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Committee Secretary
Standing Committee on Environment and Heritage
House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Madam/Sir

Inquiry into a Sustainability Charter

I am pleased to provide a submission to the current inquiry into a Sustainability Charter for Australia. The proposal for a Sustainability Charter, and a Sustainability Commission, for Australia is strongly supported. The Charter should provide a framework to enable Australia to shift onto a pathway to a sustainable future. The Commission should be a policy and regulatory resource tasked with facilitating effective governance for sustainability (across all levels of Australian government and the private sector.)

This submission comprises 3 elements:

1. The case for ensuring population health is central in the proposed sustainability charter.
2. A proposal for an Australian Sustainability Forum, in association with the proposed Charter and Commission.
3. A copy of the Program and Abstracts booklet for the recent Australian Academy of Science, Fenner Conference on the Environment on the topic *Urbanism, Environment and Health*.

I will deal with these elements in turn.

1. “Australian cities cannot be sustainable if they are not healthy for the people who live in them¹.” More broadly, the Australian environment will not be sustainable unless it is healthy for all Australians – urban and rural dwellers. Our natural, built and social environments are important determinants of health. Key aspects of relevance for health include:

- air and water quality
- noise and chemical exposures
- climate (indoor and outdoor)
- food supply

¹ Capon, T. Cities fit to live in. *About the House* December 2003, pp. 20-23.

- opportunities for physical activity (incidental and recreational)
- safety
- social interaction.

I have attached below a proposed *Framework for Sustainability and Population Health*. The framework is presented as a matrix. On the horizontal axis are six domains of our environment (not confined to the physical environment). In aggregate, these domains comprise our environment (urban or rural). The size of our “ecological footprint” is determined by the nature of these domains in any given environment. On the vertical axis, there is a list of up-stream influences on our health and wellbeing (so-called “determinants” of health). Interactions between our environment and these determinants of health can be represented in the cells of the matrix. In each of the cells, it is possible to identify policy and planning issues, or potential research questions. The matrix could support a more systematic approach to decision making about policy and regulation for sustainability, in the interest of the environment and of human health and wellbeing.

I have also attached a table in which are listed selected elements of our urban environment (Column 1: Shape of the city) and a number of contemporary health issues for Australia (Column 3: State of our health). Column 2 provides a list of mediating factors between the environment and our health. Column 4 (Cost to Australia) indicates that it is possible to quantify the costs to the Australian economy of the contemporary epidemics listed in Column 3. One could argue that if Australian governments deliver improved urban environments, through increased investment in transport and other infrastructure (the items in Column 1), it should be possible to constrain burgeoning health costs, provided health services are effectively managed at the same time. It would then be possible to secure the future health of Australians through a combination of investment in healthy environments and appropriate health services.

2. In association with the proposed Australian Sustainability Charter and Commission, there is a need for an Australian Sustainability Forum. The Forum would facilitate informed debate, dialogue and decision-making for sustainability, including population health. In particular, the Forum would provide an accessible way of ensuring community and private sector perspectives are carefully considered, and accounted for, in proposed policy and regulation. The future sustainability of Australia, including the health of Australians, is of such importance that valuable contributions from the private sector and the wider Australian community should inform government decision making.

As an alternative to working in traditional “silos” such as built environment, water, energy and transport, the Forum (and the Commission) might organise work around common Australian habitats. Examples are:

- Large cities
- Smaller urban settlements
- Intensive agriculture
- Broad-acre agriculture and grazing, etc.

Such an approach would acknowledge that the challenges and opportunities in Australian large cities are quite different from the challenges and opportunities in our smaller urban settlements. The approach would provide opportunities for integrated thinking and decision-making, cutting across traditional environment sectors and silos of thinking. Certainly, there would remain a need for “joined-up” thinking at the sectoral and national levels.

The Australian Sustainability Commission and Forum would not usually fund scientific and social science research. This would remain the responsibility of the ARC, NHMRC, CSIRO and Universities. However, the Commission and Forum could support strategic research, and other activities, to assist wise policy formulation. In particular, the Forum might support activities to enable strengthened input from the private sector and the community to policy making.

3. The 2006 Fenner Conference on the Environment was held at the Shine Dome on 25-26 May 2006. The purpose of the Conference was to bring researchers together with counterparts in policy, private sector and community to discuss and debate the important topic of *Urbanism, Environment and Health*. The Conference was organised by a team led by the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health at The Australian National University.

The Conference concluded that the relationship between Australian urban environments and sustainability, including population health, is of pressing importance given contemporary epidemics of obesity and depression, and potential long-term health consequences of ecosystem disruption and environmental change. I have enclosed a copy of the Program and Abstracts booklet for the Conference with the hardcopy of this submission. More information about the Conference is available @ <http://nceph.anu.edu.au/Fenner2006/index.htm>. In 2007 there will be a special issue of the *New South Wales Public Health Bulletin* on urban sustainability and health comprising selected papers from the Conference.

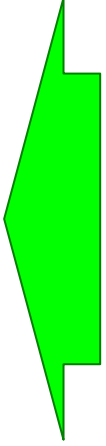
I would be pleased to elaborate on this submission if that would be of assistance to the Committee.

Yours sincerely

Professor Anthony Capon MBBS PhD FAFPHM
Visiting Fellow

Framework for Sustainability and Population Health

Ecological footprint



Economy and work	Transport and urban form	Housing and building construction	Nature and landscape	Media and communication	Culture and spirituality	Air, water, noise, infection, chemical exposures and climate
						Food
						Activity
						Safety
						Family relationships
						Social capital

Human health and wellbeing



Shape of the city	Mediating factors	State of our health	Cost to Australia (per annum)
Transport options	physical activity	obesity	
Shopping and business	food choices	diabetes	
Local economy	travel times	heart disease	
Street patterns	air quality	asthma	
Pathways/cycleways	safety	injuries	
Community spaces	car reliance	mental health	
Housing options	time for family	substance use	
Land use zonings	time with community	stress	
Educational opportunities	time to recreate	violence	
Human services	community connectedness	crime	