

Chair

Standing Committee on Planning, Public Works and Territory and Municipal Services

RZ3 And RZ4 Residential Redevelopment Policies—Inner North Canberra

Dear Chair

I am writing to address the Terms of Reference for the Inquiry into RZ3 and RZ4 Residential Development policies – Inner North Canberra

None of the sub-points in the terms of reference make explicit reference to the RZ3 Zone in which I reside, so I will be commenting generally on points (2), (3) and (4), with a glancing reference to (1)(a). In addressing the Terms of Reference I will be making some reference to the Inner North Precinct Code.

In his Tabling Speech for this Inquiry on Thursday 25 June 2009, Mr Barr made several points:

- buildings will need to be taller and suburbs denser. We all know it. We all accept it.
- higher density suburbs are also more economically sustainable.
- development of the Inner North since the 1993 Territory Plan made provision for higher density redevelopment of some residential areas has been slow.

Very true – but much of the delay can be sheeted home to arbitrary and inflexible planning rules.

Term of reference (1)(a)

With regard to point (1)(a), I have no doubt that the restriction on three-storey development in RZ4 south of Macarthur/Wakefield and north of Cooyong/Donaldson has been a very significant inhibitor of development. What it means is that developers have to build to only two storeys on a smaller plot ratio (less profitable for them) until 23.5 of the 25.9 available hectares have been developed. Mostly, they are holding off until the magic number is reached: which it isn't, because they are holding off. When it eventually **is** reached, a whole pile of relatively new two-storey dwellings will have to be torn down to make way for the new three-storey ones. It is ridiculous. It is not only inhibiting development of the RZ4 zone in Dickson, it is actually slowing development of Braddon RZ4 as well.

In general, however, I wish to comment on RZ3.

Parts of RZ3 inappropriate

I currently reside at 129 Limestone Avenue Braddon, in the RZ3 Zone. A small multi-unit development has recently been built two doors down, at 135-137 Limestone Avenue.

The area of RZ3 I refer to is a long sliver that lies between Lowanna Street (which has RZ4 down one side, and RZ3 down the other) and Limestone Avenue, and is bounded in the North by Wakefield Avenue and in the south by Ijong Street. Blocks are small, and with the two-storey restriction and plot ratio in RZ3, developers are reluctant to buy and consolidate blocks. The development at 135-137 I just referred to took many years.

The amenity of the area as a place for low-density single storey houses is becoming very degraded: traffic along Limestone Avenue is increasing, owners are simply keeping their houses and renting them out until something happens with redevelopment, and general maintenance is falling down. One house at least is empty.

The strip of housing I refer to is an anomaly in the general area. It should be included in the RZ4 Zone, and the plot ratios and height restrictions relaxed to 0.8 and three storeys. There is no compelling reason to restrict development to two storeys on a strip of road that faces a sports field – there are no single storey dwellings to overlook. Three storeys also represents a more efficient use of land close to the city and transport.

Specifically, there are also a number of problems with the Inner North Precinct Code.

Deep Root Zone

Rule 2.4 – Rear Setbacks mandates that there shall be a 7m setback to the rear of the block. The justification for this is that there can be a deep-rooted planting zone, to allow for privacy. In fact it does not protect the existing deep rooted plants, and does not help privacy, as any new plants will take years to grow. To illustrate, the new development on Majura Avenue has been clear-felled. The neighbours over the back fence will have no privacy for many years, if ever.

Worse, the deep-root zone means that blocks cannot be consolidated with the blocks to their rear. In the part of Limestone I live on, it means several things: any development will be a narrow strip along a busy road, with car access only on that road. Allowing consolidation with blocks in Lowanna Street would allow access via Lowanna, and reduce the number of cars entering and exiting from Limestone itself. The new development at 135-137 is a case in point: greater entering and exiting at peak hours.

Second, given the axis of the area of the RZ3 zone in question, this rule currently forces any consolidated blocks to be built so as to minimise northern orientation. Ideally, all apartments should get sun through the day, but shade in the late afternoon. The code should encourage solar passive developments, and it appears to take no account of this. Solar passive design should be the driver for a number of matters - alignment of buildings and set backs.

Finally, the deep root zones are also pointless, as they are the areas over which power lines are currently strung and under the Utilities Act ACTEW can cut anything down that gets close to the wires, so the suggestion plants underneath need deep roots, or that the plants will provide privacy ignores the existence of powerlines. The same

problem will occur as the powerlines are progressively “undergrounded” (who thought up that nonsense word for “buried”?) – powerlines in, deep roots out. The code is self-contradictory in this regard.

Instead, an audit of significant trees should be conducted in the area, and any developments should be forced to preserve and protect them by building around them. To arbitrarily mandate a 7m rear zone is simply silly if you want the area to have higher-density housing, particularly when blocks are so small.

Parking

Element 4 – Parking and Site Access needs to be revisited immediately. It states explicitly that the intent is to REDUCE parking, and this in itself will not only slow development but will make the area look more scruffy and less attractive in a short time - against the direct intent of the Precinct Code to make streets *places for people* and preserve its *garden city* character (which to be honest, it has never really had – and I have lived in the area since 1961).

It is fine to encourage development close to public transport and close to major centres so that people can walk, bus or ride if they want to, but are these people to have no friends? No family who live elsewhere in Canberra?

If better and more frequent public transport were available in the area, then car use would presumably drop off naturally, but to socially-engineer people via restrictions of this kind is making new residents (and therefore developers) stay away.

The net result of this policy *right now* is that people are parking on nature strips (which is illegal) or on both sides of narrow roads such as Lowanna and Dooring Streets (which is dangerous). It's pretty bad now: take a look. The new development at 135-137 Limestone is a case in point – you cannot park on the roadside, you cannot park on the median strip, so people are parking on the nature strip – at the moment it is hard-packed, but soon it will be a dust bowl in Summer, and a quagmire in the rain.

No, the answer is NOT to simply start to issue parking fines – are these people not allowed to visit their friends? This is meant to be a residential zone, not a commercial zone.

With more development, but with specific restrictions on parking provision remaining, this problem will get much worse. Parking – particularly visitor parking – should be required, not forbidden.

The code should also require off street parking for service vehicles - removal vans, delivery vans and other service vehicles that currently park on footpaths. In apartment blocks there is a constant stream of such vehicles. The code as it stands does not just ignore this need, it actively makes it worse.

Character

A choice has to be made, and soon: either try to preserve the character of the area by mandating certain building materials, footprints, building styles and profiles, or forget

it. To allow a vast range of new developments from the ultra-modern to the fake cottagey does not preserve in any way the character of the early 60's. To be blunt, the area never had much character anyway.

Fire

Apartment blocks built with timber should be forbidden. Sooner or later we are going to have another fire. We have had two fires in Braddon in the last four years, fortunately in brick and concrete apartment blocks.

Conclusion

There is a demand for higher-density development, but the current rules mean that the areas in question are currently unattractive to the developers who are needed to build such dwellings, and also militate against the new dwellings being convenient for their occupants and their visitors.

The overarching goal of planning policy should be to encourage people to live in apartments for the long term - not as a stop gap form of accommodation which people abandon for the suburbs once they can afford to escape apartment living. The mindset is "living in a unit equals a compromised lifestyle", and this must be addressed, otherwise Canberra will continue to spread ever outwards.

Unless more thought is given to this, some higher density building will happen in the area, but it will be unattractive and inconvenient, and statements about "retain and enhance a healthy and attractive residential environment" will be nothing but words.

Sincerely

Maurice Austin
Braddon ACT 2612

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