

Submission to the inquiry into fostering and promoting the significance of Australia's national capital

Greater Canberra Inc, 5 May 2023

About Greater Canberra

We are a community organisation of Canberrans who believe in a more liveable, sustainable and affordable Canberra for everyone. We believe that forward-thinking urban planning is vital to ensuring that future Canberrans can enjoy social and economic equality and a high quality of life, while achieving the city's full potential as our national capital. We say "yes in my backyard" to abundant housing, environmentally-friendly transport infrastructure and high-quality public spaces.

More information about our work can be found on our website, <https://greatercanberra.org>, and on our [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [LinkedIn](#) profiles.

The myth of the two Canberras

There are two visions of Canberra - Canberra the national capital, and Canberra the place to live.¹ Canberra the national capital is the responsibility of the Commonwealth, planned and regulated by the National Capital Authority (the heirs to the legacy of the former National Capital Development Commission) supervising the habitat of the other federal agencies and cultural institutions. Canberra the place to live, at least post-1989, is the responsibility of the local inhabitants, through their elected representatives in their own Legislative Assembly, who pay for their state and local services in the same way as other Australians, and who plan their city through the democratically-accountable processes of ACT planning policy.

The two Canberras are too often considered as separate entities. We completely reject this view. Canberra's national institutions do not run themselves; they are staffed by Canberran workers and supported by Canberran businesses. Conversely, the Commonwealth public sector continues to be the most significant employer of Canberrans and in turn supports the

¹ The history of the conflict between national and local needs in Canberra's development is well documented as part of the history of ACT self-government; see, for example, *Reluctant Democrats: The Transition to Self-Government in the Australian Capital Territory* (1996) and *Governing the Two Canberras: Canberra as Federal Capital and Canberra as a Place to Live* (1991).

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rest of our city. Canberra cannot succeed as a national capital without succeeding as a city in which to live, and conversely it cannot succeed as a city in which to live without succeeding as a national capital.

The ACT Government, as the level of government that manages most of Canberra's city services and shapes much of Canberra's urban fabric, must have an active role in fostering and promoting our national institutions. The Commonwealth must engage with the ACT Government to align visions and strategies for the best outcome for both Canberras.

A specific way in which the two Canberras distinction is perpetuated is in the structure of the NCA. The NCA's role in strategic and statutory planning in the Central National Area extends considerably beyond the Parliamentary Zone, and puts the NCA in the position of regulating not just Commonwealth facilities, but also transport infrastructure (such as light rail), housing (in central, high-amenity areas such as Barton) and public facilities that impact Canberrans more than anyone else.

We believe that the NCA's goal of developing Canberra as a national capital requires the involvement of the ACT Government at the highest level to integrate the NCA's national perspective with the local perspective and achieve the best outcomes. At present, the ACT Government only has one nominee on the NCA Board, and that only by a voluntary agreement with the Commonwealth that is not guaranteed by law. This degree of representation is inadequate and requires reform.

We intend to publish more detailed reform proposals in relation to the NCA in the near future.

Housing around the National Triangle

Canberra is one of the most expensive cities in Australia in which to rent or buy housing.

As noted in our [2022-23 ACT Budget submission](#), Canberra's housing costs completely wipe out the wage premium that Canberrans have over residents of other capital cities. This makes it harder for Canberran organisations - including government agencies, cultural institutions and private enterprises - to attract and retain the best talent.

As a result of 1960s planning decisions, which abandoned much of the original plans of the Griffins, Canberra is also a remarkably low density city. Most parts of Canberra have significant untapped housing potential. Unlocking this potential will lower housing costs and increase access to urban amenities for Canberrans. It will also enable the kinds of urban infrastructure - advanced public transport systems, cultural institutions, sporting venues - that internationally-recognised cities must have.

As part of consultation on the ACT Government's Planning System Review and Reform Project, our [submission on the Draft Territory Plan](#) and [our submissions on the Draft District Strategies](#) emphasise the importance of providing for housing in central areas and recommend that the Inner North and Inner South be required to provide their fair share of housing, close to jobs and amenities.

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Inner South and Inner North suburbs like Barton, Forrest, Yarralumla, Campbell and Deakin, which adjoin the National Triangle and fall partially within NCA Designated Areas, are exactly the kind of desirable, high-amenity areas whose potential needs to be fully unlocked.

The NCA must embrace significantly higher density in these areas, and should amend the National Capital Plan where necessary. The NCA must work with developers and the ACT Government to ensure that the Works Approval process operates efficiently and that housing developments are not unnecessarily held up. This will also deliver more vibrancy into the Parliamentary Triangle and enhance the sustainability of the area's national institutions.

Recommendation 1: The NCA should embrace density and fully unlock the housing potential of high-amenity suburbs within the Designated Areas. The NCA should work with the ACT Government to ensure that the National Capital Plan and other NCA policies contribute appropriately to achieving the ACT's housing goals in Designated Areas.

Commercial amenities in and around the National Triangle

It is often noted - by both Canberrans and visitors - that while the National Triangle is supposedly the heart of the nation's capital, and forms one of Canberra's most important employment hubs, outside of business hours it is utterly lifeless (with the exception of activation events such as Enlighten, which have proven extremely popular).

Additionally, the National Triangle lacks important amenities, such as retail shops, which detract significantly from its attractiveness to both workers and tourists, who have to travel to group centres such as Kingston or Manuka to access facilities which Civic or any of the town centres have in abundance.

While the National Triangle's distinctive national character and fundamentally public nature means that any commercial development requires careful consideration, we believe that more amenities, for both workers and visitors, can be provided in a way that is sensitive to these requirements, both within the Triangle itself and in adjoining suburbs such as Barton. These amenities would make life easier for workers and tourists, and potentially provide a method to activate the Triangle more consistently outside of business hours.

Recommendation 2: The NCA should investigate permitting and encouraging a greater range of commercial uses within the National Triangle and adjoining suburbs such as Barton.

Transport infrastructure

In relation to transport infrastructure, we endorse the views of the Public Transport Association of Canberra, who are making a separate submission to this inquiry.

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A world-class city requires a world-class transport system. Replacing cars with frequent, high-quality public transport services significantly enhances the amenity of the city, and allows more people, from all walks of life, to enjoy what the city has to offer. This is particularly important for the national capital's role as a showcase of Australia. Increasingly, visitors from interstate and overseas have come to expect that they can get around wherever they are travelling without needing a car.

Key institutions such as Parliament House and the Australian War Memorial are segregated from the public by multi-lane arterial roads whose congestion detracts from the prestige and amenities of these areas. We have built fortresses against citizen access to what is supposed to be public space, preventing Canberrans and Australians at large from enjoying the important civic centres of their capital city.

It is imperative that the National Capital Authority and our national cultural institutions fully embrace the need to shift away from cars towards public and active transport. Public and active transport must come first.

To achieve this goal, the Commonwealth must facilitate the ACT Government's delivery of high-quality public and active transport in the Central National Area, especially in relation to key national institutions. Conversely, the provision of car parking should be deprioritised, and demand management mechanisms should be further intensified to discourage driving.

We also note that allowing residential density (as discussed earlier in this submission) is a key part of boosting public transport patronage and making frequent, high-quality services more viable.

Recommendation 3: The Commonwealth, the NCA and the national institutions should ensure that public and active transport is prioritised, through:

- collaborating with the ACT Government on the delivery of high-quality public and active transport infrastructure and services all throughout the Central National Area, including high-frequency buses with dedicated rights of way, light rail, cycle paths and footpaths
- in particular, ensuring that national institutions, both inside and outside the Parliamentary Zone, have adequate public transport provision
- ensuring that federal approval processes (such as NCA works approval and EPBC approval) for ACT public and active transport infrastructure are streamlined
- taking a more aggressive approach to parking demand management.

City to the Lake

The ACT Government's *City to the Lake* project, building on the NCA's work in *The Griffin Legacy* and announced in 2013, is a transformative vision to activate the southern side of

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Civic, including linking Civic with Commonwealth Park and Lake Burley Griffin. *City to the Lake* will make Canberra a better place to both live and visit.

Major components of the *City to the Lake* proposal are already underway, including the Acton Waterfront development. This development will see the creation of a new mixed-use precinct, delivering valuable amenities and much-needed housing in the heart of Canberra.

Key to this vision is undoing the mistake that is Parkes Way - preferably by burying Parkes Way completely. Burying Parkes Way would fulfil the Griffin vision for Lake Burley Griffin to truly become Canberra's playground, and will unlock access to Commonwealth Park. It would also make northside national institutions, such as the Australian War Memorial (potentially in conjunction with changing the nature of Anzac Parade), more integrated with the Lake and the city as a whole.

Earlier this year, along with dozens of other community and business organisations, we endorsed [the call by Senator David Pocock for a Canberra Region City Partnership](#). Such a partnership would provide a coordinated approach to infrastructure investment, including delivering on the *City to the Lake* vision.

Recommendation 4: The *City to the Lake* vision should be delivered in full. The Commonwealth should provide funding and facilitate necessary approvals for *City to the Lake* projects, potentially as part of a Canberra Region City Partnership.