

Standing Committee on Planning, Public Works and Territory and Municipal Services
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Dear Committee Members,

Reference Rz3 and Rz4 Residential Redevelopment Policies—Inner North Canberra Plus other Issues

In reference to your study of development policies as they relate to the RZ3 and RZ4 zones of North Canberra along the Northbourne Ave corridor and other transport corridors, I wish to offer my thoughts to these as well as other matters.

I am of the strong conviction that planning should be undertaken for the benefit of the community, especially its citizens who vote and pay taxes. Other consideration must be secondary. The latter must include the thoughts of planning lobbyists, building groups and developers.

Many developers have a well know reputation for trying to squeeze the maximum yield, and thus profit from any development. They push the boundaries and in this process push ACTPLA. And through this process we see development creep occurring - and with what we thought was a nice environment becomes dotted with higher and more dense structures. Adjacent areas to such locations fall under that influence.

Hence you see the submission by Avigail Abarbanel and Ian Barnes for relaxation of the development rules for their RZ4 area in Lyneham. I sympathise with them and hope that any changes will satisfy them without allowing for “development creep” to further ensue on adjacent areas.

I do not wish to appear as a simple NIMBY, but one seeking to protect our quality of life whilst allowing sensible development. Many European circumstances associated with a denser city were mentioned in your recent Draft Variation to the Territory Plan No. 288 relevant to Lyons.

Whilst this is true in some situations where many Europeans live in 3-5 stories buildings, just as many live in single or two storey quaint old villages. Such people and their councils go to great lengths to protect and maintain such villages.

We should consider Canberra a more provincial city state with strong rural attributes – we are close to the country and 45% of the territory is in Namadji National Park, more with the urban parks included. Our lifestyle is unique in Australia with a mixture of a medium density city scape and lower density suburban lifestyle. There is some of course high density (and very expensive) living now in Civic.

What makes my opinions of any value? I was brought up in Sydney, lived in the suburbs in a house and later a flat, worked in the CBD in multi-storey buildings, did the same in Melbourne and London, travelled all over western Europe, saw the horrible messy apartment buildings of Israel, Damascus and Baghdad. I have travelled further through SE Asia as well as India. I also travelled around Australia and have seen its vast spaces – something most

planners do not seem to appreciate well – and something that needs thinking about for Canberra – i.e. do we need mini-Canberras close by in NSW linked by fast transports rather than massive high rise and high density in Canberra itself. Also the vast areas provide more focus on how much land there is and how little it is used. We clearly have a problem of too many people living in too few metropolitan centres. This is further exacerbated by high immigration and activities like the live in Canberra campaign.

RZ3 and RZ4 Inner North Canberra

The RZ3 and RZ4 zones along both sides of Northbourne are becoming outdated and some development is clearly needed. I would suggest we do not need any more high density structures but more medium density or 2-4 storeys interspersed with reasonable open space.

I think its time that any decisions on new heights and densities ensured adequate open space and parking. There is nothing worse than apartments packed side by side with no parking and every bit of street space occupied by cars. This is the heritage in inner Sydney and Melbourne. We don't need that!

Densification Along Main Transport Corridors and In Town Centres

There is a case for some densification along major transport corridors but I feel it should be limited to 2-4 storey, except in certain locations like Town Centres which could accommodate 4-6 storey and some 8-10 storey structures where appropriate. I cannot see any justification for 18 storeys or similar. The property council would disagree and say what the heck it's just a town centre! And therein lies a problem! Such centres are the central cultural core of our dispersed city concept. We need access to it in a timely and easy fashion. Over development makes this just so much harder. Extremely tall buildings create massive shadows and wind tunnel effects.

In all such situations there needs to be some understanding of the features of the area and some limitation based on Relative Levels and tree heights.

The NCA probably got it right in their review of the Cameron Building site in Belconnen where they limited development to the existing height along Cameron St Belconnen, which allowed 8-9 storeys at Benjamin St side and 2-3 storeys less at the Cameron St side, maintaining a standard building height. If you cycle around Lake Ginninderra and look south at Belconnen Town Centre you can actually see the consistency of height across the higher buildings.

The decision to allow some buildings of 18 stories in Belconnen (i.e. the Chandler St tower next to the Labor Club) is contrary to the good governance shown by the NCA plans. It's very much an abuse of its position by ACTPA on the Government decision to densify Belconnen town centre with a massive building totally out of character with the area and the skyline.

It is interesting that in its decision to allow the Belconnen Arts Centre, ACTPLA stated how Arts Centre fits into viewscape and general environment but didn't do the same for 18 storey complex. This shows its inconsistency between these two developments.

Natural Features Need Protection (i.e. Hills, Lakes)

All buildings and structures should be planned and built so they fit in with their surrounding environment and in particular the natural features such as lakes and hills.

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In this regard the planning of Lawson South allowing 4-6 storey apartments along lake foreshores is invalid.

I would like to suggest changes that will improve this plan. The heavy emphasise on high density to 6 storeys has not been justified. Especially close to the lake foreshore it doesn't make sense. It might make sense if you look at the other developments around Belconnen but none are that close to the lake. Also it would create a barrier between the rest of the suburb and the lake.

Similarly the same issues will become apparent with skyline at Belconnen if 18 storey buildings are constructed near the Labor Club.

Better Suburban Design Concepts

We clearly need better design of larger areas so things are clustered more efficiently. For example several suburbs or estates clustered around a central centre where more Government, health and education facilities would be provided. We now seem to design suburbs one at a time, each competing to be a better design, but not designing them as an integrated solution. Thus our services are fragmented and uncoordinated.

Such an integrated planning concept would provide for better designed clusters of suburbs allowing more cycling/walking to local central facilities.

Combined with mainly 1-2 storey limits and not over densified, these would be very desirable places to live and something we could be proud of. I recently saw a brochure proclaiming the features of a future "Springbank Rise" estate in Casey. By itself it was nice, but combined with multiple similar estates all linked by better roads and paths to a central core would be a perfect example of better co-ordinated designs. It had an oval, a lake, a village green and small community facilities.

ACTPLA Processes

The processes ACTPLA works under are inappropriate.

ACTPLA proposes plans, amends plans and then approves them. Although significant Territory plan approvals may be done at a Legislative level.

ACTPLA works with developers to undertake DA's.

ACTPLA analyses objections or queries and makes decisions.

Rarely does it accept objections to say height limits as the DA is usually undertaken according to the zone plan.

The whole process is riddled with a conflict of interest. The same could of course be said of councils in the States.

We need an independent arrangement made up of Government and rotating community representatives to approval significant developments and rezonings. I can't see nay other way to make things more independent and democratic.

ACTPLA says of the ACT Arts building right on Lake Ginninderra that it is a nice structure and will fit into the architectural environment of the area.

Yet it permits 18 storey buildings near the Labor Club and 6 storey building next to Lake Ginninderra at Lawson which clearly do not meet the same standards they thought were beneficial of the Arts Centre. It's clear they are not serious about such matters.

Lawson South

The new Lawson South plans 4-6 stories building along lake foreshores. This is code for 6 storeys. In previous building around the lake, 4-6 storey buildings have been set back, and the new retirement village has its taller building set back next to the road.

So why is it acceptable in Lawson to put 6 storey structures right adjacent to the lake? This seems like incredible poor planning ignoring features and surrounding residents. Maybe as there are no existing residents ACTPA thinks no one will object.

Lawson South needs planning as a total package with the whole of Lawson as well as how it fits into the whole of Belconnen.

Conclusions

I hope I have given some cogent thoughts and given you a feeling that many Canberrans are not satisfied with the over densification simply because some say it's required.

Of all the countries on earth Australia has the land. We don't need massive high density.

Most blocks sold to people are now more like 1/8 of an acre rather than the often quoted 1/4 of an acre. So that myth is well and truly dead.

There is a clear need for normal, low cost and elderly style accommodation. There is some need for apartments closer to the City Centre, but overall the vast majority of residents clearly want to live in normal detached houses in the 1-2 storey category. To deny this is not to be listening to the people. When I went and visited a new house at Gungahlin, on 23rd October, discussing with the new owner, I was surprised to see how many people were in fact building single storey houses. They still seem very common even on smaller blocks.

The Variation to the Territory Plan No. 288 allowed for higher densities to 6 stories in areas where this is appropriate. This is inconsistent with much of what I have written and what Canberrans want. This needs to be reconsidered. It's already being seen as the source of issues with Lawson South.

Overall high rise doesn't really work in a "bush city", especially for the families, the core of our society. It's a social turnoff and stops people having their own trees, vegetable patches or their own water systems. Properly designed houses can become more sustainable whilst I believe apartment buildings will struggle as people in such structures can't really own the common infrastructure. Such structures might make some infrastructure aspects look cheaper but at the cost of more expensive buildings, lift costs and social issues. Even in your terms of reference in point 4) it clearly intimates that higher density development might have an "impact on the amenity enjoyed by residents of the areas". If you ever lived in multi-storey flats you would know the problems are not worth it.

More recently people in the north of Sydney are starting to rise up and protest about over development with high rise in their areas.

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One should treat the comments of developers, architects and their associations with some suspicion. It's clearly in their interests to have more dense structures as these generate more technical work, more yield and thus more profit.-

In summary:

1. we need a mixture of normal 1 and 2 storey detached housing on reasonable blocks (500-600 sq metres minimum);
2. we need low height low cost housing for those who can not afford larger places as well as older people;
3. we need some low height medium density housing, for those who do not require much in the way of gardens;
4. we can accommodate higher density around town centres such as the 4-6 and 8-10 storey type of construction located appropriately and matched to the terrain;
5. and we can accommodate some 2-4 storey type construction along transport corridors with special zone along Northbourne and surrounding areas

However any designs need to be integrated into whole of town areas or groups of suburbs rather than the estate and suburb approach so common to date. Even Latham South seems alien and out of synchronism with much of the surrounding suburbs because it's not integrated into the whole of Belconnen.

Regards,

Greg Hutchison
24th October 2009