

SELECT COMMITTEE ON ESTIMATES 2023 – 2024

ADDITIONAL COMMENTS FROM JO CLAY MLA

The Select Committee on Estimates questions ministers on the proposed budget before it is debated. This allows members and the public to gauge government priorities and test whether they are implementing them well.

Hearings took place 17 – 31 July 2023. It was winter here in Canberra, but globally we saw the hottest summer and highest oceanic temperatures on record. We saw horrific fires and heatwaves around the world. Both poles suffered record-smashing melts. The UN chief took a look at the weather and announced we'd entered the era of global boiling. He urged leaders to 'step up for climate action and climate justice.'

The ACT is taking climate action. We've declared a climate emergency and set a climate strategy. We have a pathway to electrify the city and phase out fossil fuel gas and switch over to EVs. Our local clubs will become heat and smoke refuges for the next Black Summer. We're planting trees, protecting green spaces and taking action to cool our city through Living Infrastructure targets and building battery and renewable energy capacity. But are we doing enough? People see how fast governments and society moved on other crises – the COVID pandemic, the Global Financial Crisis, world wars – and ask if we're acting fast enough on this one.

Around 60% of ACT tracked emissions come from transport, primarily cars. Our EV strategy will cut emissions but even EVs have a heavy footprint in terms of roads, parking, congestion, urban space and manufacturing. That's why the transport hierarchy puts active and public transport at the top and private vehicles at the bottom. But do our budget priorities match? In Estimates, we heard there's appetite for better rail connections but limited action to deliver them¹. We discussed \$650 million put into roads with escalating costs but no public business cases showing they're still value for money², despite an Auditor-General stating we should see this public information³. We heard construction of the fourth bus depot has been delayed and government is reconsidering when they will need it as the Minister does 'not think the fleet will reach a size that will require a fourth depot for some years'⁴. We heard no plans to deliver on earlier commitments to improve the bus timetable. We've seen a reduction in services and a budget that does not deliver more buses, more drivers or service improvements. Light Rail is being expanded one stage per decade with nothing in this budget to speed that up. Progressive governments in Europe and Scandinavia are tackling aviation emissions and private car usage by setting reduction targets, prioritising alternatives like road and rail and shipping and electric aviation. Our government is simply committed to increase flights for passengers and freight as if they have never heard of the climate meme 'air-freighted asparagus'⁵.

Almost 10% of the ACT tracked emissions come from waste. Government has wound back its former commitment to a city-wide FOGO program and facility by 2023, delaying this until 2026 to concentrate on building a replacement Materials Recovery Facility instead⁶. Organic waste sent to landfill in 2026 will still be generating emissions in 2046. Government could

¹ Recommendation 7; Estimates hearings 27 July.

² Estimates hearings 18 July.

³ Recommendation 107

⁴ Recommendation 102

⁵ Recommendation 17.

⁶ Estimates hearings 18 July; Recommendations 100 & 113.

build two waste facilities at once. Or it could trial new or existing commercial composters or insect farmers or tackle waste through programs ahead of a big capital build that's been delayed. But our government is not doing that.

Our government states commitment to urban densification, as recommended by the IPCC. Sprawl destroys our environment which is a tragedy in its own right, and also affects nature's ability to draw down carbon. Sprawl also increases car dependency and carbon-intense development. Government is meant to build at least 70% of new housing as infill not greenfield sprawl, but questioning revealed they've been counting knockdown rebuilds as part of the 70% This means we've been seeing new homes built as sprawl but knockdown rebuilds, not additional homes, counting as infill⁷. It presents a double challenge in a housing and climate crisis.

Climate change brings more invasive plants and animals and less predictable weather. We need much better environmental protection and land management to cope. From a budget of nearly \$7.5 billion, we have just \$5.2 million for environmental protection⁸.

Our schools, sports grounds and assets will need to adapt to much greater extremes of heat, flooding, drought, fire and smoke than we have ever seen before. Questioning of two directorates revealed a lack of strategic coordination to adapt their facilities. The Minister for Climate Action said there is work to do to coordinate this but 'there are only so many things that can be done at once, and there are urgent infrastructure priorities in other areas'⁹.

The budget allocates \$217 million for environment, sustainable development and climate change from the total budget, or around 3%. Climate assessments on major decisions might help ensure we set the right priorities. This may be why the Commissioner for Sustainability and Environment has been calling for climate assessments under an established methodology on budget decisions since 2019¹⁰. But the Chief Minister, appearing in various capacities, did not think quantitative methodical assessments were needed. The Minister for Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction is developing a tool to standardise climate assessments – I welcome this and call on it to be urgently implemented in the ACT.¹¹

No government has the luxury of focussing on only one issue. We have a housing crisis as well. We also and always need quality health care, education, transport, urban and community services. We must ensure taxpayer money is spent sensibly and with integrity. We discussed all of these issues in Estimates, as we should, but I remain worried about the level of priority our government is putting into climate action and adaptation. Do our budget priorities meet the crisis we face?

I thank my colleagues on the Estimates committee. They took a fair and collegiate approach to managing hearings and writing this report, which is why I submit additional comments rather than a dissent.

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⁷ Recommendation 61 & 62.

⁸ Recommendation 65.

⁹ Recommendation 12; Estimates hearings 20 July for sports ground and 21 July for school adaptation.

¹⁰ Estimates hearings 25 July.

¹¹ Recommendation 12 and 13.