

**COMMENT on COMMUNITY COMMENT on COMMUNITY
COMMENT on COMMUNITY COMMENT on COMMUNITY**

DISCUSSION PAPER

**ANTI-SOCIAL BEHAVIOUR IN FITZROY STREET:
What is it? Who is it? Where is it? Who fixes it?**

As a policy researcher with an active interest in community engagement and development, I embarked on my role of coordinating the Fitzroy Street Taskforce in the knowledge that dealing with the topic of anti-social behaviour in a mixed planning zone containing businesses, residential premises, homelessness, an active night life, visitors and tourists would present one of the most complex and challenging projects that I have yet undertaken. All members of the Taskforce have acknowledged the difficult and multi-layered social problems that present in Fitzroy Street. Everyone agrees that Council, traders, residents, community groups, and police must address in a collaborative way solutions to anti-social behaviour in Fitzroy Street.

Already, there have been solid and exciting outcomes driven by the Taskforce: extensive discussion to identify a vision for Fitzroy Street; development of an Action Plan based on community consultation; Taskforce meetings to evaluate and drive actions; awareness and commitment by key Council staff to improve Fitzroy Street; and a wider community interest in vitalising the Fitzroy Street precinct. Reaching this point in less than a year is a significant achievement for the Taskforce. There are, however, some pressing issues to explore in relation to anti-social behaviour.

The Challenge of Addressing Anti-social Behaviour

So far I have heard many different perspectives on how Fitzroy Street could be improved so that the streetscape looks more appealing; so that people can feel and be safe day and night; and so that the community can be strengthened. As coordinator of the Fitzroy Street Taskforce, I am committed to establishing a culture whereby people from all socio-economic groups feel that they can express their viewpoints in a respectful environment.

Three months into being an advocate for the Taskforce I now find myself in the position of having been exposed to the range of views on problems plaguing Fitzroy Street and being the custodian of numerous proposed solutions to the problems. I think that as a Taskforce we have reached a level where we need to raise awareness of the array of members' interpretations of anti-social behaviour and deliberate on how we want to proceed with a course of action to debate these interpretations. This is likely to be the most testing aspect of working collaboratively and will require Taskforce members to substantiate anecdotal

information with verifiable research data and evidence. Moreover, the process of taking into account different perspectives on anti-social behaviour will require preparedness by Taskforce members and the wider community to review personal viewpoints and question assumptions about who should be held accountable for anti-social behaviour in Fitzroy Street.

I have been receiving a great deal of feedback from the community regarding anti-social behaviour in and around Fitzroy Street. The local community defines anti-social behaviour in a myriad of ways; proposed solutions to perceived problems are also profuse. As a Taskforce, deciding on who is responsible for causing anti-social behaviour and who should be held accountable for behaviour that threatens safety, trade, amenity and wellbeing in Fitzroy Street, is a moving feast. Who, if anyone, is to blame? Who should fix it? Should anyone or any group be included or excluded from Fitzroy Street? Who has the right to draw the boundaries between public and private use of a mixed zone streetscape?

Competing Views on What and Who Causes Anti-social Behaviour

On the one hand, some Taskforce members have contacted me to express concern about anti-social behaviour in Fitzroy Street, which they believe stems from the presence of rooming houses in the precinct. This point was raised in a recent meeting of the Safety subgroup of the Taskforce with some members of the Taskforce claiming that rooming houses attract a criminal element into Fitzroy Street. This viewpoint has been articulated by some Taskforce members in conversations with me and other Council staff, and documented at length in emails sent to me. Some Taskforce members state that rooming houses attract former prisoners; some people on the Taskforce claim that management of rooming houses is inadequate; others are of the view that homeless people increase drinking and violence on the street; some Taskforce members state that in the last 18 months a new element of anti-social behaviour has appeared in Fitzroy Street. This new element is described as constituting a cohort of people who pose as homeless and threaten traders and customers, and people who beg while claiming social welfare. Some members of the Taskforce believe that people impersonating socially and economically disadvantaged people are “dishonest” and not “legitimately” homeless – and that they threaten personal safety and have the potential to force businesses to relocate.

Most people who hold these views on the sources of anti-social behaviour tell me that they are not against homeless people or rooming houses per se. Some people on the Taskforce inform me, however, that they would like to see certain rooming houses shut down. Views also have been expressed about limiting the number of rooming houses in the Fitzroy Street precinct. Additionally, I have received requests for the CoPP to publicly state whether more rooming houses will be established in the area and whether Council will allow people from other parts of Melbourne and interstate to settle in St Kilda rooming houses.

There is, on the other hand, robust disagreement by other Taskforce members that rooming houses and homelessness are the cause or trigger for anti-social behaviour in Fitzroy Street. Some Taskforce members tell me that rooming house occupants and homeless people are scape goats for people who look to apportion blame for anti-social behaviour. These members of the Taskforce claim that the focus of anti-social behaviour is disproportionately allocated to homeless people in and around Fitzroy Street. They argue that there is no legitimate evidence or research to support claims that the main cause of anti-social behaviour is linked to homelessness or management of rooming houses.

Taskforce members who champion the right of rooming house residents and people living on the streets to have a rightful place in and around Fitzroy Street tell me that often people who are socially and economically disadvantaged become the focus of blame and anger because they are constructed as “other” in a precinct and municipality that has undergone rapid gentrification in recent years. Some Taskforce members suggest that there is a lack of understanding of homelessness by people who blame rooming houses and homeless people for anti-social behaviour.

Some Taskforce members point to wider social problems that need to be addressed by the Taskforce, such as a lack of after-hours activities that provide dignified gathering places for people experiencing homelessness. Community workers argue that activities and appropriate meeting places need to be established to facilitate a rightful and natural integration of rooming house occupants and people living on the streets into the Fitzroy Street community. Some members tell me that instead of blaming homeless people for being the main cause of anti-social behaviour, we should put our energy into creating safe and dignified community projects that seek to engage homeless people.

While in recent weeks much of the focus of Taskforce members has been on coupling or de-coupling homelessness and anti-social behaviour, other issues identified by the Taskforce relating to unsafe, disrespectful, and as yet unmanageable behaviour on Fitzroy Street, remain on the agenda. Balancing the rights and safety of residents, traders and visitors in an entertainment precinct is, according to some, the issue that should be of paramount concern. Some Taskforce members assert that the impact of alcohol-induced violence on people and property should demand much greater attention than the current fixation on social disadvantage and anti-social behaviour. They ask: Why do some people think they have a right to demand that the Gatwick be closed down as a means of eradicating anti-social behaviour in Fitzroy Street? Why do people think they have a right to demand that people be ejected from their place of residence and that a business specialising in accommodation be shut down? They note that no one is suggesting that traders should be closed down because their patrons are allegedly vomiting in the street and urinating on people’s front door steps and in lane ways. Why should rooming houses be held more responsible than others for anti-social behaviour?

Accountability for Anti-social Behaviour and the Challenge of Problem Solving

Casting blame and assigning responsibility for alcohol-related violence and disrespectful behaviour on Fitzroy Street continues to go round in circles: Should traders be held accountable for drunken patrons once they step out onto Fitzroy Street? Should the police be fully responsible for managing anti-social behaviour, brought on by drinking in bars and nightclubs in Fitzroy Street? Should Council play a greater role in managing alcohol-induced anti-social behaviour? These are questions that have been raised by Taskforce members but not yet resolved.

Reaching agreement - or at least a degree of compromise - on who and/or what cause anti-social behaviour in Fitzroy Street clearly requires greater thought, research and sharing of viewpoints among Taskforce members. If solutions are to be devised to reduce anti-social behaviour in Fitzroy Street, creative and respectful ways of encouraging Taskforce members to engage in dialogue, community engagement, and practical projects needs to be explored.

As Coordinator of the Fitzroy Street Taskforce I can facilitate discussions on how to deal with anti-social behaviour. The quandary of how to move forward is, however, a matter for all of you as Taskforce members to provide ideas and direction.

As outlined in the Fitzroy Street Taskforce Action Plan, the Taskforce has nominated respectful visitation as an action to be discussed and delivered. Surely, among Taskforce members, there also needs to be a respectful visitation of each other's views and experiences of Fitzroy Street? How is this best achieved? What type of forum or methodology could we employ for a respectful exchange of ideas for defining and solving anti-social behaviour in Fitzroy Street?

In early 2008 I will be researching models for dealing with anti-social behaviour in other complex streetscapes and entertainment precincts within Australia and internationally. I will share these findings with you so that you can provide feedback on possible models and strategies for managing anti-social behaviour. This research and feedback is likely to inform council's approach to community consultation and policies on entertainment precincts across the CoPP.

Email: kgorjani@portphillip.gov.org.au

Phone: (w) 9209 6852 (m) 0403 601 828

Post: Katrina Gorjanicyn
Coordinator Fitzroy Street Taskforce
Private Bag No.3
PO St Kilda Victoria 3182