



Legislative Assembly for the
Australian Capital Territory

Standing Committee on Environment
and Planning

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into DPA-04 – Missing Middle Housing Reform

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Submission to the inquiry into DPA-04

Missing Middle Housing Reforms - Andrew Donnellan

I am a Canberra resident who has lived in this city for almost 16 years, and in the Inner South for 11 years. I am also co-founder and secretary of Greater Canberra, who are making an organisational submission to this inquiry. I make this submission in my personal capacity to express my personal views on this Draft Plan Amendment.

I strongly support the Missing Middle Housing Reforms, and recommend the committee endorse the approval of DPA-04 by the Assembly at the earliest possible opportunity.

When I moved to Canberra from regional New South Wales in 2010, Canberra had a population of under 360,000. Today, it's approaching 490,000. Canberra had a reputation as a boring, quiet city - more of a large country town - where the economy consisted of the public service and some hangers on. Today, that reputation is evolving as Canberra is becoming a far more diverse place along all dimensions. Canberra was a low-density city, with the transformation of areas like Civic, the Town Centres and Kingston Foreshore only just beginning. Today, our city centre is thriving - becoming something worthy of being called a city centre - and our other high-density areas are also seeing the benefits. All of these positive changes have been driven by population growth.

Over the same time, our national housing crisis has become acute, and housing affordability has become a defining political issue on a national level, particularly for younger Australians. Over the last few years, we have seen a renewed focus on housing supply, both federally and in every state and territory. Demand-focused housing affordability measures - first home owners' grants and the like - are often worse than useless. At the same time, Australia's per capita housing construction rate is nowhere near the level it was at in 1970.

There is an emerging consensus that the approaches to zoning and land use planning developed in the 20th century - in Australia, the Anglosphere, the West and even the developing world - are fundamentally unfit for purpose. Well-intentioned ideas to protect liveability and the environment fused with discrimination, xenophobia, parochialism and an ignorance of economics to fuel a downward spiral of NIMBYism.

Economists, urban planners, community advocates, architects, environmentalists, transport planners and others, from across the whole breadth of the political spectrum, are realising that we can no longer afford to tinker around the edges: it's time to fundamentally overhaul land use regulation. No more tiny, targeted reforms where it's politically easiest: we need broad-based upzoning across the city, as successfully demonstrated in places like New Zealand.

New South Wales and Victoria are making moves, and the Missing Middle Housing Reforms will be the ACT's first major contribution to this national wave of reform.

My own interest in Canberra's planning issues started after I had lived here for a few years, and my direct involvement started in 2021, when I started to see how a culture of NIMBYism was directly impacting housing availability and affordability in my own part of town.

The Demonstration Housing Project, an initiative initially spearheaded by former Greens MLA Caroline Le Couteur, aimed to explore the possibility of introducing more medium-density housing typologies through inviting small-scale proposals that would be facilitated through targeted Territory Plan amendments.

One such demonstration project was proposed for Griffith. A local couple were proposing to redevelop their detached house as a "manor house" - a modest, inoffensive intensification from one home to four homes, in a well-located inner city area with good proximity to schools and shopping facilities.

The Griffith Narrabundah Community Association and the Inner South Canberra Community Council declared war. This project was the thin edge of the wedge, a threat to the sacred integrity of RZ1. Four homes on one block would be too much for this street, especially with only a woefully inadequate *nine* parking spaces. Objections and petitions had to be organised lest Canberra fall to this menace.

At the same ISCCC public meeting where the GNCA announced its campaign, they also raised the "problem" of the supportive housing exemptions permitting Housing ACT to build medium-density homes in RZ1. In a city where, as they themselves regularly like to point out, public housing is a decreasing share of the housing stock, the even more pressing problems were any measures that would improve the cost effectiveness and efficiency of public housing construction programs. The GNCA would end up fighting these projects in ACAT, with each success making our public housing waiting list longer while consuming hundreds of thousands of taxpayer dollars.

I left that meeting infuriated that the self-appointed voices of our community had decided that any kind of housing that didn't meet their aesthetic preferences had to be opposed at all costs - whether developer-built apartments like my own home, private medium-density developments that wouldn't feel out of place in some of the most prestigious suburbs of other cities, or medium-density supportive housing like the home that gave my grandmother, a long-term public housing resident, independence and dignity in the final years of her life.

Canberra's NIMBY old guard include many upstanding, accomplished people who care deeply about their community. It is unfortunate that their considerable efforts in defence of RZ1 are so deeply misguided. Freezing the built form of our city in amber does not ensure that their vision of the idyllic lifestyle will be enjoyed by future Canberrans. Instead, stasis, maintained by expending huge amounts of energy to fight against economic currents that are ultimately irresistible, ensures long-term decline in living standards, greater homelessness and poverty, and environmental degradation for generations to come.

The counter-campaign in support of the Griffith manor house project, which I co-organised, made it clear that there is an alternative perspective. This campaign ultimately became Greater Canberra, and led to the establishment of the Missing Middle Canberra coalition.

Over the last decade, the vibes have shifted. The housing crisis has become impossible to ignore. The contribution of car-dependent outer suburbs to the climate crisis is being recognised. There has been a renaissance of investment in high-quality, reliable public transport infrastructure across Australia, enabled by transit-oriented development principles. Communities and governments across Australia and other parts of the world are, slowly, recognising and rectifying the damaging consequences of mid-century planning policies that left a legacy of urban sprawl and inadequate supply.

We are a city that welcomes the newcomer; a city that wants everyone, no matter their background, to have opportunities; a city that is proud of its social inclusion and its age-friendliness. The regulations that govern our city's built form, unfortunately, don't embody these values. This impacts young families forced to the urban fringe; public housing tenants living far away from jobs and opportunity; empty nesters with an excess of housing leaving their local community rather than redeveloping to age in place.

We must return to the mindset of optimism and growth that drove the initial visions for the capital of a new federation. In 1903, King O'Malley wanted "an Australian federal city that will rival London in population, Paris in beauty, Athens in culture, and Chicago in enterprise". In 2025, there may not be quite enough demand to get Canberra up to London's 9 million people. Regardless, it is clear that somewhere along the way, we became content with expensive, socially atomising and environmentally destructive urban sprawl, implementing a hollow imitation of the Griffins' plan, while simultaneously trying to lead the nation in social equality and environmental protection.

The Missing Middle Housing Reforms are not perfect. Greater Canberra's organisational submission outlines a number of issues with DPA-04 that are practical constraints on uptake and feasibility, and I endorse the technically-focused recommendations contained in that submission. Even if those recommendations are adopted, these reforms will not be the only planning reforms we need to deliver adequate housing supply.

In the years to come, high-rise and medium-rise construction, especially along major public transport corridors, will continue to expand, and we need to be ambitious as we plan for areas such as the final section of the Northern Gateway and the anticipated Southern Gateway. Local and group centres will benefit from greater flexibility in shop-top housing. We will also need to have serious discussions about how we manage land for community facilities to ensure equitable access to services as we shift to a higher-density future.

Missing Middle isn't the end, but rather an inflection point. Departing from the broken idea that 80% of our residential land must be reserved exclusively for the most expensive form of housing sets us on the path to building a better and bolder Canberra of the future: for the benefit of those who currently live here, the generations of future Canberrans to come, and every other Australian who depends on their national capital to provide services to the people and a home for our democracy.

I urge the committee to report to the Assembly as expeditiously as possible and to recommend that DPA-04 be approved.