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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the Role and Future of the Woden Town Centre in the context of a compact city

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Submission Legislative Assembly Inquiry

The Role and Future of the Woden Town Centre in the Context of a Compact City
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I live in Woden. I was born here, catch buses here, and spend time in the public spaces around the town centre. I'm part of the generation that will inherit the city we're shaping now. So when I write about Woden's future, it's not abstract planning jargon – it's my neighbourhood.

The truth is simple: density is not the threat to Woden. It's the opportunity. The real danger is obstruction, delay, and nostalgia politics. A compact city requires us to build up, not sprawl out. Woden is the best-placed town centre to lead this transformation, and we can't afford to let it be smothered by excuses about "character" or parking.

This submission is unapologetically pro-growth. Woden's future must be one of more housing, better infrastructure, and stronger community life, not of endless sabre-rattling about shadows, traffic, or a pool as outdated as the NIMBYs defending it.

The housing future that a growing city demands

Woden should be the southside's housing engine. It sits at the intersection of jobs, services, schools, and transport – yet somehow, year after year, we keep treating density here as if it's a controversial idea rather than the obvious solution. If we are serious about a compact city, then Woden is not optional. It is essential.

Canberra's housing crisis isn't some abstract headline. It's what young people like me live every day. Rents are climbing, home ownership is a distant dream, and my generation is constantly told to "be patient." But patient for what? For more delays, more obstruction, more excuses about "character" and "traffic"? That's not a future, it's a lockout. And the people who keep defending it are the same ones who already own homes here.

The numbers speak for themselves. Between 2016 and 2021, the population of Phillip alone grew by 40%. Canberra as a whole is forecast to hit 800,000 people by 2065, and Woden is expected to carry 80,000 residents in that same timeframe. If we don't build housing at scale in Woden, where exactly do we expect people to go? Further sprawl into farmland? Longer commutes and more congestion? Or just out of Canberra altogether? None of those are acceptable answers.

And yet, when the chance comes to approve much-needed apartments, obstruction wins. Take the Woden Pool site, where apartment approvals are being stalled by NIMBY pushback led by figures who should know better – employing excuses of public infrastructure whilst conveniently ignoring that the very development they're fighting includes said public infrastructure. That kind of sabotage doesn't protect "community

character” – it denies people homes, drives up prices, and locks out the very generation who should be calling Woden home.

Let’s be blunt: Woden has the space, the demand, and the infrastructure to grow. What it doesn’t have is the political courage to say yes. Density is not the threat. It’s the solution. Every time we block a tower in Woden, that demand doesn’t disappear – it just forces sprawl, car dependence, and exclusion.

A growing city demands homes. Woden can deliver them, but only if we stop pretending density is the problem and start treating obstruction as the real enemy of housing.

Community events and facilities in context of the next generation

Housing alone does not make a community. A dense Woden without the right facilities is just rows of apartments where people sleep, not live. If Woden is going to carry thousands more residents, it needs spaces that actually belong to the people who live here, especially young people like me.

Right now, Woden fails that test. There is almost nothing to do in the town centre outside of Westfield. The youth centre is under-resourced, public spaces are often neglected or unsafe, and there are virtually no venues for teenagers or young adults to gather, create, or perform. That is unacceptable. Density without community is hollow. We can build hundreds of apartments, but if the town centre is empty after 6 pm, we have failed.

A modern, dense Woden must have a network of facilities that match the population growth. That means performance spaces for local musicians, community halls for clubs and workshops, libraries that are more than just a place to pick up a book, and sports facilities that can actually handle demand. Outdoor areas need to be shaded, lit, and connected to the town centre so young people feel safe and welcome, not excluded. These facilities are not extras; they are central to making density liveable.

Community events are equally important. Markets, multicultural festivals, live music, and street activations bring life to the town centre. They turn apartments into a neighbourhood, not just a dormitory. The density we are building is useless if people retreat to their units and leave streets empty. A town centre alive with events is a town centre people want to stay in, invest in, and belong to.

Recommendations:

- 1) Establish a Phillip Renewal Authority, similar to the City Renewal Authority, to organise events and community recreation facilities in Woden and engage in big-picture planning work. Think Garema Place concerts or the fussball tables near Impact Comics. This would engage in the broader planning work exemplified by the CRA, therefore aligning with the Southern Gateway plan, whilst also giving Woden a dedicated driver for culture and activity.

- 2) Implement a targeted consultation process to foster community events across the Town Centre and the wider Woden Valley, not just relying on the Community Council. Special attention should be given to high school and college students, who are daily users of the town centre but are structurally excluded from decision-making. Their voices must shape the spaces and events they will actually use.

The next generation is growing up in Woden. If we deny us the facilities, events, and spaces that make high-density life vibrant, then density becomes a barrier rather than an opportunity. The necessity is simple: build communities, not just apartments.

Public infrastructure and transport for a new-look Woden

Density only works if people can move around efficiently and access essential services. Woden cannot become a vibrant, compact town centre if every resident is forced into a car, or if schools, hospitals, and community facilities lag behind growth. Transport and public infrastructure are the backbone of a high-density city, and so far, Woden has been left behind. That has to change.

Transport is the first priority. Light rail to Woden is essential. It is not optional. The southside has waited long enough for high-quality, reliable public transport, yet every step forward has been met with obstruction. Take the petition to “relocate the light rail traction power substation away from Yarralumla homes.” It might sound reasonable, but in reality, it is a classic NIMBY stunt designed to block progress under the guise of community concern. Light rail must serve Woden, not the entitlement of a few homeowners. The town centre should be built around this transport spine, with apartments, jobs, and facilities directly accessible to residents via light rail.

The new bus interchange is another opportunity that cannot be wasted. It must be accessible, safe, and easy to navigate, with clear signage and connections to all parts of Woden. Buses must run frequently, reliably, and late enough for students, workers, and young people to actually use them. If this interchange fails, density fails with it. People will retreat to their cars, streets will choke, and all the benefits of compact living will be lost.

Active transport must also be prioritised. East-West access across Woden is currently poor, particularly along Launceston Street. Upgrading this path to provide a safe, continuous, and pleasant walking and cycling corridor is not optional – it is a prerequisite for a compact city.

Public infrastructure beyond transport is equally critical. Schools, hospitals, community and recreation centres, and green spaces must scale with population growth. Without adequate facilities, density is unlivable. The expansion of Canberra Hospital is welcome, but everyday services – mental health, allied health, youth centres, and schools – must

be integrated into Woden's town centre planning. Green spaces must be maintained and upgraded to match increased population density.

Recommendations

- 1) Ensure light rail is central to access to and from Woden Town Centre, and build the town centre around it rather than bending projects to appease obstructionist petitions.
- 2) Ensure the new bus interchange is fully accessible, safe, and navigable, with frequent, reliable services that serve residents and workers.
- 3) Upgrade the East-West active transit path along Launceston Street, making it safe and continuous for walking and cycling.
- 4) Ensure public infrastructure – schools, hospitals, community and recreation centres, and green spaces – is delivered at scale alongside housing growth, as is being planned with the proposed Community Centre and Woden High School.

Density works when transport and infrastructure work. Woden has the chance to become a model compact, connected, and liveable town centre, but only if we prioritise infrastructure over obstruction and plan for the people who will actually live here.

Alignment with documents and existing development

The ACT Government already has a stack of strategies and master plans that set the framework for Woden's growth. The District Strategy (2023) and the Woden Town Centre Master Plan (2015) make the same point: Woden is meant to be a high-density, mixed-use town centre that supports housing, jobs, and community life. The blueprint is there. What is missing is follow-through and political courage.

Unfortunately, Woden has too often been a case study in hesitation. Take the Woden Pool redevelopment. This should have been a straightforward opportunity to deliver modern housing and community facilities in one of the most central parts of the town centre. Instead, years of delay, public petitions, and political foot-dragging have stalled progress. That is not planning; that is obstruction dressed up as concern. NIMBY arguments about traffic, parking, and character are weaponised to block density, and Woden Pool is the clearest example of how entitlement can paralyse development.

The alignment with existing documents is not the problem. The government knows what is needed: more apartments, mixed-use development, integrated public transport, and public infrastructure scaled to population growth. The problem is that residents and politicians who put nostalgia above need are allowed to derail projects, wasting time and locking out the people who will actually live and work in Woden.

Woden's growth should not be piecemeal or timid. Development must be consistent with planning documents and delivered at scale. High-density housing, transport, schools, health services, recreation facilities, and green space all belong in the town centre, not scattered on the fringes. When these pieces are integrated, Woden will not only meet the

needs of a growing population but also set a benchmark for compact, sustainable town centres across Canberra.

The lesson is clear: planning documents provide the roadmap, but courage and commitment are required to implement them. Projects like Woden Pool cannot be allowed to languish while petitions and obstructionist politics dictate what gets built. If Woden is to serve the next generation, it must embrace density, integrate infrastructure, and reject obstructionism. Anything less is a failure.

Summative statement

Woden has everything it needs to be a thriving, compact town centre: location, transport, infrastructure, and the space to grow. Yet for too long, progress has been blocked by fear, nostalgia, and entitlement. Density is not the enemy. Obstruction is. Without apartments, mixed-use housing, and public infrastructure delivered at scale, Woden will fail the next generation.

This submission makes it clear that housing, community facilities, transport, and public infrastructure must be integrated, unapologetically, into the town centre. We cannot allow NIMBYism to dictate the future of Canberra's southside, as we have seen with stalled projects like Woden Pool or petitions against essential transport infrastructure.

The ACT Government has already set out the strategies and plans. What remains is the courage to implement them. Woden can lead the southside in housing, connectivity, and community vibrancy, but only if we embrace density, invest in infrastructure, and put the needs of residents, not nostalgia, first.

I'd be extremely interested in speaking to the committee about my perspectives and my will for more housing over NIMBYism in Woden.

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