

Hughes Residents' Association intro – Nature in our City Inquiry 13.3.19

Hughes Residents' Association thanks you for the opportunity to make a submission to this important Inquiry.

Value of our natural environment

Canberrans do not know how lucky we are. This morning, I went for a walk on Red Hill through beautiful Yellow Box Red Gum woodland, past kangaroos, a Bearded Dragon, butterflies and dragonflies, feeding flocks of little birds and five of the astonishing nine species of parrots which call Red Hill home. And yet it only takes me 15 minutes to drive to Civic.

This close connection with nature and green spaces keeps us healthy, both physically and mentally. In an era of ballooning obesity, it allows our children to grow up fit and active. It provides green lungs for the city and protects our climate.

Yet, with the pressure of population growth and urban densification, we are in danger of losing what makes Canberra special.

For example, in Sydney, high density is classified as over 600 people per hectare, but development applications currently in train for Woden Town Centre would allow density of over 2,000 people per hectare.

With this sort of pressure on our Bush Capital, Hughes Residents' Association believes that it is imperative that we urgently address your Inquiry's Terms of Reference 4 and 5, managing the interface between the natural environment and urban areas, and the supporting policy and regulatory settings.

Integrated Planning Processes

Canberrans have expressed concerns for many years about the piecemeal and developer-led approach to urban development which allows precious green spaces to be encroached on and destroyed, one by one.

So we were very pleased when the ACT Government announced that it was developing an Integrated Plan for Red Hill Nature Reserve and Surrounds, to address this issue in one precious part of Canberra.

We commend the Integrated Plan team in Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate for their considered analysis of environmental and human issues in developing this Integrated Plan.

This is the model we should follow, rather than allowing our green and public spaces to be eaten away block-by-block by unco-ordinated proposals by developers.

Policy and Regulatory Settings

Better management of development and the interface with our natural environment cannot come without changes to current regulatory settings.

Currently, rigid processes and lack of co-ordination and transparency mean that decisions which destroy our environment can be taken without community knowledge or recourse.

An excellent example is what has happened while the Integrated Plan for Red Hill and Surrounds is being developed.

Having been assured that development on Red Hill woodland was on hold while this process was underway, we were dismayed to discover, via a third party, that a new Development Application had been lodged to build multi-storey storage facilities on woodland specifically included in the Integrated Plan, at Section 66 Deakin.

Advice from EPSDD was that they had no capacity to hold over this Development Application while the Integrated Plan was developed.

The Development Application documentation included a consultant Environmental Assessment that claimed that the land comprised degraded exotic vegetation.

In fact, after their own Ecologist inspected the site at our urging, EPSDD referred the development to the Commonwealth for assessment under the Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

Meanwhile, on another part of Red Hill also explicitly included in the Integrated Plan, the Federal Golf Course developers had quietly applied to the ACT Government Conservator for a decision that their proposed development had no environmental impact.

Despite our involvement in the Integrated Plan process and a previous Community Panel on this development, local community organisations only found out three months later, once again from a third party.

Our submission to the Development Application Processes Inquiry

With this experience in mind, we ask the Committee to consider our August 2018 submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly's Inquiry into Engagement with Development Application Processes in the ACT.

We particularly draw your attention to Recommendations 5, 6, 8 and 9, on the need for Integrated Planning and better processes for development applications which affect environmentally sensitive areas and green space.

We also note Recommendations 14 and 15, on the need for genuinely independent and credible Environmental Assessment for Development Applications, and Recommendations 16 and 18, about improving protection for trees.

Close

Thank you again for this opportunity. Our natural and cultural heritage, Canberra's sustainability and the future quality of life of its citizens depends on effectively managing the interface between our urban lives, and our precious natural environment, and in ensuring we have the policy and regulatory settings to support this.