

Submission to the Standing Committee on Education, Training and Youth Affairs.

Inquiry into school closures and reform of the ACT education system

John Flynn Community Centre

Early childhood precinct and intergenerational community hub

**Prepared by the John Flynn Community Group
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1. About this proposal

The most pressing need in Flynn is for a local accessible primary school and community hub in addition to the operational preschool. This is a proposal for a need-specific sustainable community hub, using the existing Flynn Primary School building and grounds.

2. Background and summary

The greater Flynn community recognises the strength of its community built around the suburb's only community facility (Flynn Primary School and Preschool) and, in particular, its early childhood activities and the involvement of families and people across the generations (Flynn submission to Towards 2020¹, Flynn Preschool submission to Towards 2020²).

The local community acknowledges that Flynn's school and community hub, community events, participation and social cohesion provided something of great value within Flynn, Belconnen and the ACT (Flynn community submissions to Towards 2020³). Residents report inequity of access and enormous personal and community costs associated with the uncompensated closure of the Flynn school and loss of the associated hub and social fabric.

The greater Flynn community has shown unprecedented need for and commitment to restoring the school and community hub through: 33 months of intensive community effort including through conducting a door-to-door survey of Flynn, two comprehensive school submissions and 35 personal submissions to the school closure process, and raising more than \$50,000 for legal action in the ACT Supreme Court. The community recognises that the nett benefits of such a hub will outweigh those from alternative aged-care facilities or medium density housing for which there is negligible relative demand or suitability in the Flynn area.

This proposal is prepared on behalf of the community by the John Flynn Community Group. It responds to the latest demographics and needs assessment as well as available information about the building condition, site and social infrastructure (Purdon Website⁴). The proposal recognises the overwhelming and growing sentiments of the community (Flynn Primary local consultation⁵). The proposal builds on the community's needs, strengths and capacity by adapting the schools existing buildings and grounds into an early childhood precinct and intergenerational community hub (of at least equal value to the school), if it cannot be restored as a school.

3. John Flynn Community Group

The John Flynn Community Group is a community-based, not-for-profit association established in January 2007 for its prospective role in facilitating a Flynn community hub: the John Flynn Community Centre. The group has around 100 members with a broad range of skills and an intimate knowledge of Flynn and the local region.

4. Community needs assessment and supported option

The community consensus during the recent closed school sites consultation (Flynn Primary local consultation, October 2007) and in the Flynn-wide survey of September 2006 (Flynn-wide survey, 2006) is that the most pressing need in Flynn is for a local accessible primary school and community hub in addition to the operational preschool. The community, through the Flynn Primary School Parents and Citizens Association, has demonstrated its need for, and commitment to, restoring a school by contributing more than \$50,000 to a legal challenge in the ACT Supreme Court.

Given that Flynn has no other community facilities, Flynn residents (with almost no exceptions- Flynn Primary local consultation) in October 2007 highlighted the need for a significant and relevant community focal point, or hub equal to that provided by the schools and consistent with amended Option 1A.

In particular the community identified key unmet needs as:

- a Primary School (strongest need)
- community-based early childhood development activities
- playgroup venues (four groups interested)
- a minimum 60–80 childcare places for Flynn and nearby suburbs (where other centres are currently full)
- holiday programs
- youth drop-in and services
- adult education and development including community resource centre and computer facilities
- men's shed and woodworking workshops
- multi-generational involvement and participation
- retaining the cultural and architectural heritage value of the school and national memorial to John Flynn
- community meeting spaces including for Neighbourhood Watch and Safety House
- health, family and parenting support services,
- indoor and outdoor sport and recreation spaces including for ball sports, tumbling tots, gymnastics, callisthenics, aerobics and dance
- hall for community meetings, multi-use, theatrical shows and church meetings and
- compatible office uses
- community gardens or tree plantings.

These activities and services correspond with many of the services that existed at the site until December 2006 and have moved out of the community, without compensatory benefit, with the school closure.

Participants also identified negligible support for either aged care/retirement units or medium and high-density housing in Flynn because either proposal increases population density in a suburb with no community facilities.

5. Demographics

Following the establishment of the suburb in the 1970s, Flynn's population has stabilised over the past 12 years. At the same time the suburb is experiencing a sustained baby boom and renewal of families with young children. Flynn has the fourth-highest fertility rate among Canberra's suburbs (ABS 2007⁶) and the suburb's population of 0–11 year olds has increased from 15% to 17% of Flynn's total since 2001 (ABS Census 2006⁷).

A comparison between 2006 and 2001 ABS Census data, taking into account five years of ageing, shows that two age ranges are driving the renewal of Flynn's population. Flynn is undergoing significant influx of children up to 15 years of age and adults in their 30s (parents of young children). At the same time Flynn is witnessing a nett outflow of young adults as they leave home (16–32 years), their parents (47–65 years), and an older generation (65–97 years).

One of the key reasons for this demographic shift is that Flynn generally has more affordable but high-maintenance family homes on large blocks in safe cul-de-sacs and environs. These features are attracting young families or couples at the same time as young adults are moving out of home (for work, studies and to move into 'group houses') and empty nesters and the older generations moving closer to facilities or to lower maintenance homes, as confirmed by Real estate agents (Bob Murphy, LJ Hooker⁸).

This trend to more of Flynn's population being children 0–11 and parents in their 30s and 40s, can be expected to increase markedly in the next 10 years as more of Flynn's early settlers (now 57–69 years) move out to more manageable homes closer to facilities.

5. Building condition and suitability

The Flynn Primary School is in sound condition due to its strong construction and a full schedule of maintenance carried out in recent years. This condition is confirmed by the TAMS building condition report (FlynnPrimaryConditionAssessmentFullReport⁹). This report indicates relatively low annual maintenance costs in the next five years apart from in Year 4 when the boiler (currently in good condition) may (or may not) need replacing.

As a distinctive design of award-winning architect Enrico Taglietti (RAIA 2007 Gold medal citation¹⁰), the building has value in its own right and is valued by the community. The creative open-plan design facilitates flexible use by large or small groups for workshop or program spaces and can be simultaneously configured for a range of office or service provision needs.

Sydney University research (Designed environments for young children¹¹) shows that this type of open-plan design is particularly conducive to early-childhood learning as proposed by the John Flynn Community Group.

6. Local versus ACT-wide needs

The Flynn Primary School is the intrinsic hub and focal point of the Flynn community situated at the confluence of the suburb's pedestrian paths and bordered by quiet suburban streets and crescents. As such, the site logically should accommodate facilities and services primarily targeting Flynn and the nearby community and providing cohesiveness for that community. ACT-wide services would more appropriately be located in metropolitan or regional centres with suitable road access and parking. That said, Flynn has the capacity to host some compatible services and to be a safe local and regional hub for a category of relevant services, for example early childhood and adult education.

7. A need-specific community hub

Need-specific community hubs are a relatively new concept in Australia (Port Phillip community hubs¹²) but overseas (Oasis community hubs¹³,) have proven a very successful formula for creating vibrant and sustainable communities in the face of pressing needs such as lack of community facilities, disadvantage, social and family break-down, transport and sustainability issues, ageing population and limited government funding.

Flynn's demographic make-up, lack of social infrastructure, identified needs, suburban geography, sound architecturally designed and valued building and grounds make it the ideal location for such a hub.

8. The John Flynn Community Centre: fully utilised

The John Flynn Community Group (JFCG) proposes a unique early childhood precinct and intergenerational community hub utilising the existing building and grounds to meet the pressing needs of Flynn and the nearby region.

The Group proposes to name the hub the 'John Flynn Community Centre' in recognition of the strong heritage links with the Reverend John Flynn (Flynn of the Inland, Founder of the Royal Flying Doctor Service) including the national memorial to John Flynn on the site.

Other key features of the proposed Flynn hub are:

- early childhood development precinct and intergenerational community centre
- integrated education, music, arts, sports, and cultural development
- partnership between community, service providers and governments
- permanent tenancies and permanent and casual booking of multi-use facilities
- family, community and intergenerational participation
- a safe, cohesive and vibrant community
- compatible community-based business and services supporting and sustaining the above.

The John Flynn Community Group has developed its proposal with the assistance of many in the local community, TAMS Minister, John Hargreaves, the TAMS Property Management group, DHCS Minister Katy Gallagher, Purdon Associates, Elton Consulting and with the in-principle support of the Belconnen Community Council.

The Group has had ongoing discussions with a range of organisations and agencies that are ready to join with JFCG to deliver the services and vision for Flynn, as outlined above. **The demand for tenancy space from these groups is sufficient to fully utilise the building and grounds during business hours as well as many nights and weekends.**

Specific services proposed are:

Full-time Tenants

- 60–80 place community-based childcare
- Care, counselling and support agency
- Adult education provider
- Employment training providers
- Church office and meeting space
- Administration office for the community centre.
- Small businesses compatible with centre clients
- Men's shed
- Community resource and computer centre

Part-time tenants or regular program bookings

- Early childhood music and gym programs
- Playgroups
- Men and Kids program
- Holiday care for primary school-aged children
- Family and parenting support services
- Community-based learning program
- Health and GP outreach services
- Child and youth programs
- Gymnastics, callisthenics, and aerobics groups
- Neighbourhood Watch and Safety House
- Community meetings, fetes, barbecues, bushdances, theatre, carols etc.

9. The early childhood focus and benefit

An innovative early childhood hub not only for Flynn but for the region will be achieved through integration of early childhood programs and activities such as links between the preschool and childcare centre with programs such as early childhood music and gym, playgroups, Men and Kids, parenting and health outreach.

The intergenerational hub and initiatives like the Men's Shed will foster interaction between grandparents, seniors and the youngest generation, which various research shows is important to a healthy functioning community.

A safe early childhood and intergenerational community hub will maximise cross-generational involvement, volunteering and capacity-building. Through early intervention and inclusion the hub will reduce the burden of government costs that are otherwise likely to grow in the areas of health, welfare, crime prevention and rehabilitation.

10. Ensuring a viable and sustainable hub

The John Flynn Community Group (JFCG) proposes to work with service providers, business collaborators and governments to deliver a viable and sustainable community hub. The top six full-time tenants will rent and occupy most of the available space and corporately support multi-use and shared community space that will be subsidised by regular casual bookings.

Key aspects of viability will be the centre governance and the asset ownership, tenancy and funding arrangements.

Governance

The John Flynn Community Group proposes to establish a skilled community board to oversee the sustainable operation of the centre in close cooperation with collaborative partners and government. Board members will be elected from the association constituency for terms of two or three years as specified by the association's constitution.

The board will be responsible for ensuring that the centre continues to meet the needs of the suburb and region by carrying out needs assessments and by attracting relevant service providers. Under models 2 and 3 (below) the Board would be responsible for rigorous financial and business management of the entire operation.

Asset, tenancy administration, operating costs

The John Flynn Community Group is considering three models for sustainable funding and operation of the centre. While these models are outlined below, the final model would be determined in consultation with government and collaborative partners.

Asset ownership	Tenancy administration	Operating costs
1. TAMS/DHCS Department	- Needs assessments and potential tenants brokered by JFCG - Lease agreements with TAMS/DHCS - Body corporate administration and costs Casual bookings arranged through JFCG or key partner	- TAMS/DHCS maintains site - Full-time leases and casual bookings offset operating costs - Provision for subsidy or grant for community development
2. Asset transferred to the community through JFCG as compensation for school closure	- Needs assessments and tenancies brokered and arranged by JFCG - Body corporate administration and costs - Casual bookings arranged through JFCG or key partner	Total and annual savings from Flynn school closure used to fund operating costs and maintenance together with the revenue from full-time leases and casual bookings
3. The asset and adjacent green space are transferred to the community through the JFCG. This would be cost neutral or at price agreed with Govt	- Needs assessments and tenancies brokered and arranged by JFCG - Body corporate administration and costs - Casual bookings arranged through JFCG or key partner	The community through the JFCG is responsible for all operational costs, community facilities and development on the site and adjacent oval.

Irrespective of the model introduced, the JFCG would seek a Community water/water recycling grant to make more efficient use of water including feeding water off the centre roof to a reservoir to enable upkeep of a high quality playing field for ball sports.

10. Hub will produce greatest long-term benefit

In the event that a school is not restored, a safe, locally accessible early childhood and intergenerational community hub will produce the optimum long-term benefits and flexibility for the ACT Government and the community.

The annual benefit in terms of care, development and education services provided, community health, wellbeing, cohesion and capacity building, and business turnover, will outweigh housing benefits and short-term revenue from housing or retirement development in a suburb without any other social infrastructure.

Through early intervention and inclusion the hub will reduce the burden of government costs that are otherwise likely to grow in the areas of health, welfare, crime prevention and rehabilitation.

5. Recommendation:

That the ACT Government work with the Flynn community (through the John Flynn Community Group) and project partners to implement a viable and sustainable:

- a) primary school or
- b) early childhood precinct and intergenerational community hub using the Flynn school building and grounds as outlined in this proposal.

REFERENCES

- ¹ Flynn Primary and Preschool: vital to the future of NW Belconnen, Submission to Towards 2020, Flynn Primary Parents and Citizens Association and Flynn Preschool Parents Association, November 2006;
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<http://www.decs.act.gov.au/2020/submissions.htm>
- ⁴ New Opportunities for Local Communities, Flynn, Purdons Website;
http://www.purdon.com.au/formerschoolsites/Sites_FlynnPrimary.html
- ⁵ Flynn community amendments to Initial Summary for Flynn Primary Site Local Consultation of 30 October 2007
([Web link to Flynn website](#))
- ⁶ ABS 2007, Births Australia, 2006, cat. no. 3301.0
- ⁷ ABS Census 2006
- ⁸ Flynn sales report 2006–07, Bob Murphy, LJ Hookers, pers comm
- ⁹ Condition Assessment of Flynn Primary School, TAMS, 29 November 2006;
<http://www.purdon.com.au/formerschoolsites/documents/FlynnPrimaryConditionAssessmentFullReport.pdf>
- ¹⁰ Jury Citation, Gold Medal 2007 – Enrico Taglietti, Royal Australian Institute of Architects;
<http://www.architecture.com.au/i-cms?page=1.19.51.9193.9194> and
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- ¹¹ Designed Environments for Young Children: Empirical Findings and Implications for Planning and Design, Prof. Gary Moore, Faculty of Architecture, University of Sydney
(<http://www.arch.usyd.edu.au/documents/ebs/Child%20&%20Family%20Policy%20Conf%20Pa%20pe.pdf>.)
- ¹² Community hubs – the community centres of the future, Port Phillip Online;
<http://www.portphillip.vic.gov.au/communityhubs.html>
- ¹³ Oasis (UK) for people and community, The way we work: hubs;
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