



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

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STANDING COMMITTEE ON HEALTH AND COMMUNITY WELLBEING  
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## Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into West Belconnen  
supercell thunderstorm

**Submission Number: 019**

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## **Inquiry into the West Belconnen supercell thunderstorm**

### **BCC Submission**

Belconnen Community Council is a not for profit, government-funded community advocacy group who represent the interests of our members and the community to the ACT Government on a range of matters affecting people who live, work and play in the Belconnen District. As the voice of Belconnen for over two decades, and with over 100,000 people in our catchment, we are intimately engaged with processes both good and bad, and uniquely positioned to offer observations on what works for all sides of the channels we engage with.

While we can never completely rule out the likelihood that similar storms will be few and far between, we cannot support the terminology being proffered by some politicians in Australia about them being “1 in xxx year events”. This is flawed thinking as the model being quoted speaks to likelihood of it repeating, not a point in time occurrence that can be dismissed. The facts are that such weather events are becoming more commonplace and harder to predict the intensity with which they strike our neighbourhoods; the latest UN IPCC report tells us that we are failing to build our towns and cities in a more sustainable way given the man made threats we face across the world.

The ACT is the most progressive and environmentally conscious jurisdiction in the country. We have some of the best environmental policies and practices across the country, but while the focus has been on response, it is clear we need to be even more engaged on recovery and resilience.

From the recovery aspect, we then need to plan for mitigation strategies which reduce the incidence of loss of life, property and security (food ,water and access to electricity). This must include planning outcomes that similarly reduce exposure to the effects of severe weather events and prepare people for appropriate protection, evacuation and recovery practices. This is the disaster lifecycle in its most basic state and one we must challenge with every new event we encounter.

For the resilience aspect, we need to put in place measures that will help the community to manage when access to normal community functioning is disrupted by an emergency event. In particular, when access to utility supply is disrupted for an extended period. We cannot continue to expect households to fend for themselves for extended periods when severe weather events are occurring more frequently at the same time as more individuals and households in our community are living with social isolation and without traditional social support structures.

People rely on governments to provide the basics when all other hope is removed: shelter, food, protection and dignity. It's the reason we pay taxes, rates and excises to ensure the common



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wealth is sustained and maintained; we encourage this government to continue to meet those reasonable expectations without fear, favour or political opportunity.

We have been invited to provide input and feedback to this Inquiry and thank the Assembly for providing a channel to do so. Our contribution will address each of the 10 terms set out in the Inquiry's ToR in a concise manner which sets the expectations of the people of the Belconnen District as expressed to us over the weeks since the storm hit.

***a) the recovery following the recent storms;***

A simple drive around our suburbs will demonstrate the ferocity and breadth of the storm; many homes still bear tarps and temporary fixtures while awaiting repairs from insurers and trades people. There are still many trees and piles of debris yet to be removed from their current locations. The scar on the Magpies Golf Club and homes within the Woodhaven Green estate bear direct testament to the horror of that day. Trees still broken and yet to be attended to litter the area and the risk to residents and golfers alike is only mitigated by tape barriers and teeing areas moved away from danger. This is true in Holt, Macgregor, Flynn, Latham and Mackellar. The loss of electricity in our suburbs for up to 7 days was even more devastating; but people across the district pitched in to help each other out and bring fresh supplies to compensate for the loss of goods when fridges and freezers went down. There were stories shared of neighbours washing clothes and providing hot baths and showers for those whose power could not be restored quickly; even family pets were being bathed by the neighbourhood! Some folks banded together to cut fallen trees from driveways, paths and off streets to allow for crews to have access to damaged cars and homes in the hours immediately after the storm. This is the enduring story of the people of Belconnen at their best; standing shoulder to shoulder with their mates and their neighbours to share the load and reduce the angst in a time of need. At the same time, we note that there are also members of our community who are less visible and who do not have the support of family, friends, or neighbours. These are the members of our community who must be supported by a government safety net of support services, which we will suggest later.

Recovery itself has been slow, but the resilience most of us have learned through COVID stood us in good stead and taught us patience in the face of adversity. Many households are still to have all the damage repaired, but we are not hearing that there are any yet to be assessed. While the physical scars have healed, it's the emotional ones that are yet to be conquered in their entirety and many of those affected are fearful of the next major event.

What is noticeable are the number of people changing their daily walking and exercise habits as a result of the storm damage. While many decisions are enforced by debris or yet to be treated risks, many more are by choice. Most people are choosing to actively travel past their neighbours damaged properties not to rubberneck, but to assess progress against other properties under



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repair. When I asked them the reasons, their responses were almost identical; “if it could happen to them we want to be prepared for when (not if) it happens to us”. Residents are no longer questioning chance; they are firmly assessing risk and planning for it.

**b) the appropriateness of the communication strategies used to reach out to those affected;**

While generally most people didn't have an answer to this question, the response is “how do we measure appropriateness?”

People who were here in the district during the last major natural disaster (2003 bushfires), the subsequent smoke inundation in late December 2019/early January 2020, the hailstorm of late January 2020 and then Covid, all have a similar story. There was confusion over which channels have primacy and for what circumstances.

We believe the pathway to identifying the “appropriate channels” for communication needs to start with a common channel almost everyone has; a smart device. While applications are very good at harmonising information (the CBR Check In app is a great example), education on how to access and use the application is vital in ensuring people know what to do and how to do it. The second part is to use traditional phone channels and coordinate them from a central call centre. In years past, the response network was coordinated via the AFP's ACT Police call centre but this Council is unaware of how those arrangements now operate. Regardless of which channel a member of the public engages with the ACT Government, there needs to be one group in charge of assessing, prioritising, coordinating responses and then following up with them as a welfare check in process.

What we heard from a number of people was their frustration at not know when someone would get to them. They would ring either the SES, ACT Police, 000 or Access Canberra, be triaged through to another agency where their details were taken and as two residents from Holt told us “left to sit in the dark not knowing what our fate was going to be”. That is not acceptable in 2022, but as we have seen with the Northern Rivers floods, an unfortunate sign of a lack of preparedness and commitments by governments to be “disaster fit”.

**c) the service delivery options of various agencies throughout the storm period and in the weeks afterwards, to repair, redress and clean up the storm debris and support the community in these matters;**

Again, what are the measures of success and failure if we as a community don't understand or have access to the metrics?

**Clean up** - While everyone understands the limited nature of resources in the Territory which can be readily diverted to assist agencies with a response to affected members of our community, there must be better contingency identified, trained up and available in these times of crisis.



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There were many qualified members of the community who (where safe to do so) started clearing debris within minutes of the cell passing. I saw this first hand in suburbs like Weetangera, Page, Scullin and Holt; qualified arborists and trades people pooling resources to clear roadways, paths and driveways so emergency services could get access to damaged property and infrastructure.

If we knew what the metrics were around crews, timings, secondary responders and the like, this community could have been better prepared and able to recover more quickly and provide neighbourhood based assistance to those in need.

**Power restoration** - We have former members of our Committee who were without power for nearly a week, unable to get definitive updates from the service providers on when they could expect to have electricity returned to their properties so they could start the recovery process. These issues should and must be more clearly defined and articulated through Service Level Agreements and remedy clauses.

**Provision of alternative power access during extended outages** – Becoming resilient as a community involves having ways in place for the community to maintain life essentials during periods of disruption to ‘business as usual’ approaches. There are multiple things the ACT Government can and should implement to increase the resilience of our community in the face of increasing fires, storms and other emergencies.

This storm resulted in dozens of households being left without power for extended periods. Increasing numbers of people do not have family and friends that they can call upon in such situations, which increases the need for the Government to provide such support. This can be achieved relatively easily by making designated community facilities available in such situations for community members to use. For example, if the number of affected households in a given suburb met a certain threshold, eg over 25 households, a local community hall or school hall could be made available for residents to come during specific access hours to charge their phones, laptops or any other critical tool to maintain their life while their home was without power.

This is simply an extension of the principles already put in place by the ACT Government after the 2019 bushfire smoke impacts, where community facilities have been designated as areas of safe haven where residents can go if they are unable to stay in their homes due to the effects of a fire/smoke emergency.

### **d) the social, emotional and financial costs of those who have experienced storm damage;**

The financial costs are many and varied depending on what type of insurance cover, availability of finances, and in many cases the capability to recover and continue in your residence/business premises. The number of people who have commented that they just didn’t have the ability to pay for the level of insurance required and certainly don’t have money in the bank to pay for those matters not covered, was substantial. This is an education process, in our view, for the ACT



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Government and insurance companies to engage the community in. If we can do it with motor vehicle 3<sup>rd</sup> Party insurance premiums, let's look at how we can do it better for storm damage. And a quick shout out to Suncorp who reached out the day after the storm to get a sense of the situation and identify locations within this district where they might have been able to set up "pop up" stalls for affected customers. They were the ONLY company to do so, and if we are to address the financial and emotional burden on affected members of this community, that thinking and action must be encouraged.

The emotional damage is still yet to be fully realised, and in real terms may never be. Much like the 2003 bushfires, some people's confidence is beyond a level of sustainable resilience; so much so that selling up and leaving is the only way for them to cope. While those numbers are low, they are very real nonetheless for the family members, their friends and employers/customers/clients affected by their decision to relocate.

Most of the angst was driven by the uncertainty in response times to either treat risks or repair damage. Can the government through its agencies do more to reduce that emotional burden? Of course, but what would be more helpful, again, is visibility of capability, responsibility and response times to the community. Failing to properly prepare always results in failure.

The social cost is already significant. While local neighbourhoods engaged with each other in more meaningful way, the informal communities of practice that have emerged is telling for our district. Recovery stories are shared and many focus on the negatives in front of family members and friends who are not yet ready to deal with reliving their experiences. These moments need to be teased out with suitably qualified professionals in safe environments rather than informal settings which may provide further risk to the affected individuals. There are many channels to manage this and we believe the ACT Government can play an active role by adopting the same model many employers do to assist with emotional health and wellbeing; provide anyone who identifies with 4-6 free counselling sessions to assist them toward regaining their confidence and building resilience for future adversity.

### **e) the lessons for the ACT Government, and other agencies, in:**

#### **i) recovery and the necessary steps for subsequent clean ups;**

The lessons are there for agencies to build and the relevant ministers to enable through appropriate legislative controls. We have already mentioned where we see the best outcomes, key to that being:

- a smart device application that provides the community with real time information and channels for assistance with a single touch option
- consolidation of ABC local radio as the default channel for radio announcements in emergency situations. This multi-channel communications approach ensures that smart phones are not the only communications channel, given the difficulty of keeping



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phones charged during periods of extended power outages. (The experiences of south coast residents during the 2019 black summer provide examples of how extended power outages can negatively impact phone and website reliant communications.

- a central coordinating call centre to triage response, such as an enhanced and supplemented team at Access Canberra
- community education for any new processes implemented

**ii) resilience - considering the future community need for services provided in the immediate aftermath of a storm or emergency event;**

- Provision of alternative power access during extended outages by creating 'safe havens' at community halls or school halls for residents to access power to charge up their essential devices

This needs to be consulted widely across the community by ACT Emergency Services, Transport Canberra and City Services and the Chief Executive Officer of the ACT Government. Coordination of services is a key factor to community health and wellbeing throughout a disaster and the recovery phase. Identifying who has primacy for each phase and overall governance must be clearly defined and agreed on by all the parties, and implemented in a way that is transparent and has widely supported accountability controls.

**iii) considering what should be in place to enable social recovery following such events;**

As above, the same process must be followed if there is to be confidence and assurance regardless of what role you play. Services almost always resolve around social need; we see this as being fundamental to any recovery process.

**f) the value of establishing, and possible roles of, a further tier of support to help with the clear up of storm damage, once the immediate emergency is over; and**

As with e)ii, we do not wish to propose a structure that is preclusive of other community ideas; what we want to see is a round table discussion that can tease out all the aspects and not rely solely on "an examination of the the papers". But those central principles apply regardless. Do we need another layer of administration or "support", or do we just need to properly reorganise and fund existing agencies to provide those services once the storm has passed? We'd like to hear from the people at the coal face on what they believe they can achieve with the appropriate level of support before we form a view either way.

**g) any other matter the Committee considers relevant**



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We note that there is no ToR section where consideration of the impacts on the natural environment can be considered.

The super-cell storms in recent years in inner Canberra and now Belconnen have significantly damaged our natural environment and the animals that live in them. This needs to be considered in any storm response plans.

The storm in Belconnen resulted in hundreds of trees being blown down or subsequently felled due to severe damage. This is a significant reduction to the urban tree canopy and the habitat of our urban wildlife. This warrants attention to ensure the health and resilience of our natural environment as our climate warms and storms become more frequent.

To this end, part of the Government's storm recovery and resilience plans must involve the establishment of processes to identify where trees have been lost so that they can be replaced through the TCCS Urban Tree Planting Program. This could be implemented by simply advertising for residents to suggest where trees can be replaced by using Fix My Street.

We note that some residents are becoming wary of native trees because of the impacts of dropping branches or trees being blown over during storms. Replacing these with non-native trees is not the answer as non-native trees provide no food or habitat benefits to native birds, insects or mammals. Trees could be replaced without incurring the ire of residents if the ACT Government expanded its range of street trees to include smaller native trees (5-10 metres) that do not pose a risk in storms yet do provide food and habitat to urban wildlife. The range of smaller cultivars of native trees is extensive yet the Government appears to not be currently utilising this option in its tree planting programs.

The storm also delivered injuries to hundreds of birds and mammals. Veterinary clinics and wildlife organisations across the region were inundated with injured birds, bats and other animals which received broken bones due to the impact of large hailstones. Euthanasia was generally the only option due to the number of injured animals and the nature of the injuries. Consideration should be given to the provision of Government grants for these organisations to be able to apply for financial support/reimbursement due to the increased costs of staffing and medications in these influx periods.

We would also ask the Inquiry Committee to recommend the ongoing use of 666 ABC Canberra as the free to air radio channel to keep the public informed during these times of crisis. They have proven their worth time and time again and with experienced producers and on air staff who understand this community, we think the value they add is without peer.





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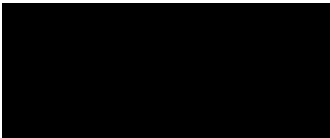
### Summary

Belconnen Community Council stands ready to assist the community, the ACT Government and their agencies through community consultation and information dissemination. We have much experience in our Committee and amongst our membership with these matters and believe we can add value to any process conducted to improve services and support during times of disaster.


Again, we look to provide further input to these processes once a fulsome community engagement is undertaken by the government and its agencies in the months ahead and urge this inquiry to make recommendations that promote inclusive consultation with this community, access to engagement by government and its agencies, provide transparency and accountability in any process going forward, and provide confidence and assurance for the people of the Belconnen District.

We thank you for the opportunity to participate in this inquiry.

Kind regards,



Glen Hyde  
Chair  
Belconnen Community Council  
25 April 2022

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M: 