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# Opening statement

Howard Maclean, Convenor, Greater Canberra Inc  
Standing Committee on Planning, Transport and City Services, Inquiry into  
the Planning Bill 2022, 6 December 2022

The ACT's planning legislation is the most important single piece of legislation that the ACT Government has on its statute book. Planning shapes every aspect of our city, society, economy and culture. It determines where we live, where we work, what services and amenities are available to us, and how we get between them.

Every challenge facing the ACT Government over the coming decades - housing affordability, transport infrastructure, economic growth and job creation, achieving net zero, delivery of education and health services, nurturing small businesses, maximising discretionary household income, the structure of the ACT tax system - hinges on questions of land use, questions that this Bill, the District Strategies and the Territory Plan will determine.

This is an imperfect Bill. We share the concerns raised by other stakeholders that the rationale for this Bill is unclear. The planning system in Canberra faces formidable challenges over the next few decades. Over the past decade, Canberra grew by over 100,000 residents - an annual growth rate of over 2.4%. The coming decades will likely see similar or higher rates of growth.

This will place huge demands on our planning system to deliver housing, services, amenities and infrastructure, mostly within the existing urban footprint, at a faster rate than any other major city in Australia and the advanced economies globally. Austin, Texas, is the only major city among other advanced economies that recorded a higher rate of growth over the 2010s than Canberra did.

The path ahead for our planning system is both steep and narrow. If Canberra continues to fail to deliver enough housing, then rents and house prices will continue to remain elevated well above national averages, driving poverty and displacement in our city, stymying economic growth, depressing discretionary incomes, and starving local businesses of the workers they need to compete with other states. However, if Canberra delivers housing without supporting services and infrastructure - schools, healthcare, water and sewerage, public transport, parks and public green spaces - then our quality of life will suffer.

We need a planning system that forms the lynchpin of a whole of government effort to tackle both of these challenges head on.

Despite being a complete rewrite of the current Planning Act, this Bill doesn't attempt to address the crucial issues facing the planning system. It doesn't consider housing affordability and reducing poverty to be core concerns for the new outcomes-focused system, when extensive research from all over the world shows that the planning system plays a vital role in determining the cost of housing. It doesn't attempt to address the current broken system of merits review, which doesn't serve anyone effectively, delays

much-needed social housing and medium-density development, and is poorly aligned with the new outcomes-focussed model.

To address our future challenges, we need a denser city with our growth concentrated in urban infill. Our planning system must facilitate rather than hinder this. We should be looking to other jurisdictions that have enacted substantial planning reforms, such as New Zealand, as models for how to deal with our own growth.

Unfortunately, the draft Territory Plan and District Strategies don't deliver the broad upzoning that would deliver housing and the benefits of density most quickly. They merely tinker around the edges of our current zoning restrictions, and put off the question of where we will build more infill housing to some indeterminate point in the future as "future investigation areas". We need plans to build, rather than plans to eventually make more plans.

Our city cannot afford to wait. In order to meet the pressing challenges of tomorrow, substantial reform is required today. We urge the committee to carefully consider the recommendations we've made in our submission:

- Affordability and housing supply must be core principles of the system, rather than peripheral concerns
- Our housing supply targets should be ambitious, and approval pathways for medium-density housing should be streamlined to achieve these goals
- Merits review must be reformed - no-one is happy with the current ACAT system, which is slow, expensive, opaque and inconsistent
- Public consultation processes must listen to the needs of our whole community, including future residents, not just noisy opponents to change. Our city should be allowed to evolve to meet our emerging needs
- Decisions should be made by officers who are politically accountable to the Executive, the Legislative Assembly, and ultimately the voters, and who can integrate and coordinate the competing demands of different areas of public policy

This Bill will shape our city for decades to come. The Assembly must seize this opportunity to set our planning system on the right path and deliver a more liveable, sustainable and affordable Canberra that is ready for the challenges of the future.