



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY**  
FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

---

STANDING COMMITTEE ON ENVIRONMENT AND TRANSPORT AND CITY SERVICES

Ms Suzanne Orr MLA (Chair), Miss Candice Burch MLA (Deputy Chair)

Ms Tara Cheyne MLA, Ms Nicole Lawder MLA

## Submission Cover Sheet

### Nature in Our City

**Submission Number: 33**

**Date Authorised for Publication: 8 August 2018**



Covering  
Page  
Scullin  
Weetangera  
Hawker



Committee Secretary,  
Standing Committee on Environment and Transport and City Services,  
Legislative Assembly for the ACT,  
GPO Box 1020,  
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Email: [LACommitteeETCS@parliament.act.gov.au](mailto:LACommitteeETCS@parliament.act.gov.au)

## INQUIRY INTO NATURE IN OUR CITY

### Current situation

1. The Friends of Hawker Village Incorporated (FoHV) welcome the opportunity to contribute to this discussion and wish to comment from our experience as residents of local suburbs created from 1968. These suburbs – Hawker, Page, Scullin and Weetangera – largely comprise single dwelling blocks of varying size with moderate-sized houses with gardens and shade trees. They also contain townhouse developments, flats and retirement villages in designated areas, all with garden space.
2. Many residents have come to Canberra from other large cities in Australia. These are all located on the coastline and mainly at or near sea level. Consequently, their climate is different from that of Canberra which is located 100 km inland and at an altitude over 565 metres above sea level. Coastal cities benefit from the ameliorating effect of the large ocean body which takes longer to heat up and cool down than does air. The ocean also creates more humid air which reduces the impact of sunshine. Canberra, therefore is hotter in summer, cooler in winter and has lower humidity than other large cities in Australia. Our skies are clearer and solar access is a more significant factor than in coastal cities where shading from tall buildings has less impact.
3. The type of building and town development that is typical of coastal cities is, therefore, not necessarily suitable for Canberra and other inland towns. Shade from summer sun and warmth from winter sun are much more important in Canberra than along the coast. The development of our suburbs reflects this reality. Having blocks large enough to accommodate large trees allows shading of windows and roofs in summertime. Having blocks large enough to ensure neighbouring buildings do not block winter sunshine is an important element in reducing heating costs in winter and has been a major factor behind the design of large windows.
4. The current densification provisions, especially in RZ2 areas, creates tension in the affected areas because they are reducing neighbourhood amenity through loss of garden space, shade trees and solar access along with increased coverage of the ground by hard surfaces. In our town centre, tall buildings no longer have any green space around them and the public footpath only has room for small trees whose sole function is decorative rather than practical. This greater land coverage by hard surfaces increases both runoff and temperatures (the heat island effect) and reduces the presence of wildlife.

5. In her Statement, the Committee Chair, Suzanne Orr observed that,

In years gone by, maintaining a natural environment within our city boundaries has been made easier by the small population to land space ratio.

But, as we know, Canberra is growing and with this population growth comes the need to accommodate everyone who is catching on to what longer term residents have always known: our bush capital is a great place to call home.

Whether it be developing up or developing out, each in its own way puts pressure on the balance between our urban and natural environments.

6. FoHV is concerned that our city is becoming less attractive as the natural environment is increasingly alienated by dense development and the bush becomes less easily accessed. This process has occurred in coastal cities which have the beach environment as an alternative attraction; Canberra does not have that. If Canberra continues to develop in the same fashion, then it will just be very hot in summer and very cold in winter with loss of the uplifting landscape vista and ready access to the bush within walking distance. The people who love Canberra appreciate the many opportunities to commune with nature in the close vicinity. It is critical, therefore, that imported planning approaches should be discarded in favour of a careful analysis of what is needed for this specific site and what will work into the future to the benefit of all Canberrans, not just to developers and the Territory's treasury.

### **Terms of Reference**

1. **The level of public support for and satisfaction with the amount and quality of nature and natural environment areas in Canberra, particularly in urban areas.**
7. As an established area, local residents appreciate the amount of green space in our suburbs, especially when compared with new suburbs such as in West Belconnen and Molonglo, where blocks are small and housing plus driveway is allowed to cover most of the block. In older suburbs, nature strips and front yards are wide enough to accommodate large street trees, backyards are generally large enough for good-sized trees and shrubs. Further, the system of footpaths that cuts through the suburbs, linking to major destinations such as schools, shops and the town centre, also provide a green space, especially in Weetangera where some of the pathways are wide enough to accommodate small trees.
8. Our suburbs are blessed with the Canberra Nature Reserve on our southern border, along with the Kama Reserve which extends to the Molonglo River. These areas are intensively used by many local residents for running, walking (with or without a dog or dogs), orienteering and horse riding. The main concern is the tremendous amount of maintenance necessary to resist the invasion of exotic plants and weeds, along with exotic animals such as rabbits and foxes. Friends of the Pinnacle are a dedicated band but managing such a large area is a huge task for a small group of people with minimal resources. Tracks in the reserve are increasingly eroded by the traffic and are becoming hazardous through lack of maintenance by the ACT Government.
9. There are also many small parks throughout the suburbs, generally located on land unsuitable for development, such as natural waterways and sites of springs draining from perched aquifers along the ridgeline. Maintenance of these parks by the Government is minimal with a continual threat of being rezoned for development. As the population grows, there will be greater demand for these open spaces, so it would be counterproductive in the long-run to build housing on current green spaces based on current usage.

10. Each suburb has its playing field/oval which is not necessarily maintained for regular use. They do, however, provide valuable green space for walking the dog and game playing by children, which needs to be encouraged in this era of smartphones, tablets and X Box. These ovals tend to be located strategically in relation to local stormwater drainage, eg. Weetangera oval. Many school playing fields are no longer maintained, eg. Belconnen High School, but they still contribute to the overall need for absorptive, heat-offsetting space, along with the district playing fields in Hawker.

11. At present, the amount of natural spaces around our urban area is sufficient for the community's needs. Maintenance, however, is irregular, infrequent and cursory. A system is required to involve community volunteers in looking after their communal wealth by ensuring legal protection for any activities carried out and by encouraging the community in their appreciation and ownership of this resource. A public campaign to inform residents of the benefits accruing from green spaces might encourage better preservation of nature strips and private yards which have declined since the millennium drought discouraged water use and, subsequently, the price of water has risen such that some residents will no longer water verges or their own gardens.

**2. The types of nature and natural environments within Canberra, e.g. urban open spaces or bushland reserves and the existing or potential benefits and challenges they bring to Canberra's:**

- a) **Social amenity;**
- b) **Economic development;**
- c) **Biodiversity; and/or**
- d) **Climate resilience.**

12. There is a need for both urban open spaces and bushland reserves to cater for different needs at different life stages. Whilst the bushland areas are currently well-used, the existing suburban parks could be better used. Promotion of these spaces to all residents could raise interest and commitment to these community assets, which can tend to be overlooked by those with busy lives. The existence of these spaces is an attraction to economic development in the suburbs in that they encourage activity and attract people. It is important to understand the physical reason these particular sites were designated for parks in the first place before suggesting they be rezoned as was proposed in Higgins and is now proposed at Kippax. Existing open space should be preserved for the future.

13. The urban open spaces are fragmented and do not serve well as a wildlife corridor to encourage biodiversity within the suburbs other than for bird species that are not deterred by proximity of housing and other urban activities. The presence of native trees and shrubs in private gardens can act to bridge the gap between open spaces. One of the great advantages of a backyard with trees and shrubs is the regular visitation of birds of different sizes and colour (and possums). These visits are, no doubt, facilitated by proximity to the open nature reserve to the south.

14. All open spaces with greenery contribute to climate resilience. For that reason, more such spaces are needed rather than fewer. Current planning controls result in a loss of existing green space and trees at a time when it is obvious that we need to be creating more to cope with the future anticipated increase in temperatures. New subdivisions should not be clear-felled but healthy, established trees should be retained and block subdivision designed around them. This has been the practice in the past, e.g. two eucalypts over 100 years old were preserved by the

division between Blocks 37 and 38 Section 11 Hawker being carefully aligned beside them around 1970.

**3. Opportunities for Blue (water) and/or Green (natural) infrastructure in Canberra including:**

- a) **Functional requirements of proposed infrastructure;**
- b) **Cost and Maintenance considerations;**
- c) **Amenity benefits; and**
- d) **Conservation and biodiversity benefits.**

15. Green infrastructure usually refers to wall and rooftop gardens. Wall gardens are difficult to maintain and to water effectively, especially in Canberra's summer heat. A major downside to rooftop gardens is the tendency for water to leak into the building as happened at the Cameron Offices in Belconnen. This was supposedly due to a lack of adequate waterproofing, a common problem in modern apartment buildings. Until building standards and independent building certification are adequately controlled and supervised, there should be no rooftop gardens installed. Further, inspection of water proofing should be mandatory at specific intervals to prevent leakage as the sealing medium ages and deteriorates.

16. The use of swales and ponds to control water drainage in and around urban developments is problematic in that they require continual maintenance to keep them clear and functioning efficiently so as to ensure water quality is not jeopardised. This makes them a costly option liable to failure if insufficient funding is available for their upkeep. Whilst wetlands have positive and desirable features, they also have a negative characteristic in that they increase the risk of upstream flooding during extreme rainfall events which are predicted to increase with climate change, e.g. Lyneham on 24 February 2018. Careful engineering is required to reduce this risk.

**4. Managing the interface between the natural environment and urban areas particularly in regards to conserved environmental areas.**

17. The fact that the Canberra Nature Park behind Weetangera and Hawker is well-used by local residents and dogs means that there is necessarily a loss of some native species and intrusion of exotic species. Education of residents about plants to be avoided in their gardens to minimise intrusion into the nature reserves is advisable along with emphasising their responsibility to protect the nature park from which they benefit.

18. The Kama Nature Reserve is separated from the Canberra Nature Park by William Hovell Drive, a major road of two carriageways. On its east, however, residential development is proposed. It is imperative that adequate controls be put in place to manage the interface between the urban area and the reserve, such as an adequate buffer zone, pet containment and education about undesirable plant species.

**5. Current policy or regulatory settings that impede the integration of the natural environment within optimal development and design.**

19. The policy of densifying portions of older suburbs that were subdivided initially for single housing, is not as successful as medium-density housing in new areas that are subdivided for that purpose. The Territory Plan provisions for setbacks, plot ratio and maximum number of dwellings, in both RZ1 and RZ2 for both single dwelling blocks and other blocks, necessarily reduce the space available for greenery and, in particular for trees and shrubs large enough to support a range of birds and other species. In this respect, redevelopment produces housing similar to that in other large cities where bird species frequenting the suburbs are restricted to

pigeons and sparrows. In this way, the provisions are destroying a unique attraction of Canberra, as well as failing to provide habitat suitable for native species.

6. **Any other relevant matter.**

20. Homo sapiens is estimated to have been on Earth for about 200,000 years, reaching a population of about one billion around 1800. In the succeeding 200 years, it has grown exponentially to a current world total calculated to be seven billion. It is expected to stabilise this century; however, continual immigration will potentially mean unending growth of local population into the foreseeable future. As human population competes with other natural species and climate change brings warmer conditions, we need to take steps to ensure our city remains liveable, with a strong connection to and understanding of nature, as follows:
- a. A careful approach should be undertaken to determine how increased population can be accommodated without reducing quality of life and removing the possibility of maintaining nature.
  - b. Houses should not be allowed to cover almost entire blocks thus limiting green space.
  - c. People should not be forced to live in Chinese-style high rises with only the wealthy and influential able to have a separate house with garden.
  - d. Existing suburbs should be protected from densification to preserve a treed core to offset the higher temperatures in barren new suburbs.
  - e. Residents should be educated about the need to maintain lawns, nature strips and gardens to offset the heat island effect and to absorb stormwater.
  - f. The Government must maintain public infrastructure, including that necessary to support the natural environment, with the assistance of the local community.
  - g. Canberra must not be forced to become a concrete jungle with the only green space being in small parks and with the town districts surrounded by the buffer zones provided for nature and the landscape of hills and ridges by the vision of previous governments. The magnificent vistas which are a vital part of the character of Canberra must be retained across the city, not just in the central Civic area.
  - h. Unending growth is not viable in the long term.

**Summary**

21. The current thinking in town planning is that greenfields development should be minimised to facilitate maintenance of sufficient natural land to support both agriculture and native species of flora and fauna. A growing human population, therefore, would be forced to reside in tall buildings or houses crammed on small blocks surrounded largely by hard surfaces with token small green spaces for relaxation. This is simplistic for the following reasons.
22. This separation of people from nature is unhealthy and leads to alienation from and a lack of understanding of nature, its flora and fauna, soils and rocks, and water behaviour. Preservation of nature has become critical. Canberra's original planning in the older suburbs allowed sufficient green space in the suburbs to grow shade trees and bushes to attract birds, thus creating a canopy across the suburbs that linked open green spaces.
23. Canberra is hotter in summer, cooler in winter and has lower humidity than coastal cities. Our skies are clearer and solar access is a more significant factor than in coastal cities. The current densification provisions are resulting in loss of garden space, shade trees and solar access along

with increased coverage of the ground by hard surfaces. This increases both runoff and temperatures (the heat island effect) and reduces the presence of wildlife.

24. Rooftop and hanging gardens are promoted as a partial solution to the heat island effect but the survival of these in Canberra's climate is dubious, especially with recurrent waterproofing issues. Furthermore, climate change is expected to result in less rainfall overall but more intense, extreme rainfall events which would devastate rooftop and hanging gardens.
25. All open spaces with greenery contribute to climate resilience; for that reason, more such spaces are needed rather than fewer. The urban open spaces are fragmented and do not, on their own, serve as a wildlife corridor to encourage biodiversity within the suburbs; however, the presence of native trees and shrubs in private gardens can act to bridge the gap between open spaces.
26. A cost-benefit analysis of the overall costs should be carried out on the current preference for employing public servants to draft, allocate and supervise contracts for maintenance work to be performed by external contractors rather than engage, within the public service, sufficient qualified personnel whose role and responsibility is to ensure that regular maintenance of public spaces is performed in a professional manner by doing such maintenance themselves.
27. Our city is becoming less attractive as the natural environment is increasingly alienated by dense development, the landscape view of hills and ridges is blocked by tall buildings and the bush becomes more remote. Imported planning approaches should be discarded in favour of a careful analysis of what is needed for this specific site and what will work into the future to the benefit of all Canberrans.
28. Our secretary, Robyn Coghlan, phone [REDACTED] is willing to appear at the hearing.

Thank you for this opportunity.

[REDACTED]

Colin Lyons,  
Convenor  
Friends of Hawker Village Incorporated