



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY

FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING, TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES

Jo Clay MLA (Chair), Suzanne Orr MLA (Deputy), Mark Parton MLA

Submission No 46 -

Mr William Burmester

Inquiry into Giralang

Shops

Received - 07/04/21

Authorised - 08/04/21

Submission on Giralang shops

1 I welcome the Committees inquiry into Giralang shops.

I have been a resident of Giralang for 45 years, the last 15 of which has been without a local shopping centre.

Throughout those 15 years I have actively campaigned for the provision of local shops in the suburb, having made numerous submissions and representations to successive Chief Ministers, Planning Ministers, local representatives, and leaders of the Opposition. I have been a member and Chair of the Giralang Residents' Action Group. I believe I have a deep understanding of this issue.

For all of that 15 years the Labor Party has been in Government, and in all that time Labor Governments have failed to secure the provision of local shops in the suburb despite their claimed position that such provision has been their intention. This represents a complete failure of the successive Labor Governments, Chief Ministers and Planning Ministers. They stand condemned by their incompetence, disregard for residents and failure to respond to the situation with effective policies and interventions.

2. The inquiry should adopt a goal of identifying recommendations that will ensure the provision of local shops in Giralang as soon as is practical.

Unless the Committee adopts a specific intended outcome for the inquiry, the committee's deliberations, efforts, and work will simply continue the failings of the past. Nothing will result from the investigation, and residents will continue to be without local shops.

Plans for suburban areas inevitably include provision for local retailing. Local shops are a priority in urban planning as they provide ready access to a basic amenity of urban living, reduce reliance on polluting transport and contribute to community coherence. It would be a strange and unacceptable policy position for a government to deliberately preclude reasonable access to commercial retail outlets in a planned urban development. Yet it appears recent ACT Labor governments are unperturbed by the closure of many such facilities across Canberra and have failed to act in an effective way to avoid such occurrences.

The Committee should endeavour to identify specific policies and arrangements that will lead to the continued provision of viable local shops to Giralang and to other suburbs across Canberra currently without these amenities.

3. The committee should consider proposals on their merits in light of the prevailing evidence.

It is clear that current planning policies, settings arrangements and commercial incentives in regard to local shops are failing. If they were not, the inquiry would not be required and suburbs like Giralang would have thriving local shopping centres at the heart of their communities. There is something rotten in the system, and no amount of political dodging and weaving will correct it. That has been the pattern of the last several Labor governments, and no resolution has been achieved.

I am concerned that, in some way, blame for the continuing imbroglio will be apportioned to the owners of the lease for Giralang shops, and that the Developer will be held responsible for the failure to rebuild the shops as a going concern. Finding a convenient scapegoat does not represent a solution to the issue – it just perpetuates it.

In seeking to achieve the above identified goal for the inquiry, there is no benefit in the Committee pursuing such matters as, at the end of the day, the provision of local shops will involve someone holding the lease, and those persons pursuing their commercial interests.

The committee needs to focus on the evidence of why some local centres thrive, and others are unable to secure the conditions in which to do so.

4 Evidence abounds of both successful and unsuccessful local shopping centres across Canberra.

The committee should seek evidence more broadly to establish the conditions and combination of factors that allow some local shopping centres to thrive, and ensure that such conditions can be established, fostered, and maintained in Giralang and other such suburbs.

I will limit myself to one example relevant to Giralang. The suburb of Crace is in close proximity to Giralang, located just across the Barton Highway, is similar in size to Giralang and has been established in the time since the Giralang shops closed. Yet, unlike Giralang it has established a successful local shopping centre in the last 15 years while Giralang has not.

One of the key differences between the conditions existing in Crace and those faced by Giralang is the imposition of an arbitrary 1000 square meter limit on the size of a supermarket in Giralang, and the waiver of such a restriction in Crace. Over those 15 years other local shopping centres have also been established without such restrictions (eg Bonner, Denman Prospect) and have thrived while others subject to the restriction (eg Coombs) have foundered.

No cogent explanation has emerged as to why different suburbs have faced different levels of restriction. The arbitrary 1000 square meter rule emerged as part of the then Chief Minister John Stanhope's forlorn and failed assault on the domination of Woolworths and Coles in grocery retailing in Canberra. (This policy was such a failure that in the last 15 years Coles took over the independent supermarket in Kaleen that adjoins Giralang!)

It was always fanciful to think that so called "grocery competition policy" settings from the Stanhope government in Canberra would unsettle national commercial dynamics, and this has proved to be the case. In fact, Canberrans holidaying on the coast see more Aldi outlets than have emerged in Canberra under this Labor policy despite this being heralded as one of the intentions of the Stanhope, and subsequent Labor government, policy stand.

5. If policies do not achieve their intended outcomes, or have a detrimental impact, they should be changed.

Despite the obvious failure of this particular policy stance, for some unfathomable reason, successive Labor Governments have continued to champion it, hold on to it and insist on its merits. This continued adherence to failure begs the question of what is behind the Labor Government's stance. And why do the Greens, who should seriously question the unnecessary carbon burden arising from lack of local shops, not challenge it.

Obstinacy and blind adherence to ideological positions should not be the hall mark of a government, yet nothing seems to shake Labor's position on this front.

It is remarkable that the chief instigator of the petition on Giralang shops which lead to this inquiry is a Government backbencher. Should not the government heed the concerns of its own members? Perhaps this is one reason why in the recent election the Labor Party failed to capitalise on its expected popularity at the height of the pandemic, while the Greens significantly increased their representation. Is there an electoral message the Barr government is ignoring at their peril?

What was not so remarkable in the instigation of the petition by a Labor backbencher was the clear inference that the Giralang debacle was the result of some failure by the Lease-holder. It is a strange presumption that a property developer would not follow his own commercial interests in this matter, and that despite considerable efforts by the developer to keep the community informed, to be accused of lack of candour. His message has been very clear – the limit of 1000 square meters on the proposed supermarket has meant he cannot attract an anchor tenant. It's that simple.

The premise of the petition was an invitation by the Labor member to pose questions about the shops that could be asked of the developer. There was no invitation to similarly ask the Minister questions of concern to the residents.

However, this inquiry provides an opportunity for such an examination. And the question the Committee really needs to investigate is not what the developer might or might not do, but what can the Minister and the government do to put in place planning provisions that ensure all suburbs can have a thriving local shopping precinct at the heart of their community.

William Peter Burmester

