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STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING, TRANSPORT, AND CITY SERVICES
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Planning Bill 2022

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Development In The ACT

Rod Pitcher

Submission to the Inquiry Into Planning Bill 2022.
Standing Committee on Planning, Transport and City Services

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I am unable to use a telephone due to my disability.

I request publication of my submission, including my full name, on the Committee's and any other website as required.

Development In The ACT

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Abstract

This submission discusses the environmental, social, and personal impacts, influences and results of the of increased development in urban areas and in the wider area around Canberra due to urban spread. It argues that this development needs to be curtailed, restricted, or at least better controlled, to reduce its negative effects on the environment and the people of Canberra.

Introduction

My focus in this Submission is on the impact of the resulting development on the local area where it occurs.

The EXPLANATORY STATEMENT states:

Developments must perform well in their site context. This includes consideration of built form, public spaces and interactions with surrounding blocks, amongst other planning considerations.

It is in the above context that I make this Submission.

In relation to urban settings I will consider such factors as the appearance of the new construction and how it blends in with current surroundings or clashes with them. I will also consider the environmental and social effects, and other implications relating to utilities and services in the area such as power, water, roads and open spaces.

My discussion of urban development is largely informed by my own observations and opinions of the development in my local area and conversations with other local residents.

Conversations with an architect, I will refer to as My Architectural Informant, but who declined to be further identified for professional reasons, provided some technical information.

In the development associated with the growth of the urban area I will discuss the environmental effects of covering more open land with buildings and other infrastructure such as roads, car parks and other facilities. I will consider the loss of open land for recreation and its visual relief, particularly areas of the Urban Forest, and the problems of supplying services to the wider area. My main points will relate to the environmental impact of the development.

My discussion of the effects of the urban spread is mostly based on material and opinions from a variety of relevant publically available sources and my interpretations and opinions based on that material.

Urban Development

Most of the building blocks in my area are fairly large and contain a single home with plenty of open space around it for trees and gardens. When the houses are

demolished and new homes built on the site, the developers are usually able to put two or more new residences on the block. Most of the blocks are big enough that they can be made to contain two modern houses, either side by side and extending right back to the rear of the block, or one in front of the other. Others are filled with blocks of multi-storey units or flats.

The effect of this is to fill most of the block with buildings, leaving little space for gardens with bushes and trees, and virtually nowhere for children to play safely. It can be commonly seen that there are always far fewer trees on many sites after the new building is finished than there were before the old house was demolished. This is something that needs to be controlled or stopped in the new Bill.

Instead of the pleasant appearance of a garden with flowers, shrubs and trees, all that is now visible is the front of the new house close to the street frontage, usually with little other than concrete or lawn, often artificial, to 'improve' the view.

These new homes are always built of dark coloured bricks or painted drab shades of grey and with dark grey or black roofs. This is in stark contrast to the old houses which were usually built of red or yellow brick, often with a red or green tiled roof. It is notable that many residents repaint their new homes white or other light colours, probably from personal preference. It also says a lot about the developers' observations and attitude to the buyers' preferences.

My local area used to be a suburb of families living in houses with big gardens for the children to play in. The new houses have very small gardens because the block is filled with the new buildings. Again I can repeat that little space is left for gardens with bushes and trees, and virtually nowhere for children to play safely

The increased amount of residential space on the block obviously increases the population density in the local area. This increased number of people results in more vehicles in the area and more traffic in the local streets, plus the number of vehicles entering and leaving the local area, both those of residents and of delivery services. It also requires an increased supply of utilities such as electricity and water to the local area. The end result is more load on the infrastructure and increased local pollution.

My Architectural Informant was also very critical of the design and the standard of workmanship in some of the new houses, and tended to share my concerns.

One of the most disastrous social effects of all this urban developments is that it is pushing house prices way up beyond the means of many young people wishing to start their first home.

Developers are able, and willing, to outbid anyone else interested in buying the property knowing that they can pass the extra cost onto their future buyers and thus recover their investment. This pushes up the prices of both old and new houses. Young people, considering either a new or old house, must become hesitant about taking on the burden of a much larger bank loan. If they can get one. And if they can afford the repayments.

Since people are less able to afford to buy a home of their own, they will need to rent one. The consequent increased demand for rental accommodation will, in turn, push up the cost of it. Then more people will become dependent on public housing, increasing the demand and thus costing the Government money to meet that demand. So the Government, the taxpayers, and all the other citizens of the ACT, will also benefit from stopping the rampant development.

The Wider Urban Space

The spread of Canberra's urban area out into the countryside, and even across the border into new South Wales, is removing much previously open land from public use. It is being covered by buildings, concrete, roads, and other surface contaminants, increasing the amount of pollution produced and reducing the number of parks and trees available to the public.

In particular, the removal of trees to provide building space, must become a major concern for a Government which is currently involved in developing policies to protect and enlarge the Urban Forest.

This urban spread is also going to produce more demand on utilities such as electricity and water, with the necessity of providing these utilities to many more widespread dwellings.

The total effect of all this development will be more pollution, the requirement for more infrastructure, a lessening of open space available to the public, a large reduction in the number of trees, and other undesirable negative effects on the total environment, including a large increase in Canberra's carbon footprint.

The Development Problem

Increasing development in the Territory is making homes for many new residents, but will those residents enjoy as pleasing an environment, especially the Urban Forest, as we longer-term residents?

Considering what I say above and what I have seen and read on the subject, I can only believe that future residents of the ACT will 'enjoy' (if that is the right word?) a more degraded and despoiled environment, particularly as far as the Urban Forest and their local areas are concerned, than we have now.

Any increase in the population of Canberra is always seen as economically important and thus attractive by the Government, but I must question if that economic gain is worth the degradation of the environment in which the new residents and the already established citizens will be forced to live.

The best way to give the issue of the development of housing and take-over of open land a positive answer is to reduce and better control new developments in Canberra. The results will depend on the provisions for such control and its effective application and utilization in the Planning Bill 2022 and how well the rules therein are enforced.

Canberra was once proudly known to its citizens and tourists as The Bush Capital because of its abundant open spaces and enormous number of trees. How long will we be able too rejoice in that name if developers are allowed to fill the land with buildings at the cost of reducing the number of trees and open spaces?

The way developers are destroying our environment and life-style we shall soon have to abandon that delightful description. It will no longer be appropriate to apply it to the densely built up, treeless, environmentally dead, city Canberra will have become.

Comments

If the Government is to be taken seriously in its attempts to improve the environment and life-style of the ACT by protecting and enlarging the Urban Forest and adapting other environmentally positive policies, then it must do something about the current and future damage to that environment by development gone mad.

Developers must be prevented from causing such deleterious effects as the loss of open areas and parks, and reduction in the Urban Forest, as they replace them with an ever more densely built up and polluted environment.

Conclusions

While developers are given what appears to be a 'free-hand' and allowed to build whatever they want, regardless of the resulting impact on the environment and people, the problems discussed above will continue to occur and increase. Not only must there be tighter control of what actually gets built, but much more weight must be given to the opinions and objections of local residents who will have to live with the resulting eyesores, environmental damage and other negative aspects of the developers' money-making schemes.

The ACT Government must take a more responsible and controlling stance in protecting the environment and life-style of its people from marauding developers.

This protection of the environment and life-style of the people of Canberra must be built into The Planning Act, and enforced as strongly as necessary to control the rampant, irresponsible, damaging development that is currently allowed.