



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING, TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES

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Submission No 1 -

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Inquiry into DV 365 -

Housing Choices

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Submission: Recommended Draft Variation 365: Housing Choices – Co-Housing and Boarding House

In defence of co-housing

One important means by which housing can be made more affordable is by facilitating co-housing in the format of much smaller dwellings, combined with the creative sharing of certain facilities. Such arrangements need not look like a “caravan park,” as one submission to an earlier phase in this process suggested. On the contrary, any cursory examination of successful national and international co-housing developments will demonstrate that co-housing structures can not only be harmonious with “residential amenity and character,” but also exceptionally beautiful, improving the diversity and richness of these important suburban features.

I have spent some years living with my family on the Far North Coast of NSW under arrangements that could be described as co-housing, as have many of my friends, and I know first-hand that it can be a wonderful means of not only improving housing affordability – allowing those to own a home who would otherwise have no prospect of such – but also of challenging the trends of social isolation and loneliness that increasingly characterise Western – and Canberra’s – societies. Co-housing is not for everyone, of course, but for some it is a practical and affordable solution to home ownership, and a rewarding way to live, and I can think of no good reason why the ACT’s planning laws should not facilitate it.

Recommended Draft Variation 365

I strongly support the proposition that the ACT Government’s *Territory Plan* should facilitate an improvement in “housing choices in the ACT through amendments to existing boarding house provisions, and by introducing new provisions for ‘co-housing’.”

Regretfully, the Recommended Draft Variation 365 (RDV365) offers little or nothing that would achieve this end.

This is disappointing: *The ACT Labor and ACT Greens Parliamentary and Governing Agreement for the 10th Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly* (the Governing Agreement) refers to the improvement of social housing and housing affordability as a ‘policy issue of particular interest’.

Perhaps more importantly, The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, to which Australia is a signatory, prescribes that housing is nothing less than a basic human right. And yet many people in Canberra on lower-incomes cannot afford even the least expensive of rental properties. It is well known that around 1,600 Canberrans were homeless at the time of the last Census, and many times this number have to make unacceptable sacrifices to pay rent for bottom-end rental properties. An even greater number again have given up any hope of ever owning their own home.

This being the case, it is my firm view that the RDV365 should be revised to give effect to the express intent of the 10th ACT Legislative Assembly, as articulated in the Governing Agreement.

How should the RDV365 be revised so that it meets purported objectives?

It is proposed that co-housing should be restricted to RZ2-RZ5. This is arbitrary and nonsensical and would effectively place 80 percent of existing urban area out-of-bounds for co-housing developments. While I think it inadvisable, I can imagine a case for placing a cap on the number of co-housing developments in a (RZ1) section; however, there is no sound rationale for proscribing co-housing completely from RZ1. By way of illustration, consider the fact that Marmalade Lane in

Cambridge, UK (see <https://marmaladelane.co.uk/>) is not dissimilar in appearance to, and has better amenity than, most of the developments in Canberra's newer suburbs.

The Draft Variation 365 proposed no limit on the number of dwellings for co-housing. In contrast, RDV365 proposes that dwelling numbers be limited by Multi Unit Code Element 3, with the effect that only three dwellings would be permitted on a 1050-1400m² block. This is no different to existing Multi Unit housing provisions; hence, it would do nothing to improve housing options or housing affordability.

It is my firm view that there should be no enumerated limit on the number of dwellings in a co-housing development; rather, any such limit should be imposed indirectly through design constraints, and the requirement that a proposed development be in keeping with the character and amenity of the suburb within which it is proposed. If a co-housing development can provide for a greater number of dwellings than three without detracting from the character or amenity of a suburb (and this is demonstrably possible), then it should be permitted. Conversely, if a co-housing development would detract from the character and amenity of a suburb, then there would be a case for disallowing it.

I commend the drafters of the RDV365 for reversing the proposal in the original Draft Variation to disallow boarding houses in RZ1. This would have been completely contrary to the objective of increasing the supply of affordable housing. However, the RDV365 proposes a limit of four bedrooms for boarding houses in RZ1. My view is that this is inadequate; if a cap must be placed on the number of bedrooms, it should be increased to at least 6. A better approach, however, would be the same approach I have suggested in respect of social housing: that any limit to the number of bedrooms should be indirectly imposed through design constraints, which should include requirements for both amenity and resident safety and comfort.