



LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT, CLIMATE CHANGE AND BIODIVERSITY
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Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Environmental Volunteerism in the ACT

Submission Number: 8

Date Authorised for Publication: 8 March 2022



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COVERING PAGE, SCULLIN, WEETANGERA AND HAWKER

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24 February 2022

INQUIRY INTO ENVIRONMENTAL VOLUNTEERISM

Thank you for the invitation to contribute to this inquiry. The Friends of Hawker Village (FoHV) was formed in 2010 to monitor proposals to redevelop the Hawker Village shopping centre and its catchment suburbs of Hawker, Page, Scullin and Weetangera, and to engage the community in this process. The current inquiry focusses on the type and nature of volunteerism in the environment sector in the ACT. We wish to focus on natural environment issues within the suburbs and the types of volunteering that occur or could occur.

Background

Our suburbs about the Canberra Nature Park on the south in which the volunteer members of the Friends of the Pinnacle care for the area known as The Pinnacle Nature Reserve behind Hawker. Within our suburbs, there are major public areas that are grassed and contain many trees. These include the District Playing Fields in Hawker and local playing fields in the other suburbs as well as smaller open areas, mainly where natural conditions make building undesirable. These often have a small playground, frequently containing only swings, in addition to grass and trees. These are maintained by the ACT Government.

Traditionally, care of the publicly-owned nature strips in front of residential blocks has been devolved to the residents. Unfortunately, the standard of care has gradually declined over recent decades. Further, the continual growth of our city's population has required alienation of green space for housing and other services. The alternative is densification of existing urban areas. Both options lead to a reduction in the existing greenery at a time when more is needed for an adequate response to climate change and to control the heat island effect.

Public vs private areas

The playing fields themselves are maintained but the areas and paths around them have not been well-maintained over recent decades, resulting in a takeover by non-native weed species.

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The current wet season is an extreme example but the problem is systemic. Some solution needs to be found to cater for the work load involved in controlling the many open spaces that make our suburbs a delight and provide some space for various native species of plants and animals, especially birds.

One example of the smaller parks is that located at the junction of Woolner and Ambalindum Streets with Erldunda Circuit in Hawker. A local resident has organized a small group of people to plant more vegetation around the swings in this area to make it more attractive. As well, the group has approval to plant a garden in the only grassy area at the Hawker shops. Both of these endeavours are being supported by the ACT Government in providing plants, permits for public meetings etc. It is important that volunteers continue to manage these garden areas into the future. The incentive to do so needs to be maintained.

Community Stewardship

There are both public and private areas that contribute to the environment sector. The private areas include backyards and front yards where residents plant and care for a variety of shrubs and trees. These attract an extensive range of birds during the year, many of which are fed and watered by the residents during times of drought.

Photograph below taken in Hawker

These green areas are needed both to assist native species and to offset the heat island effect of densely-developed areas where hard surfaces cover most of the ground, leaving inadequate space for greenery. DV 369 to the Territory Plan is an attempt to improve this. Unfortunately, there will be steady loss of backyards, like the example on the right, and careful consideration needs to be given to retaining as much space as necessary and to ensuring that the space is cared for appropriately.



New suburbs have little space for useful gardens and, therefore, do not encourage the planting and maintenance of grass, trees and shrubs. Our older suburbs need to engage in productive use of their open space for the benefit of all to offset climate change.

Photograph: Shutterstock



A major concern these days is the degraded state of many verges. These are also called nature strips but many now fail to qualify for this title as they are bereft of greenery and generally used for parking, even of shipping containers that stay for years and become surrounded by weeds. Shipping containers are only permitted on a short-term basis but this is not policed. Likewise, parking on nature strips is illegal but is not policed unless it poses a hazard of some kind. This leads to a loss of the street tree in many locations.



The above photograph shows bare nature strips with dirt patches obviously caused by vehicles

This neglect of 'nature' strips and the increasing number of vehicles per block has become significant over the years, with work vehicles routinely parked on many front yards and nature strips, causing much degradation of the areas. These vehicles include very large ones, such as tow trucks and this cement truck (below).



Photograph taken in Scullin

In 2019, the ACT Government introduced guidelines for planting of nature strips by the resident/owner. Since then, some residents have planted the entire nature strip so that people are forced to walk on the road where there is no paved footpath, even when there is traffic around. Also, plantings close to the footpath tend to block vision for traffic, especially near corners.

Many residents have simply replaced grass with gravel over the entire nature strip without any plantings whatsoever. Even where it complies with the 50% limit, most gravel has no edging to contain it and is particularly problematic as the gravel tends to drift onto footpaths and thence into the gutter. From there, it ends up in the storm water system. This is especially so where cars drive over the nature strip.

Weeds also grow in the gravel and are neglected by residents who do not appreciate the overall negative effect, including on water quality as well as the potential for walkers to slip on the gravel.

Obviously, many residents do not fully understand the limits to planting and the need to provide space for pedestrians. Local residents might be critical but need some support in highlighting the problems without alienating their neighbours.

Photograph taken from bus stop in Hawker



Our suburbs are blessed with many footpaths that cut between blocks, facilitating cross-suburb walking. These paths tend to be narrow areas with a small strip of grass on either side of the path. These generally become unkempt and weedy. A few adjacent residents treat the path like their nature strip and mow it, even planting flowers and shrubs in some locations. The majority, however, do not accept any responsibility for helping to maintain these paths. Overall, there has been a great loss in the maintenance of these paths, as with nature strips, largely following the increase in water charges during and following the Millennial Drought.

This might not seem relevant to the inquiry but our concern is that we need to keep our suburbs green and weed free, with trees, sufficient to combat the heat island effect and consequent increasing world temperatures. Residents are the most affected and most likely to be inspired to assist in maintaining the quality of their suburb.

Photograph taken in Page

Suggestions:

Some ongoing publicity is needed to educate community members that maintaining an environmentally-appropriate yard and nature strip is essential for our future and not just for the personal satisfaction of gardening enthusiasts. Ultimately, densification is also necessary because of increasing population. It is critical, therefore, that residents are encouraged to “volunteer” by maintaining their property’s open space, including their verge, in such a manner that supports our local wildlife and offsets potential warming of the micro-climate.

At present, individuals can apply to develop their nature strip but it is likely that many are not aware that they need to do so, given the observed lack of compliance with the guidelines for nature strips. Furthermore, many residents are unaware of the Urban Parks and Volunteer Groups that already exist or could exist under current provisions. Many individuals might be inspired to join an existing group or create a new one if they were aware of this possibility.

Many interested residents could be deterred from caring for public land by the modern inclination to sue people when someone trips or otherwise injures themselves because of actions other people have taken on public land. Groups have the advantage of incorporating, which means the body corporate carries any responsibility, not the individuals. Residents can be encouraged to take more care of nearby public lands only if they feel protected and that their actions are approved. Ideally, such concerned residents should be able to operate independently under the banner of some generalised 'group' arrangement.

FoHV would like to see more publicity around these issues with a view to assisting residents to participate in caring for our green spaces.