



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES  
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## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the supply of water to the Tharwa Community

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## Inquiry into the supply of water to the Tharwa community

### Submission

Kevin Jeffery, [REDACTED]

#### Issues

As a resident and ratepayer of the Tharwa Community, I am currently very concerned about the progress and direction of the “Non Potable Water Supply at Tharwa for Fighting Project”, as well as the general disregard to providing water infrastructure to the village. If allowed to continue as it currently is, the current project will provide negative value to the community that it purports to serve, is making decisions based on incorrect criteria, and has not been undertaking effective consultation.

The following issues are most important for me in terms of water at Tharwa:

- There is no potable water supply and therefore all water use by Tharwa residents falls onto the tank water that they collect, which is unreliable, in short supply, expensive and problematic based on the age of the houses (meaning they cannot use water off their roofs)
- As a business owner I cannot use water collected off my roof for any food-related purposes and thus must buy my own water.
- Tharwa is the oldest settlement in the ACT however has never had any government provided or built water supply. The aging non-potable water supply that is being used was built by community member well over 50 years ago and has been maintained and operated by the community since. It is at the stage where this is no longer affordable to maintain the infrastructure under public streets and across the community.
- The policy position of all Australian governments including the ACT has responsibility for bushfire protection shared with the homeowner, and is clear that firefighting resources may not be available to assist you at times of bushfire. As such all areas of residential ACT have water to enable them to attempt to protect themselves – except Tharwa. In fact the current ‘firefighting water supply’ project explicitly excludes (as stated on many occasions by the project manager, any use of the water by residents. This is unacceptable.
- The current water supply project is being built in complete opposition to community needs, the Tharwa Master Plan, or even to the original scoping study recommendations. As a result it will build massive infrastructure that will ruin the village amenities but is highly likely (based on historical fire activity) will not be used during the life of the asset.
- Tharwa village and surrounds continue to grow organically and will grow as a result of residential blocks being imminently released as identified in the Master Plan. With no water infrastructure available the growth will be stifled, including the identified enhancements to commercial and community infrastructure to improve the village. As the owner of the only commercial facility in the village I am not only disappointed that I have to do all the enhancements myself, I am disgusted that the single actual government project will ruin the village amenities and drive away visitors and locals alike.

#### History

Tharwa village, as per the Tharwa Village Plan 2018 is "Canberra's oldest recognised European settlement, and retains important elements from its early rural heritage, making it a valued retreat from suburban edge of Canberra".

Tharwa always had to rely on its own water infrastructure, which was primarily around individual water tanks until the community organised their own non-potable supply. Val and Ron Jeffery installed the current non-potable water supply to all houses in the village around 50 years ago, including pump, tank and piping the village. This supply has provided non-potable water for gardens and other yard use, bushfire protection, public toilets and school toilets, and water for the bushfire brigade stand-pipe. This infrastructure was owned and operated by CC Jeffery Pty Ltd until recent times when it was donated to the Tharwa Community Association Inc. The infrastructure is aging and regularly failing, and will be difficult now to extend to new properties. Thankfully the current water supply project put aside a few thousand dollars for the supply of a couple of new plastic tanks, which fixed the most urgent failing component.

In July 2015 a study was completed for the Environment and Planning Directorate regarding the options for a non-potable water supply for Tharwa. This report recommended a solution to both firefighting and non-potable water needs of Tharwa. It recommended the use of river water (rather than bore water) and using the existing location for the tanks for all options. This report resulted in ACT government funding in the 2016/17 FY for the Option 1 - water for firefighting purposes.

During 2016-18 the Tharwa Master Plan was developed with extensive community consultation. Water, among other infrastructure issues, was nominated as a primary constraint to the development and improvement of Tharwa as per the Master Plan. The Master Plan also continued the principles as per the previous NDC study of retaining the historic and rural village character.

**Tharwa Village Master Plan:**

Tharwa village, as per the Tharwa Village Plan 2018 is "Canberra's oldest recognised European settlement, and retains important elements from its early rural heritage, making it a valued retreat from suburban edge of Canberra". The Tharwa village has retained most of the original infrastructure and built features of a small rural settlement. Over the years, the village as a whole has resisted modernisation of the streetscapes, choosing to retain our rural village feel.

The wide road corridor through the centre of the village has open space and tree plantings, and is used as a key walking area for locals and increasing numbers of visitors, including attendees of the adjacent pre-school and users of the Tharwa Bridge Reserve. The Tharwa Community has taken to heart the ideas in the Tharwa Village Plan because its vision of a "welcoming and inclusive meeting place where people can get close to nature and experience the special qualities of a rural village lifestyle" fits the character of our community and I feel it is what I want from our built environment. The Community has already started a project to enhance the Tharwa Hall and tennis court area to improve the amenity of the village core in line with the Tharwa Village Plan and our own need to create an attractive, quality public space. As part of the community I am concerned that our efforts to improve and enhance the community and its amenity will be wasted due to an ACT Government Project that will add massive industrial infrastructure in the middle of the village core that could easily be placed out of sight.

**Water Supply Study:**

In July 2015 a study was completed for the Environment and Planning Directorate regarding the options for a non-potable water supply for Tharwa. This report recommended a solution to both firefighting needs and non-potable water needs of residences for Tharwa. The report recommended the use of river water (rather than bore water) as well as using the existing location for the tanks for all options provided. As a result of this report the ACT government provided funding in the 2016/17 FY for the Option 1 - water for firefighting purposes. The Tharwa community and Emergency Services Agency were both supportive of that report.

**Current Project is at odds with the 2015 Water Options Study:**

The project that was set up to implement that funded water supply has taken very different directions from those recommended in the initial report which appear to be at odds with the findings of that report:

1. The location of the water storage tanks recommended in the initial report was to be on the hill above the village to allow for gravity feeding to the village (for either use option) - yet the current project insists that they cannot use the elevated site but prefer sites with no gravity feeding;
2. The source of water for the supply recommended in the initial report was the Murrumbidgee River, due to the available ground water containing high sulphate, total dissolved solids and total hardness which cause regular pipe blockages, decrease water supply and can damage pipes - yet the current project insists that ground water via a bore on the Tharwa Bridge Reserve is the only viable option;
3. The ability to connect residences to the non-potable water supply was suggested in all options provided in the Options Paper - yet the current project has insisted that there is no possible way that any private infrastructure could be attached to a public supply.

**Consequences of the government Firefighting Water Supply project:**

These directions are driving to a result that will be of negative value to the community that is supposed to be benefitting from the government funding will actually be negatively impacted. The positive benefit of having water supplies for firefighting closer to the community than the current use of the end-of-life facilities operated by the Tharwa Community Association or travelling around 5 minutes to the closest town-water hydrant is very minimal due to:

1. The occurrence of house or structure fires (outside of major bushfire events) is around 1 fire every 50 years across the history of Tharwa (and in fact those fires are in the rural farms around Tharwa and so would not have benefited much if at all from this project). It is thus a very low likelihood that the major infrastructure that is currently being established will be used within its working lifetime for supply of water to urban fire vehicles;
2. The actual benefit for urban firefighting is only the difference in having a connected water supply at Tharwa and having a large water tanker bringing water from Banks - about 5 minutes drive. This means that there is only slightly increased likelihood of improved firefighting results. The travelling distance for pumpers to be initially onsite at Tharwa appears to further reduce this benefit.
3. The addition of rural firefighting use of the water was added into the project well after the initial planning (it was specifically ruled out during the initial community consultation session). This appears to improve the benefits of the project, however research from the Bushfire and Natural Hazards CRC has confirmed that in major bushfire situations the ability for local residents to defend themselves is far more effective than growing the firefighting capabilities. Rural fire vehicles are also able to use other sources of water and so will get minimal benefit from the project. This ability for residents to prepare their gardens and defend their properties is in line with ACT Government Policy and reinforced in the Strategic Bushfire Management Plan, but is explicitly excluded by this project.
4. The experience in Tharwa in the 2003 fires was that the village pulled together with the experience of fire leaders to defend the village.

What the village needs is capabilities and support from the ACT Government to enable it to work as a cohesive community in times of emergencies, while also assisting government-provided response capabilities - rather than a sole focus on the narrow provision of water to fire trucks with explicit removal of any assistance to the community. If the water supply infrastructure were to be situated right into the village core as proposed - removing a key green space and overwhelming the human scale of this small rural village - it would:

- causes a major safety risk in that it is proposed to be built right on the only school crossing for the Tharwa pre-school, putting a truck turning circle direct on top of the only available school crossing on the main road through the village;
- have a massive negative impact on the amenity and country feel of the village;
- result in government money being spent in a way that negatively overwhelms the efforts and resources that our community itself is investing to make the village hub and public spaces an appealing and attractive area for the community and visitors in line with the Tharwa Village Plan;
- potentially lead to vandalism by being in plain sight
- devalue neighbouring property.

I consider this level of impact on our village is disproportionate for the narrowly targeted outcome of water for fire trucks only. It is fair to say that the community has severe reservations about the plan to put the tanks at the street side site. I have noticed that throughout the ACT, including the similar village of Uriarra, the water tank infrastructure is placed high on hilltops making use of gravity and hidden away from public sight.

**Preferred Changes to the current Project:**

I support the location on the hill behind the existing bush fire shed where:

- it would be out of sight and not overwhelm the public spaces of the village which are core to the Tharwa Village Plan and the community's own improvement plans.
- it would make use of gravity feed in the likely case of power outage during major emergency events
- the current landholder is amenable and encouraging of the benefit to locating the water infrastructure on that hill to benefit the village
- the opportunity exists to link this activity to the recently identified need to extend the ACT RFS (volunteers) Southern brigade shed to provide needed facilities.

**Other Issues of Concern**

Once the immediate issue of putting the current project on hold before it does irreparable damage to the Tharwa Village is resolved, there are then a few other considerations that need to be actioned.

Key concerns I have are:

- Why do none of the options that have been presented across the various studies have an option for extending the Canberra town water supply from Banks to Tharwa (via Lanyon)? The ACT Government manages a set of properties on Lanyon as well as properties in Tharwa and all of those have issues with potable water supply via roofs. A serious review of the option for extending the Canberra town water is warranted. It would be worth an investigation into plans for water supply to Lanyon to deal with current issues to make sure that any investment could be leveraged across both locations.
- Tharwa village is located in a Bushfire Prone Area. As such there are responsibilities on various parties to prevent and mitigate the impact of Bushfire. It seems illogical that in such a case, where research has shown that the most effective mitigation are better prepared gardens and house construction, that a new water supply is being explicitly quarantined from use by residents.
- How was the decision made to fund just the fire-fighting water supply in the 2017/18 ACT Budget, was the community use, particularly for fire prevention and protection purposes, specifically excluded when the key expenses of the infrastructure that could be shared are built as part of that investment?

- The Master Plan suggested in regard to infrastructure that the rural village character and lack of urban infrastructure “present an opportunity to showcase best practice ‘off-grid’ technologies and sustainability measures”. The current project is none of those things and in fact totally against the rural character and any sustainable efforts.
- I note in the most recent Pre-Suppression Plan for Tharwa Village from the Emergency Services Agency in regard to response times for appliances from the any ACT Fire And Rescue station “The location of Tharwa Village falls outside of the ACTF&R operational response area matrix making legislated response times unlikely”. This suggests that the value of the massive infrastructure investment in the current project, which is explicitly limited to fire fighting truck use only, is actually very marginal. Therefore the costs and community impacts should be considered extremely carefully because otherwise we are causing massive harm for minimal impact.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide a submission to this Inquiry, and I look forward to discussing this further in person.

Yours Sincerely

[REDACTED]

Kevin Jeffery [REDACTED]