

SUBMISSION BY CONSERVATION COUNCIL ACT REGION TO VISION 2030

CONSACT Members' Feedback on 'Time to Talk'

Basic Assumptions

Is bigger really better? Members have seriously questioned the underlying assumption of needing to plan for a Canberra of 500,000 people. In a recent (March 2010) independent random survey of Canberra residents, 82.8% indicated that Canberra was either already too large, or "about right" in population size. They point to a raft of constraints to such growth (e.g. water, space, lifestyle, carbon footprint etc.), and the implications that it would have upon the quality of life in the ACT. They also identify many examples of cities/communities that manage to function in a vibrant and viable manner with no, or highly limited, population growth.

What does sustainability mean? We believe it means giving your children a better quality of life than you had, and treading more lightly upon the planet?

Green Spaces

CONSACT members strongly support maintaining the 'Bush Capital', 'Garden City' concept with easy access to nature.

The retention of green open spaces is seen as a critical issue, with many such areas under threat and suffering from a declining condition. Members are concerned at reducing maintenance budgets (in real terms per hectare) for open space and Canberra Nature Park, and a growing tendency to concentrate facilities in regional locations, rather than providing highly accessible 'neighbourhood spaces'. This, we believe, encourages car use, and reduces maintenance levels for local facilities.

Urban Infill

The current land sales paradigm constrains development of a more compact city, since it is seen by developers to be cheaper to build on Greenfield sites. However, we believe that the true cost of such suburbs is largely borne by ACT taxpayers as much essential infrastructure is at the cost of the ACT exchequer (arterial roads, water and power reticulation, schools and other community buildings, transport facilities and rolling stock etc.). There is a strong call for the Government to diversify the ACT revenue base, and to address the issue of adequate income from urban infill development.

There is a widespread impression that much of the urban infill constructed in recent years is of poor-quality, poor design, mitigates against social inclusion, and fails to create buildings sympathetic to their neighbourhood or to provide suitable areas of public open space. This lack of quality design encourages a NIMBY reaction to proposals for infill which, we believe, would change if we enforced worlds-best-practice criteria (including double glazing as standard, passive solar design, and integrated recycling facilities – just to name three).

Affordable Housing

We reject the notion that 'affordable' housing cannot be sustainable housing, or that it has to be of poor design and quality. There are many examples elsewhere demonstrating that

affordable housing can be innovative, vibrant, socially inclusive, aesthetically harmonious and environmentally sustainable in a manner that does not force residents to endure increased energy costs.

Transport

We have also received many negative responses on the state of Canberra's public transport, in particular the pattern of many suburban routes acting as 'tour buses', taking lengthy periods to reach major hubs. We believe that far more innovative and socially appropriate approaches need to be considered. Many residents of older suburbs point to a real reduction in frequency over the past 10-20 years. We accept that public transport provision is partially linked to usage demand and that, with declining population levels in some older suburbs, patronage declines to a point that cannot support frequent services. However, there are many other models, such as transport-on-demand, that could address the social needs of elements in the population who either do not have access to a car, or who have mobility problems. Our belief is that public transport is as much about social inclusion and access to critical facilities, as it is about economics; for example, we are concerned that proposals for new rapid transport systems still fail to provide easy access to our major hospitals. It is also about reducing our carbon footprint by encouraging regular commuters to leave their vehicle at home.

Our Vision

The overarching objectives of our Vision for Canberra in 2030 and beyond in building a sustainable, vibrant, and inclusive community are fourfold:

1. Maintain our 'Bush Capital' by conserving and enhancing its biodiversity, its clean air, its sense of light and space, and its environmental character permitting easy access to nature;
2. Reduce our ecological and carbon footprint by reducing energy use (through better design), reducing car use (through higher residential density and improved public transport) and restricting further greenfield development;
3. Re-building a sense of community spirit through socially inclusive urban design, by affordable housing, by providing accessible vibrant public spaces, and by ensuring disadvantaged groups have easy access to essential services and facilities; and,
4. Reducing our consumption of non-renewable resources by achieving zero waste in both residential and commercial sectors, by lower car-use, and by moving from coal-fired electricity to renewables-based electricity.

This is a vision that we believe that the vast majority of ACT residents share.

Biodiversity and Sustainability: A Move to a More Compact Canberra

We believe that the ongoing loss of biodiversity in the ACT, and the manner in which our population gains access to nature (whether this be formally reserved parts of Canberra Nature Park, urban open space, or rural landscapes) requires that we quickly halt the development of any more Greenfield residential areas (outside those already designed). We are facing an extinction crisis in our native flora and fauna, and any continuation in greenfield development will exacerbate this situation by destroying critical habitat and key connectivity corridors, and by creating increased pressures along the increasing length of the urban-bushland interface zone (see below).

We strongly believe that by encouraging and facilitating sustainable & socially inclusive medium-density residences in existing suburbs, we would achieve:

- A lower ecological footprint;
- Improved opportunities for biodiversity conservation and rehabilitation;
- Reduced cost of infrastructure to the ACT exchequer;
- Increased social cohesiveness, inclusion and a sense of community;
- Increased suburb populations to ensure retention of schools, retail outlets, medical services and other community facilities;
- Increased density of population to support improved frequency and choices in transport modes; and,
- Through more of the population living near to employment and retail/facilities hubs, an increase in cycling and walking with the twin advantages of improved health and lower carbon emissions.

By employing world's-best-practice in our urban design, we believe that this can be achieved without destroying the nature and character of those existing suburbs, by maintaining a flow of revenue to the ACT exchequer, and by meeting strict requirements for public green open space and environmental sustainability.

In our Vision, our rural fringes are retained, they continue to provide ecological services to our city, and their condition is enhanced through sympathetic conservation-lease management. Our biodiversity is further protected by providing functioning connections across the landscape between elements of Canberra Nature Park, to the mountains, and to the wider region (including NSW). Retention and improved management of urban green space and the urban forest brings nature into the suburbs, creates connectivity between our protected hills, and enhances both amenity and mental health.

However, we have been concerned in recent times that increased pressures on the natural areas adjoining the urban city (eg recreational use, weeds, fire, climate change, neighbours) have not been matched by resourcing of the ACT's on-ground management of these areas. TAMS needs a substantial injection of funds if we are to keep those Bush Capital values that so many Canberrans cherish.

Our Scenario

We therefore would envisage a Canberra based upon the following scenario:

Zone 1: 'City Hubs': Increased density of apartments (medium to high density) integrated with employment centres and retail/cultural/community facilities – nodes for frequent light rail to other nodes and for suburban bus feeder services – many streets as shared spaces for pedestrians and cyclists (with service vehicle access out-of-hours) –vibrant green and safe streetscapes with community events.

Zone 2: 'Inner Suburbs A': Parts of suburbs surrounding City Hubs would capitalise upon proximity to employment and facilities with medium density townhouses/apartments no more than canopy height (4 stories on side streets, 6 stories on major transport routes - preserving amenity, minimising loss of solar access and privacy, and maximising the 'heat island' effect of the urban forest) sensitively designed to maintain the existing green character of such suburbs but also ensuring retention of single detached dwellings in those parts of such suburbs outside easy walking distance to the city (e.g. 1-1.5 km).

Zone 3: ‘Suburban Centres’: blocks in direct proximity to suburb centres should be zoned for medium density townhouses/apartments of no more than 3 stories height. Codes should be revised to permit retail premises under apartments. A high proportion of such dwellings should be affordable housing (including single bedroom rental accommodation) as these components of society often do not have access to public transport. Substantial areas of mixed use public open space (including school spaces) should be a feature of such areas. Suburban Centres should act as nodes for local transport services including ‘transport-on-demand’, and receive frequent feeder services to major city hubs. With appropriate infrastructure as such areas are eventually redeveloped, they could also act as ‘park-and-ride’ and ‘cycle-and-ride’ nodes.

Zone 4: ‘Inner Suburbs B’: Suburbs close to existing City Nodes not covered by Zones 2 and 3 would retain their single dwelling character with some limited opportunity for dual occupancy. Small neighbourhood parks (some with playground facilities) should be scattered throughout the suburb. Every effort should be made to retain tree cover throughout the suburb and to reduce vehicle speeds through passive and active traffic measures.

Zone 5: ‘Outer Suburbs’: These should permit a wide range of housing types to cover market demands. Such suburbs should be designed and developed in manner that ensures that critical infrastructure is constructed at the same time as the start of housing building and includes:

- Employment opportunities;
- Retail and medical services;
- Public transport services linking to City hubs and ‘city’ facilities; and
- Recreational open space and facilities (including dog off-leash areas).

Zone 6: ‘Bushland Fringe Sections’: All housing in close proximity to urban and rural bushland should covenants incorporating the following principles:

- Pet animal containment (especially cats);
- Restraint from growing plants likely to invade natural areas;
- Recycling of green wastes;
- Stormwater and runoff management away from bushland; and
- Retention of large trees and extant native vegetation (consistent with fire management requirements)

Adoption by the ACT Government of the Bush on the Boundary Guidelines, and implementation through appropriate regulations and policies, would be an excellent first step in achieving such outcomes.

We would urge a substantial move away from new Greenfield suburbs (with Kowen not being developed) as people downsize to the new townhouse and medium-density apartments thus freeing up existing detached family housing stock (in our survey, 47.6% Canberrans say they would prefer to live in medium-high density accommodation).

Housing Form

All new residential housing throughout Canberra should attain much higher levels of environmental sustainability (e.g. energy, water) integrated in their built form. This would remove impositions upon low-income residents to install high cost energy-saving measures and thus reduce their innate energy consumption and attendant costs. However, we believe that sustainability will not be attained until we set realistic targets and report on achievements:

and a restructuring of the State of Environment Reports produced by the Commissioner for Sustainability and Environment may be an appropriate mechanism.

Community-Government Partnerships

The revitalisation of our neighbourhoods needs to be undertaken in a partnership relationship between Government and the community, and we need new structures and mechanisms to put this into effect. While Government has moved substantially in recent years to provide opportunities for community input into decision-making, our recent independent random survey showed that 87.8% of Canberrans had severe reservations that Government was 'listening' feedback systems need to be provided in order to reassure Canberrans that they do in fact have a real participatory role in major Government decision-making on the future development of their city. One problem identified by our members is that of piecemeal decision-making within agency silos. There is a need for whole-of-government integrated solutions and a re-engagement with communities.

10 Steps to a Green Liveable and Sustainable City

At its recent November Forum, the Conservation Council facilitated a dialogue between its member groups, the general public, Community Councils, and the professions (ecologists, urban and transport planners, and architects) on ways we could move forward in Canberra to achieve a Green Liveable and Sustainable City.

Taking some licence from the website "green-changemakers" (see below for link), we provided examples from around the world. We advanced ten key principles for achieving such a vision (not in any priority order):

1. Plentiful Parks
2. Efficient, Flexible and Available Public Transport
3. Quality Vibrant Public Space
4. Bike Lanes, Parking and Hire
5. Green Buildings
6. Comprehensive Recycling and Composting
7. Mixed Use and Infill
8. Safe, Attractive and Inclusive Neighbourhoods
9. Smart Energy Policies
10. Connected with Nature

Some further resources on Sustainable Green Cities

<http://www.worldchanging.com/cities/>

http://itdp.org/documents/2010-OurCitiesOurselves_Booklet.pdf

<http://green-changemakers.blogspot.com/2010/01/10-things-that-make-great-green-city.html>

<http://www.treehugger.com/files/2010/11/stephen-teeple-shows-social-housing-can-be-green-gorgeous.php>

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/24056306/>