

# Yoorrook Justice Commission Submission

Merri-bek City Council Renaming

July 2024



Merri-bek  
City Council

Merri-bek City Council is submitting the historical Renaming Project to the Yoorrook Justice Commission's call-out for stories related to Land, Sky and Waters, under the category of 'Ways to acknowledge and address injustice against First Peoples'.

## Submission summary

In November 2021, Traditional Owner representatives of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation requested the then Moreland City Council change its name, due to its association with racism, slavery and dispossession. Following collaboration and consultation with the Wurundjeri, a truth-telling process with our community and support from the Victorian Government, in September 2022 the name of the Council officially changed to Merri-bek, meaning "rocky country" in Woi-wurrung language.

## BACKGROUND

### Statement of Commitment

In May 1998, Moreland City Council endorsed its 'Statement of Commitment to Indigenous Australians'. The document was updated in May 2021 and re-signed in October 2021 as the 'Statement of Commitment to Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung People and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities of the City of Moreland'. This statement outlined a range of commitments, as well as recognition and support for First Peoples. Its vision included the following:

*"Council commits to addressing dispossession and dislocation of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from their traditional lands by establishing and maintaining into the future, respectful partnerships between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the broader community."*

The Statement committed the Council to

*"Undertake cultural consultations with the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and seek to include Woi-wurrung names in the process of naming and renaming spaces, places, roads and parks in the City of Moreland."*

This statement centres the interests of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and all First Peoples as the core motivation for Council's strategy and subsequent decision-making.

### Naming of "Moreland" in 1839

Use of the name "Moreland" in Melbourne stems from land, between Moonee Ponds Creek and Sydney Road, "acquired" in 1839 by Farquhar McCrae. McCrae named the property Moreland after a family plantation in Jamaica, an estate which traded in slaves, sugar and rum. Various reports suggest his grandfather operated the estate and his father was raised there. Records are available online via the University College London academic website which set out the history and statistics around slave

trading of the estate from 1783-1887. The numbers of enslaved people at the estate peaked in 1827 with 700 slaves.

After slavery was outlawed in British colonies, in November 1835, Moreland's slave-owners received significant compensation for 585 slaves from the British Government. Despite this, these slaves were then required to endure an extended period of indenture and would still have been in bondage when McCrae first used the name Moreland in Victoria.

The Traditional Owners had never given permission for the sale of this land, it was part of the devastating dispossession of the Aboriginal community in Victoria. Council's Statement of Commitment adopted in May 2021 includes recognition that "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have never ceded sovereignty of their lands".

## **PROPOSAL TO CHANGE NAME**

### **Approach by Elders from Traditional Owner Community and Community Representatives**

In October 2021, a community member contacted the office of Cathy Henderson, Chief Executive Officer, on behalf of a group including Elders of the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people. He requested a meeting with the CEO and Mayor to:

"alert them to a matter of significant concern involving the City... a confronting example of ingrained racism of historic origin relating to the City that involves ongoing insensitivity..."

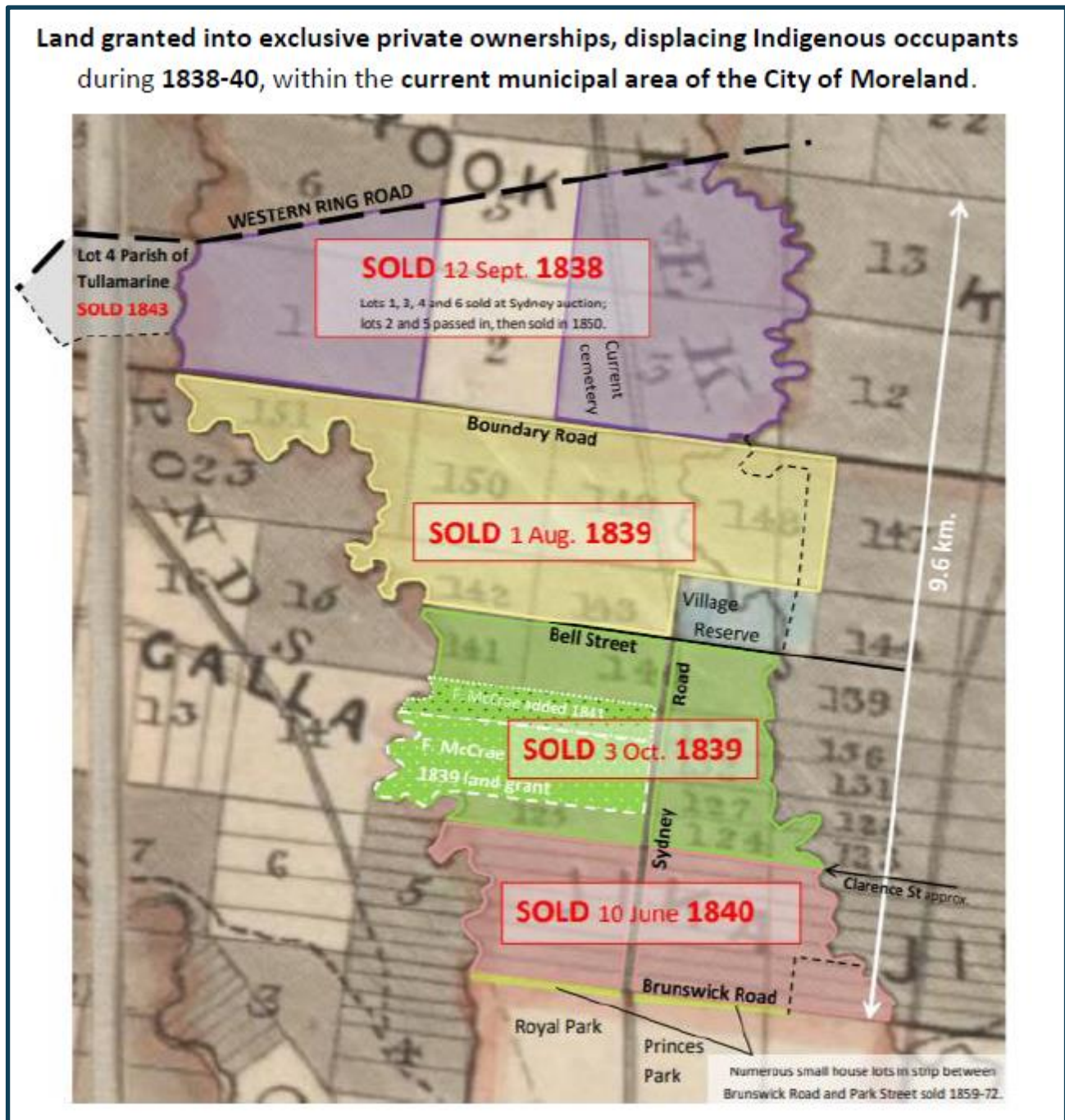
The meeting took place on 19 November 2021 including four Elders from the Traditional Owner Community – Uncle Andrew Gardiner, Uncle Tony Garvey, Auntie Julieanne Axford and Auntie Gail Smith, and supported by other citizens. From Council, the Mayor Cr Mark Riley, CEO Cathy Henderson and Director Community Eamonn Fennessy attended. The Elders and community members presented a "Letter of Request to Council" addressed to the Mayor and Councillors (see Attachment 1).

At the meeting, Elders acknowledged Moreland City Council's strong efforts in relation to reconciliation, including the recent signing of the renewed Statement of Commitment to Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung People and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities of the City of Moreland.

The group provided information showing the origins of the name "Moreland". Farquhar McCrae named the land that he acquired in 1839 after a Jamaican slave estate his forebears had operated. The Moreland plantation estate operated in Southern Jamaica and was active between 1783 -1887. Its business included sugar, rum and slave trading, with 500 – 700 slaves there in any one year.

There was also information presented in relation to the rapid rate, extensive scale and catastrophic impacts of land dispossession on Aboriginal people from the 1830's and 1840's land sales in the local government area. During the years 1838 to 1840, approximately 85% of the area of what is now known as Merri-bek was granted into exclusive private ownership. This occurred swiftly, without the permission of Traditional Owners, who were suddenly dispossessed from their land with catastrophic consequences. The diagram overleaf was shown as a terrible illustration of the dispossession that occurred.

Picture 1: Diagram shared by Elders and community representatives at 19 November 2021 meeting, showing rapid dispossession of land within the Council area



In the Letter of Request, the Elders and community representatives asked Council to make commitments to:

“Partner with stakeholders in a respectful process to select a suitable new name during 2022.

Initiate and implement actions that acknowledge the impacts and consequences of dispossession, encourage respectful understanding through truth-telling, redress injustice and heal racist hurt.”

The group did not suggest an alternative name, but proposed a co-design process with stakeholders, including Traditional Owners, to determine a suitable and respectful process for renaming. The request

was solely to change the name of the municipality. No changes to other established place names or features were proposed or requested.

### **Decision in principle to change the name**

At its 13 December 2021 Council Meeting, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elder Uncle Andrew Gardiner gave a Welcome to Country and addressed the Council meeting. Councillors then considered the Letter of Request to Council and a report from Council staff.

This report also included a 30 November 2021 letter from the then Victorian Minister for Local Government, the Hon Shaun Leane MP, to the Mayor. The letter included this assurance:

*"I note the proposal for renaming of the Council has come at the request of the Elders from the Wurundjeri community and other community representatives.*

*I understand a report on the proposal will be considered by the Council, and if supported, a comprehensive community engagement process will be conducted in 2022 to consider community suggestions for a new name. I encourage the Council to work closely with the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation throughout this process.*

*I confirm my support and will be pleased to facilitate renaming of the Council in accordance with the requirements of the Act if the proposal is supported by Council and the local community. "*

That night, the Council resolved by a majority to support in principle changing the name of the municipality. The resolution was:

*That Council:*

1. *Supports in principle changing the name of the municipality.*
2. *Partners with stakeholders, including the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation, to co-design a process to select a new name during 2022 including consideration of arrangements such as community nominations and a consultative survey.*
3. *Plans and commences in 2022 a community information and education program that acknowledges the impacts and consequences of dispossession and racism and encourages respectful understanding through truth telling and reconciliation.*
4. *Receives a report in February 2022 detailing the proposed community information and education campaign, and recommendations from the name selection process co-design activity, including plans for community engagement with such matters as nominations, shortlisting processes and surveys.*
5. *Following community and stakeholder engagement, which includes consideration of matters such as nominations, and surveys, receives a further report with survey results and other considerations, and selects a preferred suitable name for the municipality to present to the Minister for Local Government for consideration in 2022.*
6. *Notes and refers to the budget process an additional \$250,000 per year for two financial years (\$500,000 total) to update Council's digital platforms, signs at significant Council buildings and facilities and municipal entry signs and notes updating Council assets such as street and park signs, smaller facilities signage, staff uniforms and vehicles will be addressed incrementally within existing budget allocations and asset renewal programs over a 10-year timeframe.*

## RENAMING THE COUNCIL

### Co-design of renaming process

Through late December 2021 until April 2022, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders, community representatives, the Merri-bek CEO and Director Community met almost weekly to plan the consultation process on a new name, and the truth-telling process to accompany it. The meetings involved discussion of process and community engagement, and at times Elders generously shared information and resources with attendees about the rich history of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and the impact of devastating dispossession. The meetings also included planning for the community education program and truth-telling, as well as key ceremonial events.

In March 2022, Council adopted the proposed engagement process for choosing a new name. Wurundjeri Elders had urged Council to exclusively offer only Woi-wurrung language name options for community feedback. After consideration and debate this was supported by a majority of Councillors at the meeting. This was a decision deeply rooted in respect for the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Traditional Owners and aimed at celebrating and preserving their language and culture.

### Cleansing Ceremony and Scroll Handover – presentation of three Woi-wurrung names

A ceremony was held on 14 May 2022 at Coburg Town Hall with a Welcome to Country, Cleansing Ceremony and Scroll Handover.

The Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation generously offered three Woi-wurrung names as potential future names for the Council. These Woi-wurrung words were provided as proposed name options through detailed research and careful consideration by the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation. The three names were offered to Councillors at the ceremony, burned onto a paperbark scroll.

Picture 2: Invitation sent for 14 May 2022 ceremony, including artwork by Wurundjeri artist Mandy Nicholson



The ceremony was attended by Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders, First Nations Advisory Committee

members, First Peoples, Councillors, community representatives, members of Parliament and other community members. The ceremony included a smoking ceremony conducted by Wurundjeri man Alex Kerr, a calling of the Elders by Wurundjeri woman Mandy Nicholson, a performance by the Djirri Djirri dancers, an address by Aunty Alice Kolasa, an address by Mayor Mark Riley, and the handing over of the paperbark scroll.

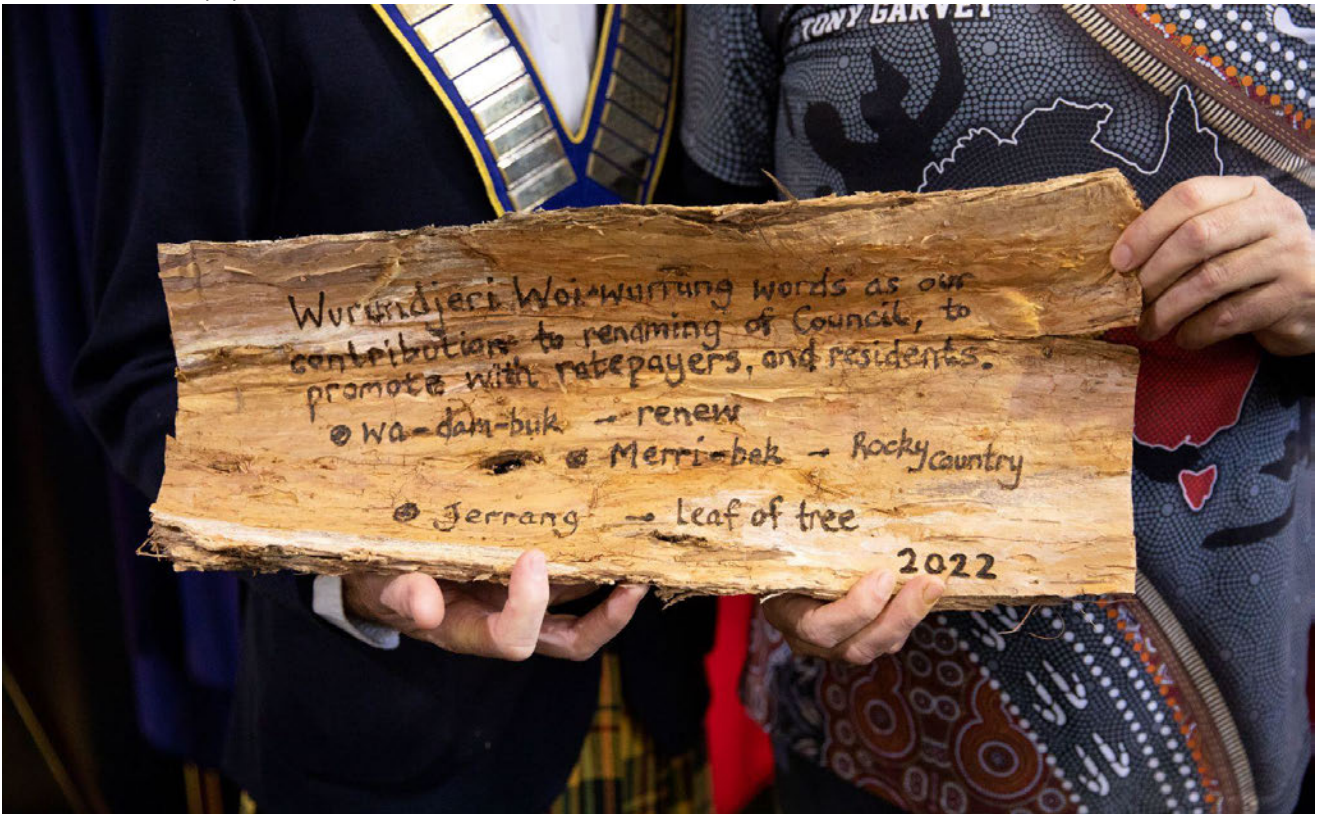
Picture 3: Aunty Alice Kolasa at the 14 May 2022 ceremony



Picture 4: Presentation of the paperbark scroll by Uncle Tony Garvey and Uncle Andrew Gardiner to Mayor Cr Mark Riley and Deputy Mayor Cr Lambros Tapinos, with Cr James Conlan, Cr Adam Pulford, Cr Angelica Panopoulos, Cr Annalivia Carli Hannan and Cr Monica Harte



Picture 5: Detail of paperbark scroll



The three Woi-wurrung names offered on the scroll were:

- **Wa-dam-buk** - meaning 'Renew'
- **Merri-bek** - meaning 'Rocky Country'
- **Jerrang** - meaning 'Leaf of tree'

## **Community engagement and education**

From May to June 2022, Council conducted extensive community engagement on the three name options, as well as a community education program throughout the year that shared with community members the history of our local area and the reason why Council would be changing its name.

Events included:

- History lecture by Dr James Lesh (who was commissioned by Council to write an independent report *A Report into the Place Name "Moreland"*).
- A series of public information sessions at various venues
- Truth and Treaty Yarns event with First Peoples' Assembly representatives Tracey Evans, Ngarra Murray, Uncle Andrew Gardiner and Yoorrook Justice Commissioner Maggie Walter.
- Screening of *First Australians* episode focusing on Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people
- First Peoples Childrens Story times
- First Nations Film Festival
- Council staff information sessions
- Meetings with stakeholder groups including senior citizens, interfaith leaders, youth ambassadors, neighbourhood houses and other community groups.

Council invited the broad community to provide their preference and comments on the three names. Feedback was encouraged via a range of online, in-person and written engagement methods to encourage residents, ratepayers, business owners and other community members to take part. These included hard copy mailouts to more than 80,000 households and targeted engagement with CALD community members.

There were 6,315 members of the community joined the conversation by submitting a survey, and Council also heard further from children and Council staff.

The results were:

- |   |                   |
|---|-------------------|
| - Merri-bek (rocky country)                   | 3,749 votes (59%) |
| - Jerrang (leaf of tree)                      | 1,368 votes (22%) |
| - Wa-dam-buk (renewal)                        | 824 votes (13%)   |
| - None (interpreted as prefer no name change) | 384 votes         |

Most of those who chose Merri-bek nominated that the reason they chose it was because the Merri Creek is important to them, or because they identified with the meaning of 'rocky country'.

Children were consulted about the options for names at five early years centres across the municipality. A total of 164 children participated and the most supported option was Merri-bek (89 children), followed by Jerrang (59 children) and Wa-dam-buk (16 children).



## Final choice of name

The Mayor, Deputy Mayor and representatives from the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation jointly considered the community feedback and recommended Merri-bek to Council as the new municipal name

On Sunday 3 July 2022, Council held a Special Council Meeting at Glenroy Community Hub accompanied by community activities. The meeting was preceded by a Welcome to Country and smoking ceremony, and Uncle Tony Garvey and Uncle Bill Nicholson addressed the Council meeting. At the Council meeting, Councillors considered and endorsed the recommendation of 'Merri-bek' as its new name.

In the library, Mandy Nicholson gave a talk about Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung culture. Then, following the Council meeting, Deputy Mayor Lambros Tapinos gave an address, a Wurundjeri Elder also addressed the audience, and the Djirri Djirri dancers performed. A manna gum was planted in the park adjacent to Glenroy Community Hub.

Picture 6: Planting of the manna gum tree, with Cr James Conlan, Cr Monica Harte, Cr Angelica Panopoulos, Cr Adam Pulford, Cr Annalivia Carli Hannan, James Williams, Uncle Tony Garvey, Senator Jana Stewart, Deputy Mayor Lambros Tapinos, CEO Cathy Henderson



## Final approval and implementation

The name Merri-bek was approved by the Victorian Government and Governor in Council, and came into effect on **26 September 2022**.

An event was held on the day the name change took effect, at Coburg Town Hall, attended by Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Elders, the Minister for Local Government, the Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Councillors, and Members of Parliament.

Banners and promotional material were on display with the new name, including the beautiful leaf artwork by Mandy Nicholson, which has been used with permission in branding and promotion of the Woi-wurrung name Merri-bek.

Picture 7: Event on 26 September 2022 to mark the new name of Council, with Dr Samantha Ratnam MP, Aunty Alice Kolasa, Fiona Patten MP, Uncle Andrew Gardiner, Cr Monica Harte, Cr Angelica Panopoulos, the Hon. Melissa Horne Minister for Local Government, Mayor Cr Mark Riley, Cr Annalivia Carli Hannan, Deputy Mayor Lambros Tapinos, Kathleen Matthews-Ward MP.



Council has since updated its digital platforms, signage at significant Council buildings and facilities, and municipal entry signs. Updating other Council assets such as street and park signs and smaller facilities signage will be staged over a 10-year timeframe.

The new name celebrates the continuing culture and language of the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people.

## REFLECTION

### Feedback from community and Elders

While acknowledging differences in community opinion that were brought forward through the process, Council was overwhelmed by positive support for the historical name change.

In a May 2022 interview, Wurundjeri Elder and Traditional Owner representative Uncle Andrew Gardiner said the following about the consultation and process:

“Council were at the forefront of wanting to make a change.

Council members and Council officers, particularly, were ‘we have to be respectful. We want to do the right thing by our Indigenous people. We’ve got a Statement of Commitment, so we’ve got a tied commitment to reconciliation. How best can we do that? Anything we can do, we will do’.

And the process was stepped out in how we could do that, getting community recognition and consultation.

If the process is actually right, getting the reconciliation process right, then the Council is actually stepping into the place of doing the right thing and doing the good thing. [They’re] taking advantage of the responsibility that they hold because they’ve been elected. They’ve got a right to have a view. They’ve got a right to make a decision.

Right now, it’s about changing the name for Moreland. [It’s] an example, a positive example, of reconciliation between the broader community and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community. There’s a positive outcome that can be had for everybody... to move forward into the future.”

### Merri-bek Council support for a Treaty or Treaties

Merri-bek City Council acknowledges there is still extensive work to be done in regard to truth-telling and justice.

Council supports a Treaty or Treaties for Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As stated in our Statement of Commitment:

Council supports:

*“A process towards self-determination and local, regional or national Treaty or Treaties that enshrine the rights of Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.”*

## Attachment 1

19 Nov. 2021

The Mayor and Councillors  
City of Moreland

### Letter of Request to Council

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 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. The municipal area then expanded in December 1994.

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 undersigned, representing the traditional owners of the land - the Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung people, and citizens of the municipality, offer support and encouragement to Council to utilise re-naming of the Council as an opportunity to complement the current spirit of truth-telling and reconciliation, embracing this change as a timely platform for awareness-raising, acknowledgement and healing.

No changes to established place names or features are being proposed, solely the name used to identify our municipal Council. An alternative name is not being suggested, enabling its selection to be part of a respectful process devised in partnership with all stakeholders.

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 impacts and consequences of dispossession, encourage respectful understanding through truth-telling, redress injustice, and heal racist hurt.

Yours sincerely,

<b>Andrew Gardiner</b>	Deputy Chair, Wurundjeri Woi-wurrung Cultural Heritage Aboriginal Corporation
<b>Julianne Axford</b>	Board member, WWCHAC
<b>Gail Smith</b>	Naming Researcher, WWCHAC
<b>Tony Garvey</b>	Cultural Values Representative, WWCHAC
<b>Dr. Klara Hansen</b>	Acting Manager Research Unit, WWCHAC
<b>Rev. Alistair Macrae</b>	past National President, Uniting Church in Australia; former Moderator, Uniting Church Vic. & Tas.
<b>Phil Cleary</b>	former MHR for Wills, 1992-96
<b>Jo Connellan</b>	former Councillor 2004-12
<b>Rod Duncan</b>	research coordinator
<b>Beci Orpin</b>	Freelance designer, illustrator and maker
<b>Rafael Rashid</b>	Brunswick entrepreneur, founder Beatbox Kitchen

Other citizens are also being invited to add their names to this letter of request.

*\* 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.*