



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
Dr Marisa Paterson MLA (Chair), Ms Jo Clay MLA (Deputy Chair), Ms Leanne Castley MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

Submission Number: 25

Date Authorised for Publication: 17 May 2022

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Sent: Friday, 6 May 2022 12:40 PM

To: LA Committee - ECCB <LACommitteeECCB@parliament.act.gov.au>

Cc: 'GCG Executive Officer' [REDACTED]; [REDACTED]; 'Tony Farrell' [REDACTED]

Subject: Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism - Submission by MG Brice, Convenor Lions Croke Place Wetlands Land Care Group

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Submission to the Standing Committee on Environment, Climate Change and Biodiversity Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism

Dear Chair,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to the Committee.

Background:

I am the convenor of the Lions Croke Place Wetlands Land Care Group in Evatt in the ACT. Sponsored as a project by four local Lions Clubs, it enjoys the support of the overarching Ginninderra Catchment Group (GCG) and that of agencies of Transport Canberra and City Services (TCCS). The Lions Croke Place group aims to expand on the environmental benefits following the establishment of wetlands by the Murray Darling Authority, by improving the area downstream of the Lake Ginninderra spillway for about 900 metres to the next land care group.

The Croke Place group started in November 2020 with the intent of involving the local community and to make the site more pleasurable to visitors and attractive to insects and birds. Plantings of native species, and weeding - including 'cut and dab' removal of suckers of exotic trees - has led to an increase in volunteering, the regular visit by a local school for environmental studies, corporate environmental team-building efforts, and support from local woodworkers. Visitors have been most complimentary about the improvements being made. Community activities such as woody weed removal and other beneficial efforts by nearby associations, entry into the impending Floriade program, and the seeking of assistance through the Adopt-a-Park scheme, are being acted upon to make the site attractive to visitors and to the volunteers who provide so much effort and inspiration.

This submission is made on the basis of experience over the past 18 months and with the express aim of developing a better working relationship between the seeming myriad of government offices, agencies, directorates, depots etc, and volunteer groups.

Submission

Government support of the Lions Croke Place Wetlands Land Care Group (somewhat of a mouthful!) has been mixed – very good in some parts and poor in others. This submission aims to address the following terms of reference:

Item 2. That improve environmental volunteerism and community stewardship

Item 3 Managing relationships between volunteers and their organisations, the ACT Government and the public

Item 4 Current policy or regulatory settings that facilitate and/or impede the work and the involvement of volunteers.

1. Volunteers would be easier to attract and retain if there were arrangements for a better working relationship between the land care group and the government that desires their contribution. The following instances provide examples of how volunteers have been slowed in their efforts to improve their land care site. They have become frustrated and wonder why ideas of common sense and issues that are widely undertaken elsewhere, are subject to long, drawn out deliberation by government agencies, often without result.
2. The first case in point is the issue of nesting boxes – a number of which were manufactured, in accordance with accepted designs and construction methods, by a local woodworking club. The boxes were completed in July 2021. Application was made for their attachment to suitable trees in the Croke Place site, and the government agency response was, that a policy on the placement of nesting boxes was being developed. Months later, a site inspection was undertaken by myself and members of the agency responsible. More time followed, with emails seeking progress on the policy being answered by thanks for ‘patience and understanding’ while the policy was passed through the manager and ‘Comms Unit’ – but without an anticipated release date. Further enquiries followed with the same result, until finally, after about 9 months had passed, advice was received advising that a set of publicly available guidelines on nesting box hanging could be used. This is a ridiculous situation and a poor reflection on those employed to develop policies, and to work with volunteers who are so keen to better the environment. Little time is left to get the nesting boxes installed. The government will not fund the nest box positioning, has prevaricated over the development of a local policy for situations that are already well covered, and has finally reverted to approving the use of existing guidelines – with the requirement to not share the information because the approval was expressly for Croke Place and not to be distributed to other groups. This is not a sign of working together – rather it demonstrates impedance, and even desperation, by a government agency that has resulted in delay without any added value! Indeed, to volunteers the issue is off-putting, and raises the question of what could possibly cause such a delay.
3. A second point is the government agency call for abeyance in ‘cut and dab’ removal of tree suckers while an instruction was developed covering the proper placement of felled suckers - so that they could be fed easily into a shredder or chipper. This would involve lining up the suckers butt first rather than having a large pile of jumbled suckers for the shredding workers to sort out. A sensible idea, but one that could have been made plain by an email to groups rather than them having to pause activities while waiting for an

instruction which needed to go through the inevitable 'Comms Unit'. The instruction has yet to be received and so 'cut and dabbing' has continued, with the alignment of felled suckers satisfactorily understood and achieved by volunteers. This leads to the questioning by volunteers of the value of processes of the agencies that should be supporting them.

4. Recent storm damage rectification – shredding of fallen trees and branches etc – included work by contractors at Croke Place. Whilst the need to remove storm damage material is supported, the butts of two fallen trees in Croke place had been selected by volunteers as suitable for seating as they were near the walking path. (there are only two government provided seats in the land care site, more have been requested.) One tree seat had already been made and plans for the second were underway. The contracted shredders, however, had the two items on their government-provided list to remove. Hearing the noise of the shredder I visited the site, sought a stay on their work regarding the two tree stumps and was blessed with their assistance in moving the second one into its position as another seat. The storm damage clean up is a large task but there is no reason why planning of clean-up efforts in known land care sites cannot include the volunteer groups at the government's planning stage. The result in this case is use of some of the fallen material for the benefit of those visiting the site, rather than being chipped or removed.
5. Weeds removed from recently planted sites remain piled and awaiting removal after many months. Part of a requested delivery of mulch, however, was satisfied within days. Water for the TCCS-provided water cube has not been provided some weeks after asking, so it is necessary to bucket water from the water treatment ponds when putting in new plants, and this is not an easy task especially for older volunteers.
6. A simple open-air schoolroom was proposed for use by the visiting school – more schools will be invited to use the site – but the proposal was denied on what volunteers have considered as inappropriate and, in some cases foolish, reasons. The petition effort required to seek a reversal of the decision is quite extensive – far greater than that by the government that led to the denial, and it is now a distraction from volunteer efforts at the site, and a let-down for the school. What was intended to be an opportunity for the government and volunteers to work together to provide a suitable shaded area for schools has turned into a situation where volunteers have less respect for the decision-making process and wonder at the credibility of making similar attempts for improvements.
7. A recent initiative needs to be applauded. I was approached by the government volunteer coordinator to seek out a chipping contractor to remove the large number of volunteer-felled suckers which would not be removed by the storm damage contractors. The contractor found has provided a quote but has not received a reply. There is a limited financial window for this work and the need to chase up what is causing the delay is a further drag on volunteer efforts. The principle was right but the implementation has yet to occur. If the task is achieved within the remaining available time, then this initiative will be seen as a most welcome one. If the opportunity is missed then the initiative will join the other protracted and disincentivising activities already listed.
8. Local experts from GCG and elsewhere have volunteered to talk to students of Miles Franklin School when they visit the site for environmental

studies. This a wonderful initiative which may be able to be extended to other schools, but it needs more and keener contribution by the government agencies involved in supporting the environment. It is an excellent opportunity to explain the reason for the wetlands, the benefits of the waterway, and the array of environmental and management factors which contribute to the maintenance of this and other land care sites and waterway systems. We want these students to develop ownership, bring their parents and friends to enjoy the site, and to know that the whole is an amalgamation of good government practice and support, and willing, nay, keen volunteers.

Summary

There has to be some way of combining the needs of the government - in caring for the parkland infrastructure - with the ongoing efforts of volunteers so that the best arrangements are made possible. This will demonstrate that the government is serious about its encouragement of volunteers. It is appreciated that there are many land care sites and that they meet and work at different rates of intensity. However, where there is land care site work planned by the government there is little to be lost by making contact with the group convenor – either by message or regular meeting with the local depot or other body – to discuss how best a situation might be approached, especially if there is a direct advantage to the environment. The opposite however is true. There is dismay at the limited, protracted, and often unnecessary efforts of the government’s environmental organising bodies, and a sense that it is all too difficult to consult before taking action – which is often to the detriment of the site or wishes of those who have volunteered and so often have expertise that is ignored or overlooked.

Recommendation

Give it a try. Trial discussions between the government’s volunteering managers, directorate policy makers, depots etc, and the volunteers of the sites they service. The goal would be timely support, transfer of expertise and effort both ways, and better outcomes in environmental improvement and volunteerism. The results could be measured to provide support for the expansion of the goal.

Conclusion

The examples above are of the day to day variety rather than being strategic in nature. But they address some the terms of reference directly. A way ahead is offered. It is very difficult as a convenor to keep saying to volunteers that we are waiting for something from the government when what is waited for is a simple action and yet is apparently bogged down in policy processes and intransigence. It is a failure too, in that volunteer keenness is dulled and the environment not improved for the site visitors whether human or wildlife. We can do better.

Regards and thanks

Michael Geoffrey Brice
Convenor
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