previously indicated an interest in arts, culture and community; planning, design and infrastructure; roads, paths and transport and/or the Thomastown area were notified via email of the new project page (total 466 subscribers). Of these, 290 recipients read the email with 30, or 6 percent clicking through to view the Alexander Avenue engage page.

The project Engage page featured two consultation activities, a survey and a pinpoint map. The survey captured feedback on how respondents use the area as well as any insights on how we could best improve the area. The pinpoint map enables respondents to drop a pin and make a comment on a specific point within the project area and provide feedback or an improvement idea for that particular point.

At in-person consultations respondents were presented with six key themes and asked to rank the areas they felt needed change/improvement the most.

Participation

Feedback was received from 144 participants including traders in the activity centre, residents of the surrounding neighbourhoods, visitors to the shops and Nick Ascenzo Reserve as well as the students, their parents, and staff members of Thomastown East Primary School. This feedback is valuable to the City of Whittlesea to understand the community's concerns as well as their ideas and aspirations for the activity centre.

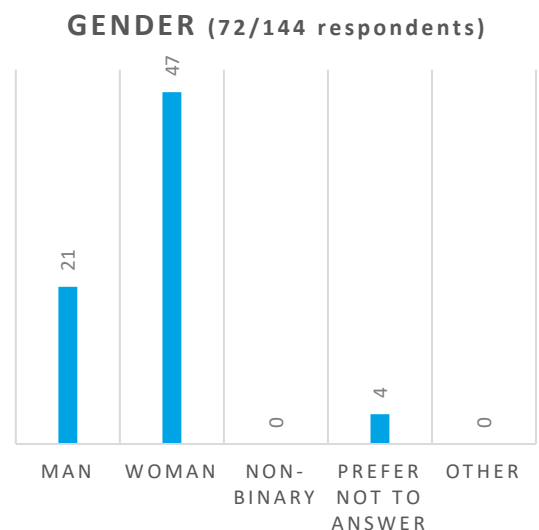
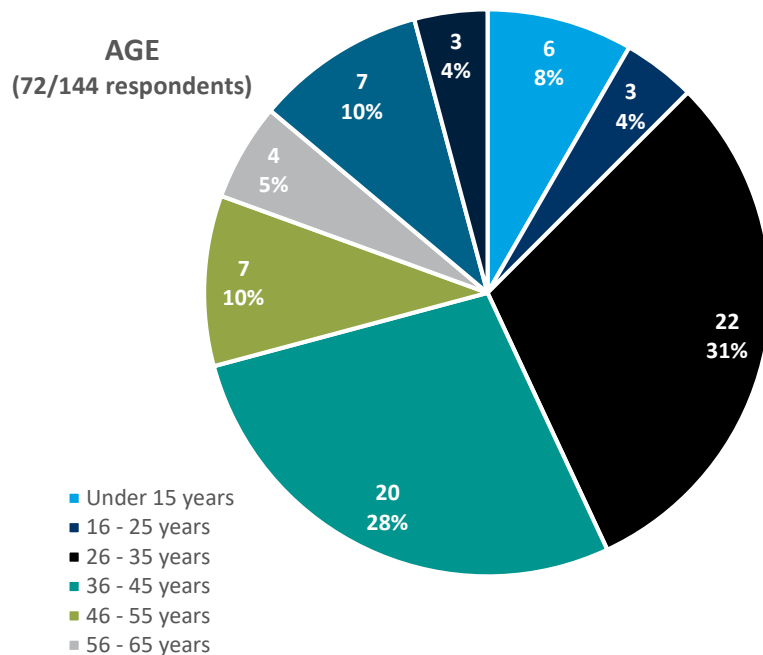
The Alexander Avenue shopping precinct revitalisation page on Council's Engage platform attracted 656 views and saw 85 contributions made including 73 surveys and 12 pins dropped on the interactive map.

The planned online workshop with the Enhancement Group didn't go ahead due to low attendance, instead the project team successfully engaged in 1:1 conversations with eight of the nine Alexander Avenue traders who also completed the survey.

An online workshop was scheduled for the evening of Monday 15 August, however like the Enhancement Group session this did not go ahead as there were no pre-registrations recorded.

On Friday 26 August the project team met with the Principal of Thomastown East Primary along with 19 student leaders. That evening the project team held a community pop-up on-site that was attended by 56 community members including an additional six young people who together made 56 priority votes and dropped 24 pins on the pinpoint map.

Participants in the consultation activities were of all ages, providing insight into the requirements and priorities of different age groups. Majority of participants were aged 26-45 years old and over half were women. Participants were typically from Thomastown and Lalor, but some also travelled from Bundoora, Epping, Mernda, Wollert, and Mill Park.



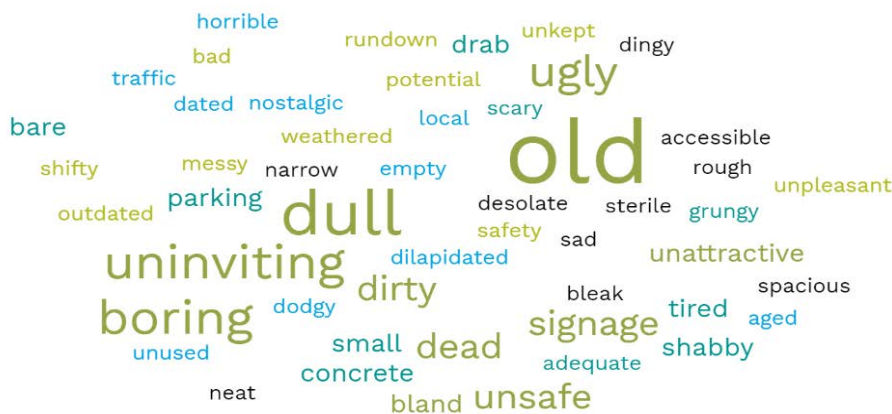
What we heard

Overall, we heard that the area's infrastructure is degrading and in need of repair, paths and carparking areas do not meet current standards of compliance and existing land uses in the precinct can be better connected. Residents and visitors perceive the area as 'unsafe', 'uninviting' and 'dull'.

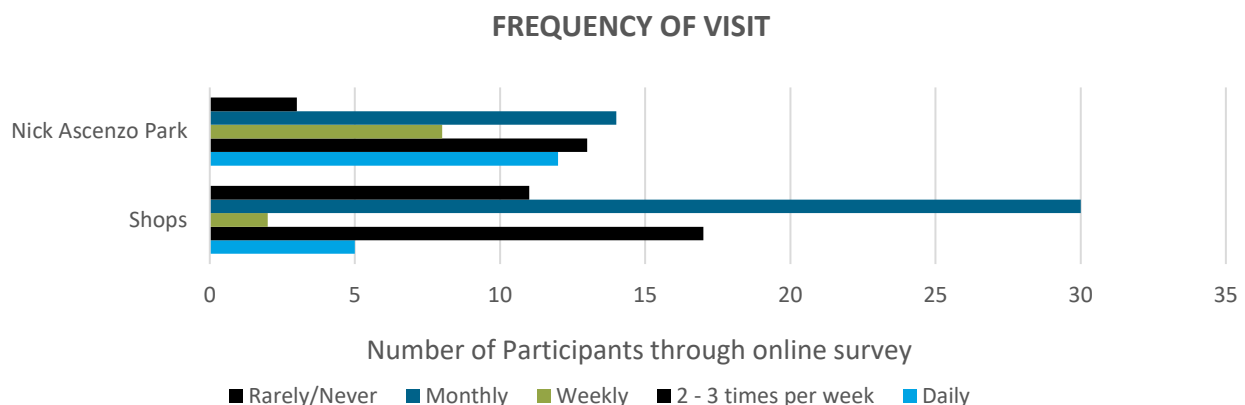
Our community engagement highlighted three main points.

1. There are poor perceptions of safety in the area (such as lack of lighting at night-time, poor passive surveillance and open views, lack of activities/things to do near the shops).
2. Pedestrian safety and access is a concern of the community and traders; and
3. Any improvement would be supported, especially those designed to activate the area (such as outdoor dining or public art).

Participants were asked to describe the area with three different words, the below wordcloud represents these visually, the more a word was mentioned the bigger it is.

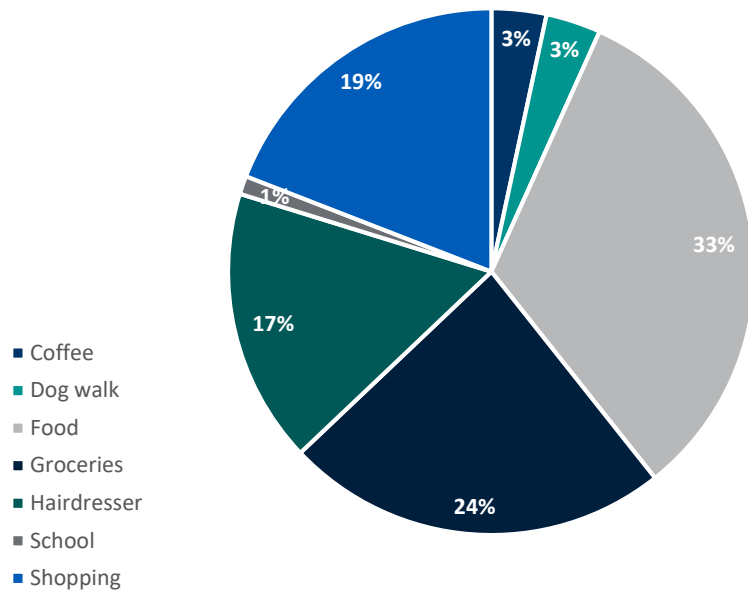


Residents and visitors including the parents of students accessing nearby Thomastown East Primary School use the shopping strip. People who visit the shops (63), do so once a month (30) or a couple of times a week (17). Many (11) do not visit the shops at all due to number of reasons such as a lack of options for shopping and activities and safety concerns. The infrequent visits from the community have reduced foot traffic in the area, coupled with inadequate lighting have led to sharp decrease in the perception of safety among the community.

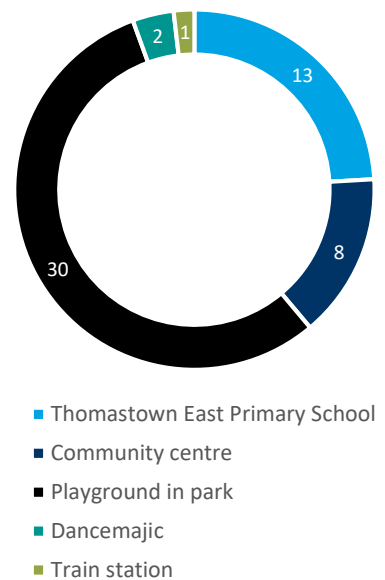


The shops are frequented by the participants to buy takeaway food (33%), groceries (24%), flowers and other items (19%) and visit the hairdresser (17%) and by parents dropping children off to school (1%). Due to the nature of these visits, time spent at the shopping strip ranges from a few minutes to an hour, except for hairdressing appointments, which could last up to a few hours.

REASONS FOR VISIT

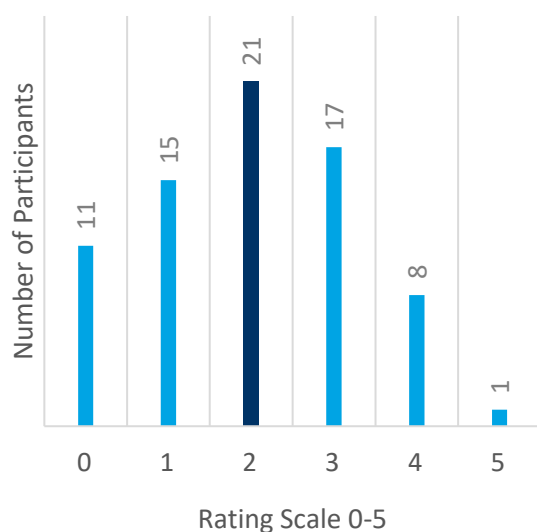


OTHER PLACES TO VISIT

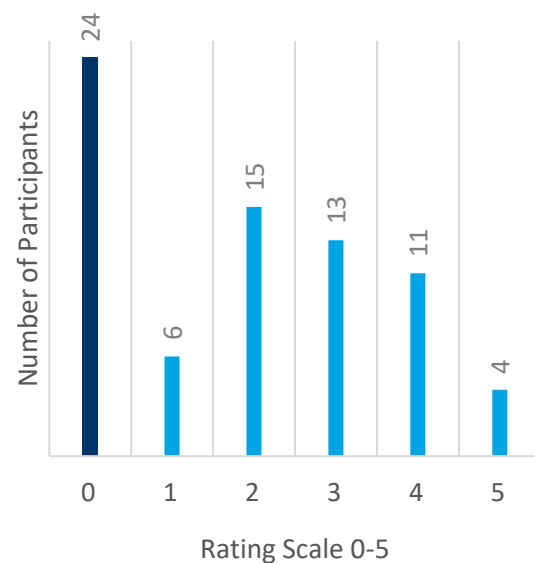


Participants were asked to rate the shops and the reserve on a scale of 1 (negative) to 5 (positive). Most participants felt that the shops and streetscape lacked amenity. Safety concerns also added to a low rating of the area. Nick Ascenzo reserve is not frequented by many of the community due to poor upkeep and a lack of diverse activities.

ALEXANDER AVE. STREETSCAPE AND SHOPS

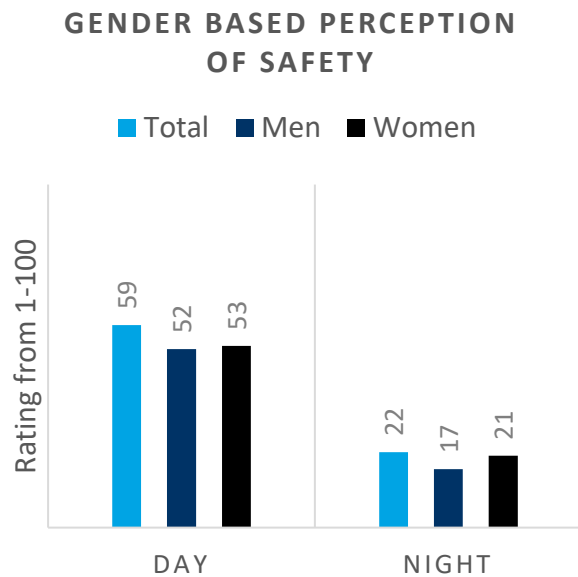


NICK ASCENZO RESERVE



Participants were asked to rate their perception of safety on a scale from 0 (unsafe) to 100 (safe) during the day and at night. Perception of safety was moderate during the day (50%) and was especially low during the night (around 20%).

General safety and lighting were the key issues identified by traders. Almost half of the traders were women and the perception of safety among them was especially low. This is predominantly due to inadequate lighting, anti-social activities in front of the shops and in the park, obstructed sight lines, a recent assault at IGA and a history of ramraiding and burglary across the shops.



Traders reported a lack of activity in the area, speeding, poor access to the park and carparking area on Boronia Street. The traders would like to see better cleanliness measures, fit for purpose parking spaces/times and opportunities for outdoor dining activities. Better street furniture, lighting, trees and planters and activities such as a playground, were identified as ideas to attract more people and improve the area.

Council staff members including Urban Design, Youth Services and Community Development walked with 19 Thomastown East Primary School students and their principal to the shops to gain perspectives of what mattered to young people in the area. Young people used a different colour dot to differentiate their priorities during the more general in-person engagement also. Younger participants were keen to see more public art in the space as well as more activities within the shopping strip and around the reserve that were relevant to their age group.

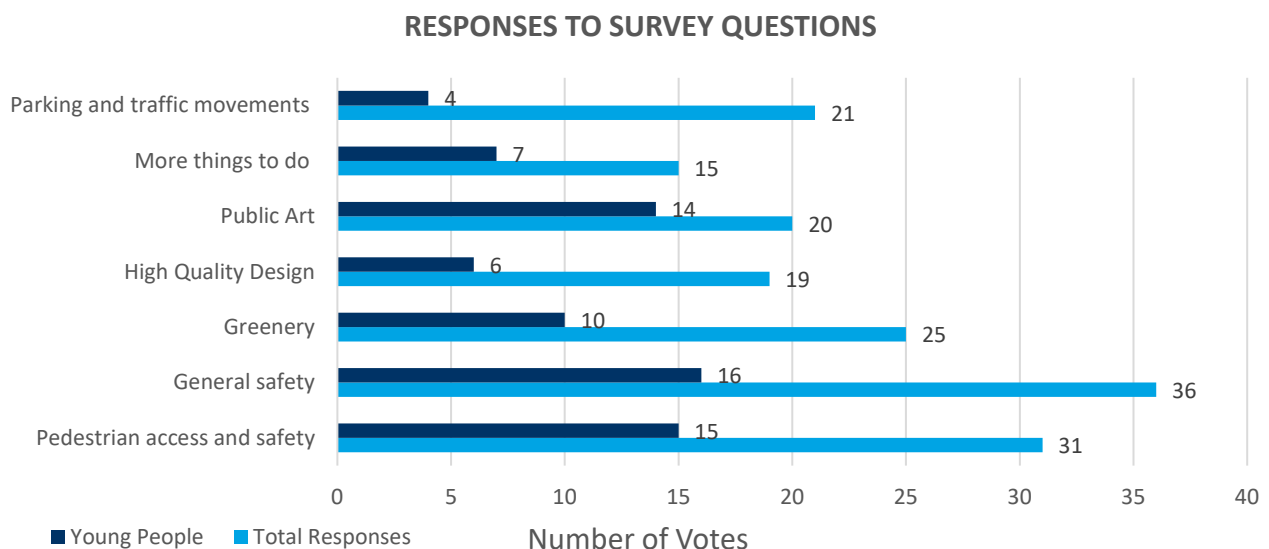


Photo: Urban Design, Youth Services and Community Development Officers discussing issues and opportunities with Thomastown East Primary School students and Principal.



Photo: Dark areas of carparking and park at night time.



Opportunities and concerns

The community felt that general safety was a priority, people have been assaulted in the area. Traders, especially women, feel unsafe working after dark. Pedestrian safety was another key concern as many incidents of speeding, ramraiding and improper usage of the open space in the park to drive vehicles have been noted by community.

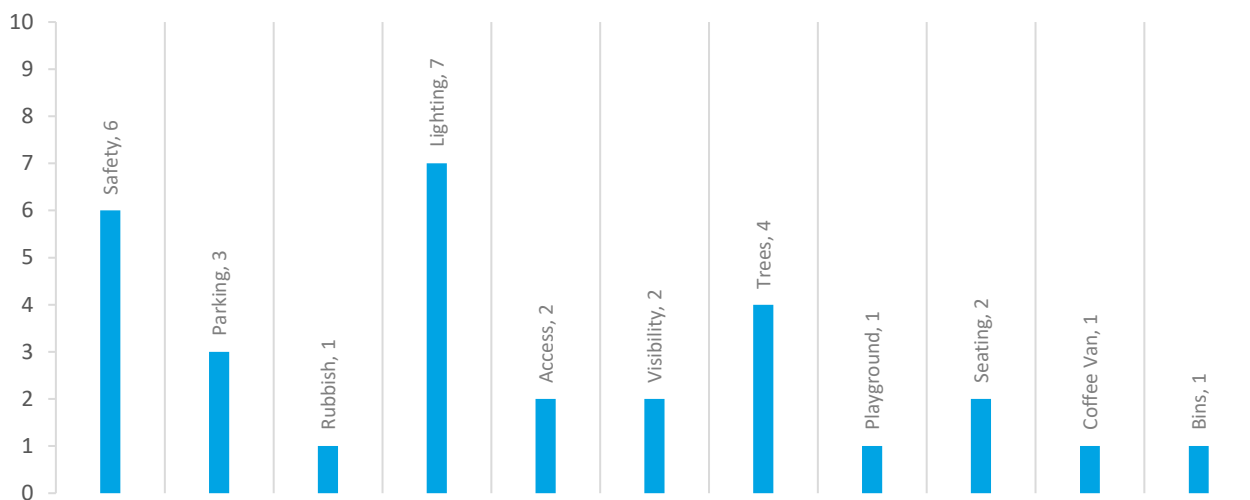
They also prioritise greenery and shade to make it easier to walk, making the precinct cooler during summer, and increase its visual appearance. The community also indicated that high quality street furniture coupled with provisions for outdoor dining would make the shopping strip attractive for locals and visitors. A key concern of the community was the potential increase in traffic flow due to the renewal of the

“...looks rundown and not safe.” – Community Member

shopping strip which would attract more people as well as a potential threat to pedestrians crossing the roads as there are no crossings in the area currently. The pinpoint map highlighted opportunities for reducing car parking spaces to create space for outdoor dining, seating areas for the people to gather, greenery and planter boxes and trees to upgrade the strip.

Respondents of all genders identified that greenery, general safety and pedestrian access and safety were the most important themes to address.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON ALL FEEDBACK



The below map provides a summary of the online and in person pinpoint map of the location specific issues identified by online and in person participants.

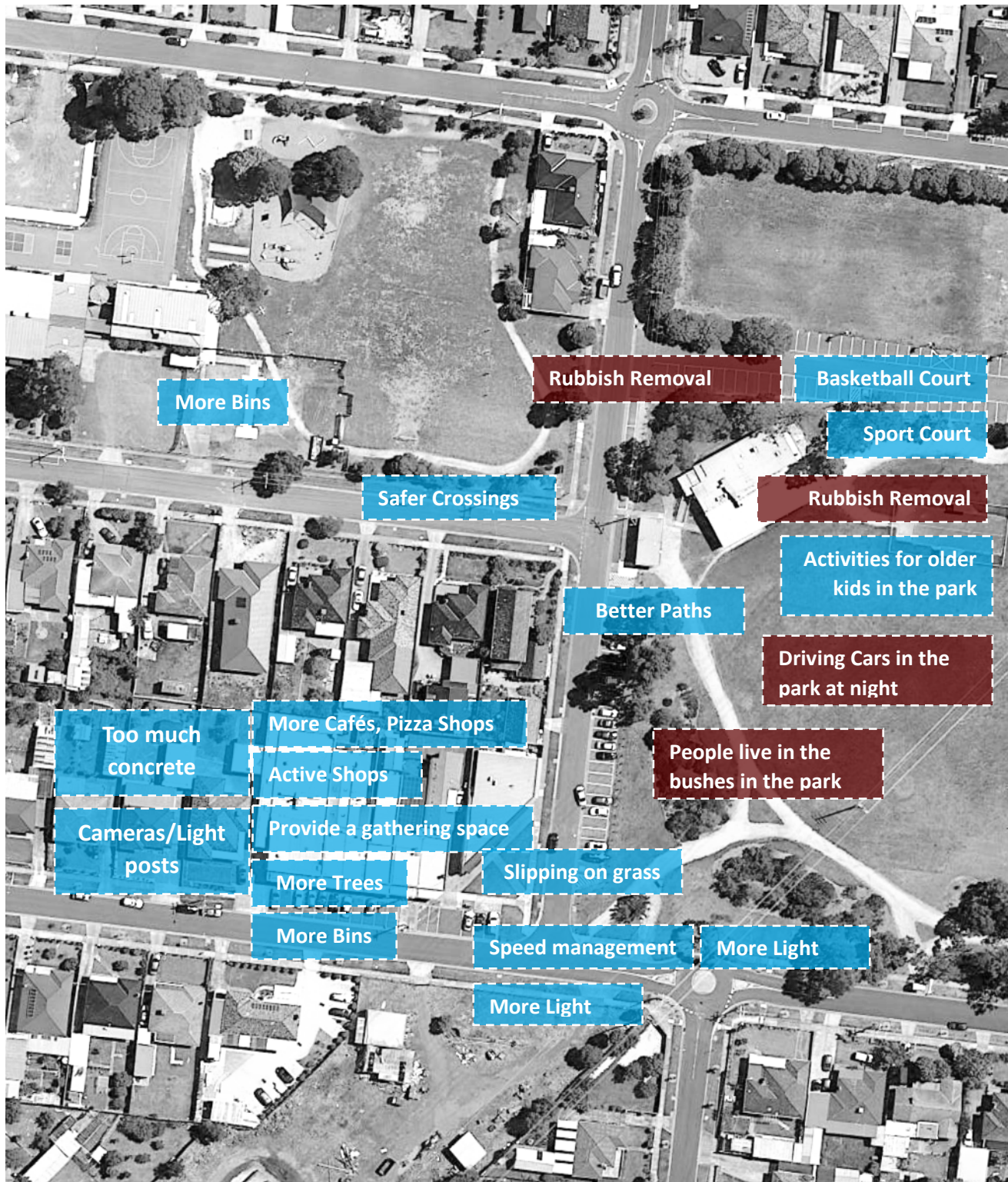


Table 1 – Shopping precinct Issues and Opportunities summary

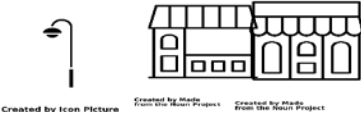









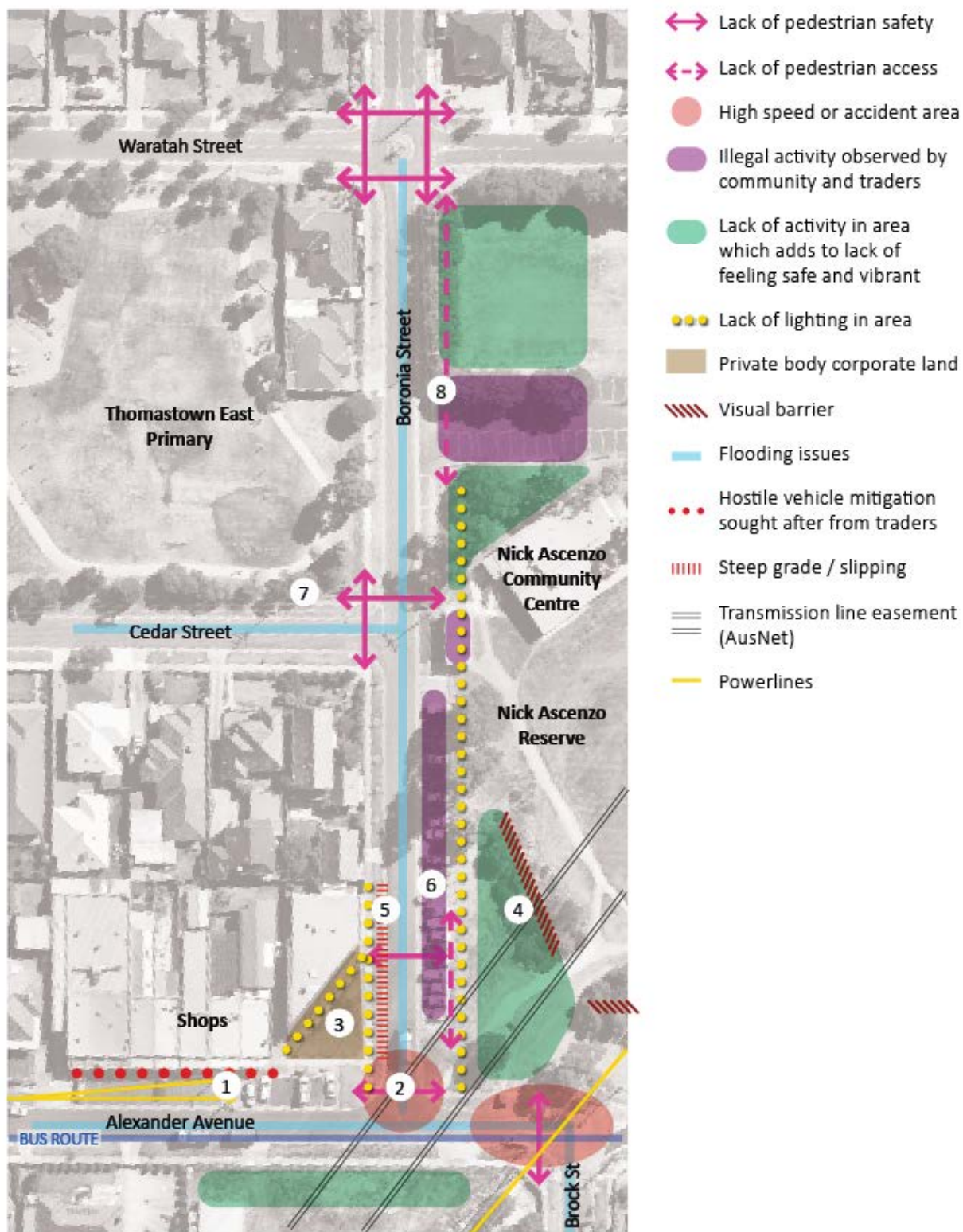
Issues	Comments and ideas
General Safety  <p>Created by Icon Picture Created by Made from the Noun Project Created by Made from the Noun Project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uniform lighting over the entire area to prevent dark spots. • Layered lighting, directional lighting as per requirement (with reference to Arup's LSUP (internal). • Façade improvements. • Improve passive surveillance and sight lines through shops and park. • Investigate empty shop front activation options. • Public toilets in Nick Ascenzo considered unsafe and poor design.
Pedestrian access and safety  <p>Created by parkinson from the Noun Project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Footpath across easement is a tripping hazard. • Pedestrian crossing between shopping strip and reserve. • Concrete strip/access point from Boronia Street carpark. • <i>"Ideally a marked crossing from the opposite side of the road to get to the shops, especially due to cars coming from around the corner from Brock St, it makes it hard to cross safely"</i> – Community Member
Greenery  <p>Created by Guna Yoda Created by Made from the Noun Project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase tree cover in and around the shopping strip for shade and visual appeal. • Increase the greenery of the precinct as well to make it a bit more aesthetically pleasing.
High Quality Design  <p>Created by Guna Yoda</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce street furniture that responds to the current needs of the community. • Install bins at better locations. • Council's level of maintenance is considered poor. • <i>"Keep it Thommo! Keep it concrete!"</i> – Community Member
More things to do  <p>Created by Guna Yoda Created by Made from the Noun Project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Space for youth centric activities – skateboarding, tennis, cricket, futsal etc. near the shops. • Outdoor dining activities to increase opportunities for socialization. • <i>"Create bigger paths outside shops to create opportunity for outdoor dining. Could bring in better restaurants or gelati shop/cafe. There aren't many good cafes in the area enjoyed by a greater number of young families coming into the area."</i> – Community Member
Parking and traffic movement  <p>Created by Guna Yoda</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase parking time for patrons running longer errands. • New elements in road to minimise speeding in the area and create slower streets. • Rethink parking spots and times. • Bollards / hostile vehicle mitigation. • Stop cars driving in park.
Public Art  <p>Created by Markah Icon Created by Nicolas Vignat from the Noun Project</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incorporate murals on blank walls and introduce other forms of public art such as sculptures, paving patterns etc to liven up the space.

Table 3 - Nick Ascenzo Reserve issues and opportunities

Issues	Comments and ideas
<p>General Safety</p>  <p><small>Created by Icon Pitcher for the Nick Ascenzo Reserve Project</small></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lighting issues. • Larger bushes need trimming/replanting with less foliage. • Activities or design that prevents people from misusing large empty spaces. • Toilet block feels unsafe.
<p>Greenery</p>  <p><small>Created by Icon Pitcher for the Nick Ascenzo Reserve Project</small></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open/clear out bushes in the reserve, trees with low foliage density. • Create possum boxes etc on trees.
<p>Maintenance and Upkeep</p>  <p><small>Created by Icon Pitcher for the Nick Ascenzo Reserve Project</small></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better pathways. • Lawn needs to be cleaned/ free of litter, broken glass. • “The paths need to be paved, we walk our dog here and the paths are gross and muddy especially when it rains. It is very deserted and sad looking, could do with fencing and some landscaping for a good dog park.” – Community Member • “Always lots of rubbish, broken glass, the lawn is usually not well looked after.” – Community Member.
<p>Lack of activities</p>  <p><small>Created by Icon Pitcher for the Nick Ascenzo Reserve Project</small></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Space for youth centric activities – skateboarding, tennis, cricket etc. • Seating and BBQ area. • Urban agriculture/community gardens (social enterprises may also be interested in urban agriculture area) • Scouts Hall not very well utilised. • Bocce court is not utilised for intended use, currently used as informal dog park.

Challenges summarised

The below map summarises key challenges identified in this report that can be addressed through streetscape redesign. Further discussions with Council staff and subject matter experts will be undertaken to identify which challenges are a priority to address in a streetscape concept design and achievable within a reasonable budget.





Two power poles (one high voltage) exist within the shopfront streetscape.



Intersection of Alexander Ave and Boronia Street is wide and encourages speeding. Pedestrian crossing point is also not direct, with no safe pedestrian access between the Boronia carparking and shops.



Triangle grassed area on corner of Alexander and Boronia is privately owned body corporate.



Shrub planting creates visual barrier into the park, making it feel unsafe and unwelcoming. People cannot see what others are doing in the park - which could draw people in.



Steep crossfall and grass between shops and Boronia carpark causing slipping incidents.



Dark environment at night time on Boronia Street carpark and shopfronts, creating poor perceptions of safety.



Crossing from primary school to shops and Nick Ascenzo Reserve have children crossing unattended.



Steep crossfall and lack of footpath along western edge of reserve. The reserve also has a lack of uses along it's western edge, resulting in a lack of activity and passive surveillance.

Next steps

Thank you to everyone that completed the survey, dropped a pin, and participated in the community engagement.

Feedback gathered from the community is being used to develop the design of the streetscape upgrade and will be incorporated into the decision-making process. The project team will seek to develop a plan that addresses the issues raised and balances these with the broader needs of the community.

A draft concept design will be presented in the second phase of community consultation, providing an opportunity for the community to see how the feedback provided has helped shape the concept design. The draft concept design will need to be endorsed by Council to proceed to community consultation.

Appendix Item 1 – Trader Issues and Opportunities

Key issues identified by traders	Opportunities identified by traders
General safety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Observations of antisocial behaviour in the car park and park • Inadequate lighting means the area is perceived as unsafe especially by female members of the community. It also facilitates anti-social behaviour and discourages visitors to the shop. • Robberies reported at the shops, assault at IGA • Overgrown landscaping around the reserve is inhabited by people after dark • Area generally inactive at night. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase lighting around the shops • Open/clear out bushes in the reserve, trees with low foliage density • Integrate new uses (potentially something for young people) into the park near the shops – this could deter antisocial behaviour • Increase active surveillance measures around shops by installing CCTV. It was highlighted with traders that CCTV isn't something Council generally offers as a service.
Pedestrian access and safety <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent speeding around the corner of Alexander Avenue x Boronia Street • Poor access from pedestrian pathways. • People continue to slip on nature strip in between shops and Boronia Street • Trucks hitting light poles when going around roundabout on Brock St • No pedestrian access from carpark on east side of Boronia Street • Ramraiding of shops in recent history • Speeding in the area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 40 zone around shops - flashing lights to show this • Concrete strip/access point from Boronia Street carpark • Zebra crossings and street designed to encourage slower speeds • Bollards / hostile vehicle mitigation • Close Boronia Street between school and Nick Ascenzo Reserve.
Car parking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not busy throughout the week, but during peak hours, parking is limited or not fit for purpose (i.e., hairdressers want 4-hour parking near their shop, takeaways want quicker parking) • Traders parking there all day, they don't have anywhere to park their cars without getting booked. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can parking be reorganised to have parking on both sides of Alexander Ave • More carparking, could Council purchase transmission easement • Better parking times for uses at the shops. • Trader permits.

<p>Greenery</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The shopping does not have trees/ planters/ landscaping elements that improve amenity of the area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More Trees and nature to make the place feel nicer • Beautification, nice light poles, pavers, planter boxes etc.
<p>Lack of things to do</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The area lacks activities that are targeted towards young people such as skate parks, exercise, community sports • Lack of coffee shop? More outdoor dining would be great, helps business • Inactive during the night. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coffee van spot near the shops to help activate, no café currently • Playground / play items for kids, bring them to shops more, more people around for more reasons • Offer space for outdoor dining and street trading • Possibility of Council purchasing or activating vacant transmission easement.
<p>Poor maintenance and poor-quality infrastructure</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Littering and rubbish • Broken glass bottles and hazardous items lying around in the car park • The condition of the area deters people from coming to the shops • Cracks in road, foot paths and aging bins • Recently installed tables considered ugly, but they do get used. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Install bins at better locations • Check Council's level of maintenance • Better seating, tables, umbrellas • Improve design and quality of the area.
<p>Wayfinding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People are unaware of the shops resulting in low foot traffic • No one would know there are shops here from Dalton Road. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better signage for shops • Improve wayfinding to the shops from surrounding street network • Improve lighting.
<p>Visibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Don't clutter views/space – keep visibility open across the area • Closed shops/roller doors make area unattractive. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Improve passive surveillance and sight lines through shops and park • Clearer views across and into the park. • Investigate empty shop front activation options • Seek options to work with shop owners to improve their facades.