



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING
Mr Johnathan Davis MLA (Chair), Mr James Milligan MLA (Deputy Chair)
Mr Michael Petterson MLA

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into the West Belconnen supercell thunderstorm

Submission Number: 001

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The Select Committee on Health and Community Wellbeing
ACT Legislative Assembly
GPO Box 1020
Canberra ACT 2601
(LACommitteeHCW@parliament.act.gov.au)

Dear Sirs

Re: Inquiry into West Belconnen supercell thunderstorm

Following for your consideration is my submission to the above Inquiry.

I would be happy to expand further on any of the points discussed. I may be contacted at the above address, by email at [REDACTED] or by phone at [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]

Bruce Wright

22 March 2022

Introduction

My submission addresses particularly the following terms of reference:

- a) the recovery following the recent storms;
- b) the appropriateness of the communication strategies used to reach out to those affected; and
- e) the lessons for the ACT Government and other agencies.

Background

The storm on 3 January brought down a very large pine-tree branch in parkland at the intersection of [REDACTED] Latham. This is immediately in front of my home. The base of the branch remained partially attached to the trunk; the upper part brought down parts of hakea bushes and a peppercorn tree in my front garden, blocking the public footpath and resting on lattice-work in my garden.

I advised authorities on 4 January, through "Fix my street" (reference number [REDACTED]). As is usual, the automated email which acknowledged my submission said: "You should expect to be contacted within 10 working days". Acknowledgements of "Fix my street" submissions always say this; but such contact rarely happens.

Over coming days my wife and I cleared the public footpath.

But the rest of the wood, leaf and pine-cone and pine-needle litter stayed.

On 2 February I wrote as a letter to the editor of The Canberra Times: "There are growing numbers of flashing signs appearing around Belconnen suburbs, declaring 'Storm clean-up underway'. This is despite a complete absence of work crews actually cleaning up the storm damage in the area." This was published in The Canberra Times on February 3. Visible activity around Latham was focussed on erecting signs rather than clearing trees and branches.

On 17 February, six-and-a-half weeks after the storm and as the litter dried, I and my wife wrote to the Minister for Transport and City Services, Mr Chris Steel, expressing concern at the fire danger to our home from the drying branches which still stretched from the pine plantation and into native bushes close to our home. (Appendix A) At the same time, I updated my submission to "Fix my street", expressing the same concern.

While government did nothing, a neighbour reduced the fire hazard somewhat by taking five utility-loads of fallen and broken branches to green waste. But the bulk remained.

On 2 March "ACT Government, Urban Treescapes" sent an email (Appendix B) thanking me for my patience and advising that my incident "has now been resolved and all appropriate action had been taken". At that point, the only action that had been taken was the clearing for the footpath by my wife and me and removal of some waste by a neighbour.

I was away on 2 March. On 8 March, I replied (Appendix C) that no action had been taken. I sent an email in similar terms to Minister Steel.

About 10 am on 9 March a crew with chainsaws and muncher turned up, and cleared the bulk of the material, leaving two to three metres of the thickest part of the trunk and lots of litter of smaller branches, leaves, cones and needles.

On 10 March I emailed both "Urban Treescapes" and Minister Steel advising that the job was incomplete. (Appendix D) The office of Minister Steel replied: "I have passed on this feedback to TCCS for appropriate action when prioritising storm clean-up works."

Nothing further has happened. As I write on 22 March the base of the branch and much of the litter remains, (Appendix E) although there has been some clearing of litter undertaken by neighbours collecting it as *fire-starters*. (And isn't that ironic, given my earlier concerns?)

Submission

The response from the ACT Government to the damage was slow; advice to the public about what was happening was slow, ineffective and poorly communicated; and no one actually checked what was done and what was not.

Having been initially promised contact in 10 days, I received no contact at all until virtually two months later, when the advice that the job was complete was incorrect. The job had not even begun. No one checked.

Being aware of the widespread damage, I saw no evidence at all of anyone cleaning up anywhere other than clearing roads (and much of that was done by residents). Then I saw flashing signs telling me that the storm clean-up was underway. The only evidence of that was the signs, not actual work crews being seen to clear damage.

Yes, the job was huge. But did it not occur to anyone in government to look for extra resources? Why was it, weeks after the event, before we saw news that a few people had been moved from one area in government to another to help with the clean-up? Should government not have immediately sought assistance from elsewhere, such as nearby councils? The end of March approaches, and still the job is not done. Should the government not have communicated clearly, frequently and specifically with neighbourhoods about when work in their area might be done?

Unfortunately, the sorry saga of the clean-up mirrors much work by or on behalf of the ACT Government. It appears no one supervises; no one checks that a task that is said to have been done has actually been done effectively.

We see it in the mowing schedule. Those on the mowers routinely skip areas to try to keep up with the schedule. Try to complain that an area has been missed, and you will simply be told when that area is next scheduled to be mown. The fact that it was missed last time is treated as irrelevant. No one wants to know.

We see it in footpath maintenance and repair. When sections of footpaths in Latham were being replaced, I advised "Fix my street" that in one area near me rough soil had been left hilled up near the new concrete. First sign of rain, I said, and mud would wash over the new (steeply sloped) section of footpath. The official response: Someone gave the contractor my phone number; he phoned me complaining that I had complained about his work; and no one fixed the issue. In the next rain mud washed across the footpath. No one checked that the contractor had done the work effectively and professionally. Government just paid him. Does it cost too much to check?

Nearby, someone building units installed a series of pine bridges from ground level, over the termite barrier, up into the timber house frame sitting on top of the termite barrier. The Canberra Times published a letter from me about it. The ACT Government could have checked it. But no one did. Cladding now covers the pine termite bridges, and the units are for sale. The buyers will never know until the frame is falling down around them.

A neighbour is concerned that the home being built on the block next to her bears little resemblance to the approved plans and extends to within 30 centimetres of her boundary. She raised the issue with planning authorities and was told to send in a photograph. She sent in photographs, but then was told the planning authorities had no way of knowing whether the photographs were real. They could have been from a different site, she was told. But, no, they would not send anyone out to check.

Conclusion

Recovery from the storm was far too slow because government applied insufficient resources. Approaching three months later, it is still far from complete. It is clear no one actually ever knew what had been done and what was still to be done. This is obvious from the fact that I was told work was complete when it had not even begun. Did anyone ever know the scope of required work? Is the fact that work in the park outside my place is incomplete actually recorded anywhere central?

Recovery activity was and is poorly communicated. Even the much-trumpeted City Services website is very broad, offering vague, almost meaningless, words. The "storm clean-up is underway" signs are insulting. "Fix my street" used to be an effective service. It now tries incredibly hard to limit what can be reported and fails to respond. Yet it still promises contact within 10 days. The passing on of my phone number of a contractor is, in my mind, a significant breach of privacy.

Clearly failure to check that work has been completed satisfactorily is standard process from much ACT government activity. I can only assume this is because of a lack of resources and is seen as saving the cost of sending someone to check. But when work is so routinely done poorly or not at all, would it not actually save resources to check rather than assuming satisfactory completion (if it is an in-house job) or paying (if it is a contractor)?

Managing public space is routine for local government councils across Australia. And many do it effectively, efficiently, even with excellence, with or without storms. Yet the standard of management of public space in the national capital, regardless of storms, is appalling. One needs only to drive to the coast to see that Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council and Eurobodalla Shire Council manage public spaces much more effectively and to much higher standards than government achieves in the national capital.

Government in Canberra clearly needs to change its priorities.







