



Legislative Assembly for the
Australian Capital Territory

Standing Committee on Economics,
Industry and Recreation

Submission Cover Sheet

Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

Submission number: 012

Submitter: Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum and Canberra Business Chamber

Date authorised for publication: 1 April 2026

**Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum
and**

Canberra Business Chamber

**Submission to the ACT Legislative Assembly
Standing Committee on Economics, Industry &
Recreation**

Inquiry into Canberra's Night-Time Economy

March 2026



Introduction

This submission sets out the views of the Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum and Canberra Business Chamber in relation to the Committee's inquiry into Canberra's night-time economy.

The Forum

The Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum (the Forum) is the ACT and region's peak tourism and events industry representative body.

The Forum is a not-for-profit, comprising heads or representatives of the leading tourism, business, sports, arts, cultural, aviation and educational sectors in the ACT and surrounding Canberra Region.

The Forum's focus is on promoting the value of these sectors to the ACT and region visitor economy and acting as an advocate, 'think tank' and policy generator.

The Chamber

The Canberra Business Chamber is the peak body for business in the ACT and Capital Region.

Our objective with this submission

We see the night-time economy as a key element of the city's offering for visitors (and residents), and significant opportunity for the city to showcase opportunities for further commercial investment in new facilities and services.

The night-time economy is a key means to encourage and support increased visitation, longer visitor stays and higher spend on hospitality, retail and accommodation.

In this light, we welcome the Standing Committee's Inquiry. This Inquiry can be an opportunity to critically assess the current state of the visitor economy after dark, its strengths, challenges and opportunities, and to identify means of tackling current issues to achieve stronger outcomes for visitors, residents and businesses.

The focus of this submission is on Civic, but many of the issues identified are equally applicable to the town centres.

The value of tourism & the importance of the night-time economy

Tourism is a very significant part of the Territory's economy. Tourism Research Australia research shows that, for the ACT, 4.5 million visitors arrived in the year to September 2025, generating \$3.1 billion in expenditure across accommodation, hospitality, retail, attraction and transport sectors. Tourism related businesses account for one in eight ACT businesses (4,804 businesses), and one in every 13 workers (22,200 direct and indirect jobs).



The night-time economy is a critical component of and contributor to the commercial success of the tourism industry but also of residents engagement with and enjoyment of the life of the city. Research undertaken by the Council of Capital City Mayors (*Measuring the Australian Night-Time Economy*) in 2025 emphasises the value of the night time economy's to a city is not just economic, but significantly contributes to social interaction in the community and amongst individuals, and can drive innovation amongst providers of food and beverage services, attractions and other offerings.

Current issues

Despite its importance to residents and visitors (and attracting extra visitors) there is a number of issues impacting on the night-time economy.

Look and feel of the city and visitor safety

The ACT Government has committed to making Canberra a 'global city'. In particular, the ACT Government (*Economic Development Strategy, 2025*) has identified its economic development goals:

- Canberra as a great place to do business;
- Canberra as a great destination for visitors coming to experience our attractions, events, and food and hospitality offerings;
- Canberra as a beautiful city, a source of pride for residents and business, one we would be very glad to invite visitors, business and investment.

A key part of this is presentation of the city as clean, orderly, well-kept and welcoming. Canberra does not match this ambition. We do not believe that Canberra is meeting or even actively pursuing these aspirations, primary due to ACT Government inaction and under funding of its municipal services and facilities.

We believe the look and feel of the city is critical in welcoming and reassuring residents, visitors and investors they are in a great destination, one offering world-class hospitality, retail and accommodation facilities and services.

This is perhaps especially so in encouraging visitors (and residents) to confidently go out at night to enjoy these offerings. We believe participation in the city's night-time offerings is as much driven by safety, access and the state of the public realm as venue offerings, events and other attractions. We note that the proposed city centre police station has not progressed despite 3 years of discussions. This lack of government action shifts costs to business operators in higher security costs, repair to vandalised facilities and sometimes having to act as 'refuges' for visitors and residents escaping anti-social behaviour.

Yet the Government is, if anything, reducing the provision and level of such services and facilities.

Some examples:



- *Many parts of the city (and Town Centres) are considered unsafe.* Partly this is due to poor lighting, but is exacerbated by other factors, such as antisocial behaviour particularly individuals gathering and drinking in public places at night;
- *Crumbling and poorly maintained privately-owned buildings at street level* in the city centre and town centres reflect poorly on the National Capital. Vandalism and graffiti not remediated adds to the dilapidated and unsightly state of some areas, particularly in Civic and the town centres;
- The sad sight of the *homeless camping in the city* and some suburban shopping areas needs a special focus on finding these people suitable accommodation and other forums of assistance as a priority;
- *Damaged public infrastructure*, such as broken, missing and miss-aligned paving stones used in pedestrian and some road surfaces are old and present trip hazards. The overall cleanliness of the precinct and the many deteriorating concrete features need attention;
- *Graffiti on public (and some private) buildings and other infrastructure* is both unsightly and adds to a look that the city is unkempt and rundown;
- *Rubbish* discarded on major road links and not picked up by City Services reflects poorly on the Territory. This also applies to the weeds on roadway gutters;
- *Fading and peeling directional signs* reflect badly on Canberra's National Capital status and undermines the pride which the ACT Government is keen to engender among Canberra's growing population.

Current initiatives

We recognise the significant efforts of the City Renewal Authority and City Environment Directorate in attempting to address these issues, such as the upgrading of Garema Place and City Walk. However, we believe it is critically important CRA and CED receive additional resources and / or re-prioritise existing programs to address these foundational issues, but also be funded to prevent them happening in the future.

Disruption by the Light Rail construction project

While understanding the ACT Government sees this project as an innovative means to add to the options and stock for public transport, the Government has seemingly underestimated the negative impacts on residents and visitors and on businesses, in particular hospitality businesses in its path, and especially such businesses operating after hours. A further impact in affected areas is the loss of parking. We have already mentioned the poor state of areas of Civic in terms of presentation to residents and visitors, and the associated issues around public safety.

These issues are magnified by the impacts of Light-Rail construction, and well documented (for example, 'City restaurants struggling under Light Rail construction' Lucy Ridge Region 20 March 2026). The Government Transport Minister's response that businesses drop off business cards and takeaway menus to the nearby construction sites



to encourage worker patronage (same *Region* article) is contemptible and makes a mockery of the same Government's commitment to tourism. Independent MLA Thomas Emerson's comments to the Assembly – 'based on the feedback I've received from affected businesses [it's clear] that the level of support is insufficient'. Mr Emerson goes on to suggest a remedy 'I've repeatedly called for means-tested rates and rent relief to ensure businesses affected by these construction works in the city survive to the other side...' (same *Region* article).

We support these sentiments and note precedents in Covid pandemic responses by the ACT Government, but also NSW experience with the Sydney Light Rail and similar projects, which found foot traffic reductions of 30 – 60% in periods where access, parking and visibility are impaired (Sydney Metro 2016 *Chatswood to Sydenham Environmental Impact Statement*).

These studies also found support similar to that suggested by Mr Emerson enabled affected businesses to survive major disruption (Sydney Metro, 2025 *Small Business Owners Support Program*).

We also note that further disruptive construction projects are likely or planned in Civic and that the NSW experience with its Light Rail project also included work by the NSW Audit Office that developed a model for any further such assistance programs (NSW Audit Office 2016 *Audits*).

Government taxes and charges

The cost of rates and taxes, licence fees and charges and the plethora of other Government regulation are a major impost and constraint on businesses in the ACT, including those operating in the night-time economy.

Some examples:

- ACT liquor licence fees are well above those levied in other jurisdictions, in particular those levied in surrounding NSW. Using data provide by the Australian Hotels Association ACT Branch, we note for a 500-capacity venue closing at midnight, the ACT fee is \$7,027, while the NSW fee is \$1,111. If the venue remains open till 3 am, the ACT fee is \$22,272, while the NSW fee is \$7,889.
- A further issue is the treatment of outdoor seating at hospitality venues in terms of licensing fees. Again, we advocate the introduction of an evidence-based policy for charging. Overall, ACT Government charge seem not to be related to risk, previous venue regulation compliance history, management, location, etc. We recommend a review of the charging policy with due recognition of financial impact on venues, but also a stronger focus on the equity of charging, including taking into account the factors noted above.



- A further example particularly impacting on hotels is the so-called 'toilet tax' levied on accommodation houses, which unfairly impacts on hotels and other accommodation providers. We note the Independent Competition and Regulatory Commission is reviewing the Territory's sewerage tariff framework, a long-overdue reconsideration of the charging framework. We argue the ACT Government should be similarly reviewing other such imposts on business, perhaps building on the work of the Red Tape Taskforce reports.

Missed opportunities

The MICE (Meetings, Incentives, Events and Conventions) sector is a major contributor to visitation and its contribution to the local economy. Beyond these economic benefits, events contribute to residents enjoyment, social mixing and the cultivation of pride in the city; they are also major elements of effective branding for the city.

The Chief Minister (2026 *Ministerial Statement on Tourism & Events*) has recently emphasised the importance of events (and tourism) to the city, noting a very high return on investment for Government expenditure establishing and assisting events such as Floriade and Enlighten, but also youth-oriented events such as Spilt Milk. We also note business conventions and events attract large numbers of visitors.

Attendees visiting from other places are often then looking for something to do in the evenings and naturally gravitate to Civic. Yet the Government's support for new events through the Event Development Fund is very small compared with other states and territories. We recommend a significant increase in this fund. We also note the comments above about the look and feel of the city are very relevant to attracting visitors into the City Centre.

Employment and training

We have noted earlier in this submission the importance of tourism and the night time economy in terms of providing and sustaining jobs in the Territory. Tourism is a business sector that is peculiarly amenable to a wide diversity of jobs, and at many different levels and different skill levels. Many workers are casuals, or only adopting tourism and hospitality jobs for particular times in their lives, or as a stepping stone to other employment.

However, Regional Development Australia Southern NSW & ACT's 2025 *State of the Workforce Report* notes some issues with the ACT workforce. The region (ACT & southern NSW) has a very high 81.7% participation rate, with unemployment at a low 4.3%, meaning there is a very tight labour market across the region, including in tourism and hospitality. The *Report* also notes the impact of demographic change, with a high proportion of older workers and a rising 65+ population. This has led to labour shortages in the industry, particularly in food and beverage, but also security staff and other parts of the tourism and hospitality industry (*ABS Job Vacancies Report*, 2025). This in turn puts extra



pressure on venue staff, in particular SME businesses, which may only the owner and a few others.

Training is a further issue. Vocational training in the ACT is provided through CIT and seems to be operating effectively as a training provider; however, recent re-structuring at the Territory's only provider of tertiary tourism and event education, the University of Canberra is a cause of concern in that the foundation Bachelor of Tourism and Event Management will no longer be offered, depriving the industry of training for managers and professionals. We propose a review of existing programs and arrangements, in conjunction with industry and relevant organisations active in this field, such as the Capital Region Local Jobs Program.

Stronger coordination and more responsive governance

It is clear from the above that the success of the night-time economy depends on several government programs and operations residing in different directorates. This results in poor coordination, and a lack of specific focus within government for this critical area of the visitor economy.

We recognise the government in 2024 created a new ministerial role responsible for the night-time economy. However, we argue that without specific support in addressing the issues identified, these will continue, and the potential of the night-time economy remain unrealised.

We note that both NSW (with the creation of an *Office of the 24-hour Economy Commissioner*) and Queensland (*Night-Time Economy Commissioner*) have recognised the significance of the night-time economy, the challenges and opportunities and responded by resourcing specific offices. These offices broadly focus on being a whole-of-government coordinator, source of policy and operational leadership within the government service in identifying issues and opportunities to further develop the night-time economy, and providing a single point of industry and other stakeholder contact. The NSW and Queensland experience has shown the value of these offices.

In investigating means to address current issues and maximising social and economic returns and opportunities from the night-time economy, we ask the Committee to explore the merits of such a function for the ACT. This could be a new, say, Office for the Night-Time Economy or otherwise. But the role would be to better coordinate relevant Government activities and programs, address industry and community issues in a more timely way and provide expertise in identifying and pursuing opportunities to further develop and diversify the Territory's night-time economy

Recommendations

In light of the above, we recommend the Standing Committee:



- Recognise the critical nature of the night-time economy and its contribution to the economic and social well-being of the city;
- Recognise the poor current state of the city's look and feel, and challenges to public safety, and recommend the ACT Government allocate extra resources to firstly address current problem areas and secondly provide continuing additional resources to prevent the current issues recurring;
- Acknowledge the significant impacts of the Light Rail project on tourism and hospitality businesses in Civic but also on residents and visitors way-finding and propensity to patronise night-time venues. In response, recommend to the ACT Government an assistance package, equivalent to the support given during the Covid pandemic (and on similar conditions) to assist businesses survive the construction period;
- Recommend a review of the policy and strategies behind fees and charges impacting on the tourism and hospitality industry;
- Further investment to attract visitors and support resident enjoyment of the city through additional funding for the Event Development Fund; and
- Suggest a review of training and education offerings for new industry entrants and existing staff in conjunction with industry;
- Explore the merits of a new coordination function for Government in the night-time economy, to better coordinate relevant Government activities and programs, address industry and community issues in a more timely way and provide expertise in identifying and pursuing opportunities to further develop and diversify the Territory's night-time economy.

Further information

We would welcome the opportunity to provide additional information, or otherwise further assist the Select Committee's inquiry into Canberra's night-time economy.

Contacts

Dr Brian Weir

Director, Policy Coordination, Canberra Region Tourism Leaders Forum

Email: [REDACTED]

Telephone: [REDACTED]

Greg Harford

Chief Executive, Canberra Business Chamber

Email: [REDACTED]

Telephone: [REDACTED]