

## **A submission on The Future of Dickson Parklands (Section 72)**

This statement is based on previous documentation including that used for the 2017 Dickson Residents Statement on the Parklands; hence there are similarities in the comments.

This is a submission in response to the call for responses to the consultations on the future of Dickson Parklands (Section 72).

There is no doubt that many (not all) residents have welcomed the opportunity to talk about what could be developed on this central site – especially as the population is increasing as a result of the intensification of the surrounding suburbs.

As stated previously in discussions and submissions, the future of this important community site needs to be subject to a Master Plan that covers the whole of Dickson Parklands (Sec 72) as well as the surrounding areas.

I note the Planning Directorate statements that a 'Precinct Plan' is to be undertaken, and while I agree with this, its scope should be nothing less than would be expected through a comprehensive master plan process.

Given the significance of this location and the importance of planning for and delivering community services for a diverse and growing catchment (53,000 persons in the 2016 Census with an average growth rate of 2.4% per annum), a master plan will save both money and time by ensuring that appropriate infrastructure is staged in a timely fashion on this site and in the surrounding suburbs and that vital services are capable of being co-located to maximize accessibility.

A master plan will also mean that social, economic and environmental impacts can be properly identified and addressed.

See attached notes for more detailed comments.

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## **1 Labor Government commitments**

Much has been made in the press of the need to place a Common Ground facility on the Dickson Parklands – and this is now the main subject of the current consultations as overseen by the Planning Directorate.

While the elected Labor Government listed another Common Ground among the many election commitments during the last campaign, the commitment was that there should be another such facility built within Dickson – or at least the Dickson area.

It was not made clear that it needed to be placed on the community-zoned area – Dickson Parklands.

The current consultations need to be undertaken in an open and transparent manner and hence the location of this facility within the whole Dickson area and surrounding suburbs should be openly discussed.

A new Common Ground facility within the area would most likely have majority support. But if this matter is seen by residents as being not negotiable and is rolled out with all the usual infamous deceptive spin, then opposition to it will most likely be increased. This would be a shame.

## **2. Biodiversity – a top priority**

A greater priority needs to be placed on embedding the care and the enhancement of the city's biodiversity within the planning structure. Such an approach does not exclude increasing density of residential areas or the redevelopment of sites such as the Dickson Parklands.

But it does mean that a landscape approach to development needs to be upfront rather than being seen as decoration and treated as an optional add-on.

We actually have talented professionals within our government bureaucracy and within some local professional consultancies who, if given the opportunity, could provide the expertise and guidance on how to keep biodiversity as a priority.

Recent outcomes in developments point to this government acting as if increasing biodiversity and undergoing residential development are exclusive of each other. This is so wrong!

The ACT Government is charged with the stewardship of our city's total environment – and therefore needs to reconsider its role in caring for the landscapes, the various ecosystems and the total biodiversity of the whole city.

Such an approach needs to underpin the future of the Dickson Parklands.

## **3. Community-zoned for a reason**

Across Canberra there are significant suburban sites originally zoned for 'community use'. Whether it was accurate or not according to the government's own processes and legislation, local residents who live close by these spaces have had an expectation and understanding that these community sites were set aside for community uses – ranging from social, arts, cultural activities.

Historically there was definitely no understanding that one day they would be used for any form of social or public housing.

The rezoning of these sites through very questionable processes, technical amendments, has been very badly handled and has resulted in negative attitudes towards and a growing frustration with this government – being the Ministers involved and the agencies who have been charged with sending out to residents loads of unbelievable spin.

These questionable technical changes to the definition of 'community use', including as it affects the future of the Dickson Parklands, has created barriers to trust. This distrust and suspicion continues to hamper any hope of friendly two-way dialogues between residents and planning agencies.

#### **4. Inner North Cultural Facilities**

With increases in population density well underway across the Inner North of Canberra, and significantly more in the pipeline, the Dickson Parklands site has outstanding potential given its location, attributes, and relative underutilization.

Since the first block was developed for Dickson Pool in 1963-4 this site has been explicitly designated for community uses. It remains an outstanding omission by the former NCDC planners that they did not deliver on local arts facilities within the inner north and many other suburban areas. Many of those we see today, the Tuggeranong Arts Centre, the Street Theatre, Megalo, ANCA studios and more came into existence directly because of later advocacy by the arts and local communities.

Subsequent planning agencies have also failed to follow through on the needs of the local communities and as a result there are very few arts and cultural facilities in this inner north Canberra precinct.

As more social/ supported housing in any form is located in or around Dickson, this site will be even more important as a community site offering a range of community, cultural and arts facilities.

I join with others in urging the government to ensure that the burgeoning population's future needs for social, community, cultural and arts facilities are facilitated, and that this opportunity to provide for the growing local communities is not squandered.

#### **5. Tall or low rise – how tall is appropriate?**

The ACT Government has a terrible reputation on the delivery of attractive and well-designed taller buildings.

This history/ legacy is the biggest stumbling block to bringing residents onboard to agree that sites such as the Dickson Parklands could include tall buildings (more than three stories).

In theory if presented with sound reasons and good architecture and landscape architecture, it should be possible to obtain agreement from residents that some tall buildings (taller than presently allowed for) could add to the ambience of the site.

But this would have to be an outcome of solid planning and thorough consultations whereby the outcome was logical.

At present as illustrated in recent press reports, the present Chief Minister's agenda is that tall buildings are necessary – with no logical accompanying reasoning.

There has been nothing in recent statements that signals the community would not just get more of the same boring and inappropriate bland boxes – and that they will be plonked wherever the developers deem to be best for progress (profits).

For the argument for well designed taller buildings to be advance in a mature fashion, it will require some intelligent and creative approaches by ACT politicians and the planning agencies and for everyone to be encouraged to think outside the box.

One essential ingredient would be for a completely new strategy to deliver aesthetically pleasing and well-designed architecture with enhanced landscape designed areas.

If a new approach to dealing with these issues cannot be put into place, the prediction must be for years of fighting over having taller structures on this and other sites.

## **6. Green Spaces and Urban Forests - preventing future heat islands**

The Dickson Parklands site hosts a variety of uses within an attractive established landscape setting, dating back to the original plantings by Dr Bertram Dickson for the CSIRO's former Experiment Station in the early 1940s, linking Downer's heritage-listed farm buildings to old Sullivan's Creek.

Permeating and bordering the site are a number of valuable green spaces and landscape corridors, together with shrubs and trees that contribute to the ambience of the area and its aesthetic appeal for pedestrians and visitors.

Residents feel very strongly about retaining a generous proportion of the Parklands site as landscaped open space, and preserving an abundance of deep-rooted trees within and around the site for amenity, as a buffer, and for environmental benefits.

Residents feel very strongly about having the Parklands site include some open space and for there to be an on-going abundance of trees throughout and around the site.

Lack of children's playgrounds in Dickson is a concern. There is a need for structured and unstructured play spaces around Dickson – and this site should be considered for this provision amongst the green/open spaces.

## **7. Special Needs Housing - supporting people with disabilities and aged women**

There have been repeated suggestions that a portion of the site could be used for some form of aged care and associated housing. While the 2014 workshops and meetings noted this, it has come to our attention that there are key groups not being adequately catered for within the Inner North.

There is an urgent need for innovative and affordable housing for people with disabilities, plus there is a widening gap in affordable housing options for aged women.

Whether these important requirements should be provided for within the Parklands site and/or through the use of other sites in and around Dickson, these needs should be important aspects to be explored through a comprehensive planning process.

## **8. Common Ground project announced for Dickson**

The ACT Government has suggested that following the success of Common Ground in Gungahlin, a similar project be built and potentially located on Block 25 (the old Downer Club site).

Along with others I strongly support increased provision of low-cost housing targeting homelessness such as Common Ground and innovative community housing/co-housing. In fact the ACT Government should be thinking bigger and should examine options to locate more such facilities and services.

All such options need to be explored across the inner north to identify what sites would provide the best location for such facilities – for instance the need to be immediately close to transport, shops and related community facilities

Having visited and been shown through the Gungahlin Common Ground facility, I agree about its benefits but would add that the Gungahlin building is presently isolated from other residential areas and is not situated close enough to relevant support and community facilities.

## **9. Canberra Seniors Centre - making services for the aged more accessible**

I have been part of the Dickson Residents Group's conversations with the Canberra Seniors Centre about their strategic plans to transfer operations from their Turner site to a purpose-built facility near Dickson shopping centre, co-located with COTA. The Dickson Residents Group supports the Canberra Seniors Centre move and is working with them to identify options.

## **10. Options to improve Parklands access**

While the site in question occupies a central location – it is not accessible as it could be. The Parklands site needs to be reassessed for how people access the site – whether it be people walking, cycling and/or by transport and private cars.

There was a lot of this work undertaken in the 2014 consultations, there is no need to redo a lot of this - instead the results need to be part of the next set of documentation being put out for consultations.

## **11. Good integrated design could deliver on many options**

With a transparent planning process and a subsequent integrated design approach, many possibilities could be catered for within Dickson Parklands and the surrounding suburbs alongside all of the present on site lessees, taking into account future needs, noise, traffic and parking, and safety concerns.

While there is a growing wish list of options, with some innovative architectural and landscape design work innovative solutions could be identified. For instance it is possible that any social housing facility, wherever located, could occupy the levels above the ground floor, while the ground floor could be set up to offer a range of cultural/arts opportunities for locals.

The future of this Parklands site along with the surrounding suburban precincts should be about developing a mix of facilities that provide access to the growing number of residents in the surrounding areas, including more social/supported housing.

With enhanced greenery and creative integrated design, this community site could easily be redeveloped to live up to the name 'Dickson Parklands'. Good design – combining good architecture and innovative landscape architecture – could deliver something exciting for future residents.

## **12. Dealing with the mess of its own making**

The Dickson Parklands is an important site for the inner north. Yet despite this, various agencies and Ministers have over a number of years made a complete mess of how a government deals with residents over such a site.

Residents have seen the development of a notional master plan for the commercial area that for some reason ignored the presence of the Parklands even though it is located alongside the shopping centre and anything that happens to either site has an affect on the other.

Resident saw many trees threatened to make way for a car park as a result of inept planning for the sale and possible construction of a new supermarket complex on the present carpark.

At the time of the 2014 consultations, Block 25 (the old Downer Club site) was frequently spoken about as being earmarked for an aged persons facility – and this was very much accepted within the discussions. This option has disappeared to be replaced by the current agenda to deal with the government's own lack of forward planning on other social housing requirements.

There has been doubt and mystery about the future use of sections on the site given the nature of the land deal between the former LDA and the Tradies.

There have been several announcements that indicated that the government was keen to build apartment towers on the site.

The perception of residents is that the government has not approached the future of this site openly. Instead it has run various agendas to achieve a range of political outcomes, despite very clear differences of opinions and aspirations as expressed by residents on numerous occasions.

These painful and time-consuming experiences have left residents wary of approaches by this government and its agencies to undertake any development of the Parklands site.

It is very much a mess of its own making.

### **13. The 2014 Consultations - keeping faith with participants by demonstrating transparency**

In 2014 a series of public workshops were hosted by ACT Government agencies (the Economic Development Directorate, LDA, and Community Services Directorate) on the future development blocks on the Parklands site and a revised layout for the site as a whole.

That documentation, research, and design and feasibility studies provides a useful starting point for a master planning process.

The Government has recently released this documentation – it is now hoped that it will be fully used to provide background material and that all that valuable work will not now be repeated

## **Conclusion**

The ACT Government should ensure that the future of Dickson Parklands is based on nothing less than a rigorous master (precinct) planning process to identify and investigate not only what options could be considered for the Parklands site - but also whether there are other opportunities in surrounding areas nearby that should also be considered for provision of any of the services mentioned above.

All available documentation and other research studies should form the basis for any master plan activities as mentioned above.

There is a host of background material available for the development of first drafts of master plans – and it is definitely not necessary to have such a planning initiative start with a blank sheet and ask for ideas from residents and other stakeholders.

Much of this has already been gathered and need to be used to indicate up-front that the ACT Government takes seriously the aspirations and ideas of the electorate.

Staging, site management and implementation should be addressed in the master plan.

Most importantly, it should be clearly stated at the commencement of the planning process, that the final subsequent master or precinct plan is to be given statutory force via a draft Territory Plan variation.