



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING, TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES

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Submission No 11 -

Mr Peter Elford

Inquiry into DV 364 -

Gungahlin Town

Centre

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Inquiry into Draft Variation 364: Gungahlin Town Centre

Submission from Peter Elford

The Gungahlin Town Centre is the first district town centre to have been developed under ACT self-government. All other existing town centres were developed under guidelines enforced by the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC) which ensured substantial amounts of commercial office space were established within each town centre.

The ACT Territory Plan by itself was unlikely to be effective in attracting substantive employment to the Gungahlin Town Centre, and virtually no other mechanisms, incentives or controls were put in place by the ACT Government to encourage employers to move to Gungahlin.

Weak enforcement of the ACT territory plan has also significantly impacted the Gungahlin Town Centre. Allowing the North Western precinct of the town centre to be transformed block by block from a Business/Office Park to a cluster of high-rise residential apartment towers (so-called mixed-use) robbed the town centre of valuable land and drastically altered the character of the town centre. Worse, there has been no acknowledgement of the impact of these changes or any attempt by the ACT Government to amend the plan (if there is one) for the town centre as a result.

It fell to the community, through the Gungahlin Community Council (GCC), to raise this issue with the Environment Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate (EPSDD) in November 2016. The response was the creation of the “Gungahlin Town Centre Planning Refresh” project, which would undertake a community consultation process which would inform possible changes to the territory plan. The Refresh was to consider:

- Building height and character
- Upgrading and enhancing public spaces
- Walking, cycling and road transport

The consultation (which I participated in), although drawn out over many months, was reasonably well done, and the “2018 Gungahlin Town Centre Planning Refresh - Community Engagement Report 2018” captured the findings from the consultation process well.

The subsequent “2018 Gungahlin Town Centre Planning Refresh – snapshot”, published nearly 6 months later, included several recommendations that were never discussed in the consultation most notably the reduction in the amount of land reserved for commercial office space and allowing mixed-use residential development across almost all of East Gungahlin Town Centre. There was broad condemnation of these recommendations but all of them were part of Draft Variation 364, when it was published in draft form for comment with interim effect in September 2019.

Somehow interim effect was allowed to lapse after the statutory 12 months, and DV364 was not updated based on the feedback provided until March 2021. And here we are.

Draft Variation 364 should be thrown out for (at least) the following reasons:

- It was excruciating slow, and at no time did it appear there was any urgency on the part of EPSDD to get the job done in a timely fashion. All the while, land continued to be sold in the town centre and more Development Applications approved for developments that would not contribute any value back to the town centre.
- The rationale provided by EPSDD in drafting DV364 lacks any credibility or evidence of data-driven analysis, particularly regarding the reduction of land for commercial use.
- Other recommendations in the Engagement Report have never been actioned.
- Much is made of the value of “mixed-use” but that term is very poorly defined and applied
- The introduction of the significant and drastic changes were not part of the community consultation.
- The consultation on the draft itself was woeful (a 30 minute talk at a GCC meeting, a two hour popup in front of Woolworths one Saturday morning, and a poorly advertised call for written responses to the draft)
- It undermines the little trust the community has left with the Planning System

The whole process of arriving at DV364 reflects many of the worst aspects of policy making – slow, poorly communicated, not justified, irrelevant (eg. changing height limits on sites that have buildings in place) and contains surprises. Worse, it has become something of a red herring, because the ACT Territory Plan is only a part of the challenge facing the Gungahlin Town Centre.

Relying on the “free market” and weakly applying the Territory Plan will not deliver a viable town centre. Action needs to be taken immediately to take a different approach to identify how the Gungahlin Town Centre can be developed as a destination. If it is not going to be for the obvious – employment – then urgent work needs to be done to establish what else it could be, perhaps retail, recreation, entertainment, education, health, etc. Community, industry and government need to be involved and a level of creativity not normally seen applied to the problem.

This requires the ACT government to a) acknowledge there is a problem, and b) take a whole-of-government approach to addressing it, not passing it off to a single directorate/portfolio.