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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES

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Submission Cover Sheet

Nature in Our City

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Nature in Our City

Submission to the ACT Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services.

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Part 1.

Nature in our city is disappearing at an alarming rate, driven by insidious “land economics”, which has relegated responsible town planning. Planning has become plaything of property developers, banks, and real estate companies; and the ACT Treasury is apparently only too happy to give them their heads.

Land economics is creeping into our living, working, and recreational lives; stealing away amenity, and probably, population health; forcing intrusive higher living densities on us; depriving us of generous personal and group private open space within residential developments; eating into areas of important natural significance; often relegating public parks to conveniently difficult terrains; making us beholden to property developers, spec builders, and their financial backers/masters; and eroding housing affordability.

Land economists target public open spaces in existing suburbs, for development; and will probably do likewise in new ones, over time, especially the perfunctory, narrow “linear parks” conveniently lying between two or more

streets in new suburbs. They have the distinct look of “SLOAP” (Space Left Over After Planning). Linear parks sit, ripe for the taking. They are a pathetic substitute for decent sized backyards, which are basically excluded in new suburbs.

One of the worst examples of “linear-type” parks can be seen in the new residential estate to the west of the West Belconnen Golf Club. There, the park is cynically located right under, and follows the line of the pre-existing high voltage power lines. There is little or no other parkland in this estate, and the blocks there are tiny. Medium density blocks lie hemmed in, over the back fences of street-fronting blocks. Nature doesn’t get a look-in, even around the edges of the estate, which will be subsumed into Ginninderry (see below).

It is vital that development in adjoining new development tracts of Ginniderry (West Belconnen), the first of which is Strathnairn, will be of a higher standard than the above former-golf-course-land estate, with decent sized blocks, and especially, plenty of natural open space separating the new residences from the inviolable Murrumbidgee Corridor, and the Gininderra Falls/Gorge area.

It is also vital that any development of former CSIRO land on the Barton Highway, is carried out so as to preserve and respect nature, while giving residents plenty of private open space.

Urban sprawl is a myth here in the ACT, by virtue of careful planning, and the brilliant and successful decentralisation of our town centres. It is also a myth that there is a shortage of land in the ACT for new suburbs – look around.

Respected academics in the field of town planning, like Emeritus Professor Patrick Troy, assert that there is no

environmental, energy, or sustainability advantage in the current fad of urban intensification.

The planners of our decentralised arrangement made sure that employment, shopping, and other services were on hand, early in the piece; and that nature formed a major element of the new built environment. For instance, arterial roads, like Drakeford Drive in Tuggeranong, were, and hopefully will remain separated from residential areas by generously wide nature strips containing carefully selected planting; and, of course, the inner hills and ridges were protected.

However, land economists are clearly contemptuous of that, and we see in, for instance, Lower Molonglo, virtually no new shops, offices, or service industries, but perhaps worst of all, high and medium rise flats etc. built virtually right on the main multi-lane through road, John Gorton Drive. Nature is banished.

Transparently, the latter arrangement is a completely misguided interpretation of a methodology introduced into single-CBD cities like Sydney and Melbourne, where high-density living has been placed on major transport routes in and out of the CBD – as a way of trying to counter true urban-sprawl blight.

There, we now see a new blight, brought about by traffic noise, vibration, and dust, and a virtually complete lack of parks and gardens in and around the jaw-breaking blocks of flats.

Suburban living remains the preferred mode for most people, especially families. Careful and environmentally responsible town planning can deliver on-going sustainable and healthy suburban living in the ACT and immediate environs. Land economics won't.

Urban sprawl is a bogeyman invoked by land economists to justify the shrinking of blocks in new suburbs, and therefore inflate per-square-metre land prices. Land subdividers, surveyors and civil engineers, including those in government, and of course, the ACT Treasury itself, apparently all invoke this myth, while cashing in on this gravy train, at the expense of homebuyers and their amenity.

Backyards, a major component of the ACT open-space/natural environment, have all but disappeared in new suburbs. They must be reinstated.

Similarly, land economists are pushing for backyard-destroying dual occupancies to be allowed in the extensive and popular RZ1 (typical suburban) residential zones.

“Mr Fluffy” replacement dual occupancies in RZ1 are the thin end of the wedge. The special planning controls on them were meant to protect the RZ1 environment, especially backyards, but, under pressure from land economists (probably including in Treasury), the controls were severely watered down with “weasel” wording, leading to situations like the apparently illegal, partially built, but now thankfully stopped, intrusive Mr Fluffy-replacement dual occupancy at 3 Tudawalli Place, Chapman in the RZ1 Zone.

In the main, dual occupancies kill the important interlinking swathe of nature that is the backyard environment. Planning controls on dual-occupancies need to be tightened to preserve that vital natural environment in our city.

And as mentioned above, backyards have all but disappeared in new estates.

To counter this, it is recommended that house land block sizes in new suburbs be increased by around 50%.

In this way, “nature” can return to our suburbs through the creation of the traditional green back-yard domain that visually links our houses, while providing a healthy environment, space for activities like gardening, trampolines, pools, sheds etc., safe play, as well as privacy. Those facilities can barely exist in new suburbs.

With the recommended increase in backyard areas, it is very important to retain all solar-access and privacy controls, etc., so as to avoid over development (“McMansions”) and cramping of backyard space. And, to the same end, tighter plot ratios (floor area : site area) should be imposed.

Further, we need to see public parks in new areas, designed and sited with better safety, visibility, and with a sense of permanency.

As well, we need to mandate large, well-designed and maintained gardens, on natural ground (not on the lids of basements) within higher density developments, especially those along major new transport routes, like Northbourne Avenue, John Gorton Drive in Lower Molonglo, Flemington Drive in Gungahlin, and similar roads.

In this way, nature can break up the grinding harshness of medium and high-density developments, by creating generous open spaces within them.

That’s required because such developments are being built cheek by jowl, blighting whole precincts, especially after developers get in and rip up carefully prepared Master Plans – even those prepared by the developer’s own professional consultants. (An apparent case in point would be *Soho*, a proposed all-residential redevelopment of a former government-flats site on Northbourne Avenue, north of a motel adjoining the ABC premises, in Dickson – in that case, Commercial zoning (CZ5) is cynically being used to justify

outrageously dense, barracks-like, sunless residential development.)

With the above recommended substantial gardens being included within developments, residents will have a sense of ownership of them.

Part 2.

If necessary, one way that could compensate for perceived financial “losses” arising from the above measures, and in any case, could be by:

Selectively redeveloping “Backs”.

Backs (my terminology) occur where there are blocks of land in existing suburbs with their back fences facing a road (often a primary or secondary distributor road), and where there is often a relatively wide strip of land (the Back) between the subject back fences and the carriageway.

Backs generally occur fairly widely throughout existing well-established suburbs.

Often existing Backs are poorly maintained, and unsightly, as well as being unsuitable and unsafe for general access and recreational uses.

Because they adjoin roads, and are bordered by an often-disparate array of back fences in various levels of (dis) repair, the Backs hardly contribute to a sense of “nature” in the suburbs. They are not “nature strips” in the normal sense, as they are not generally maintained and cared for by residents. Backs may contain utility services.

New restricted-use “By-roads” (again my terminology - being carriageways parallel to the existing road) could be

installed within the Backs, if the Back itself is wide enough. By-roads would generally be “rural grade” and one-way; and would provide an easement in themselves for any existing utilities (some of which may have to be relocated locally or put underground).

The By-roads would provide local access to new residential blocks, which in turn would be located completely or partially within the existing blocks, or completely within the subject Back.

A suitable nature strip would be retained to temper any road noise etc. from the pre-existing road, as applicable, insofar as it impacts on the new blocks.

In some cases, it could be acceptable for there to be no new By-road, and for the new blocks to have direct access from the existing road across the remnant nature strip.

Backs containing flood ways should not generally be considered for this concept

All newly created blocks of land within the Backs would need to be at least 500-800 square metres in area, so as to generally maintain existing suburban character, and to enable trees and gardens to be installed on each block. This could (acceptably) change the aspect ratio (width to length) of the proposed new blocks, with a long side facing the street.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

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