

To the Chairperson

Joint Standing Committee on the National Capital and External Territories

Committee activities (inquiries and reports)

Inquiry into the role of the National Capital Authority

Terms of Reference

The terms of reference for the inquiry, referred by the Minister for Home Affairs, the Hon Bob Debus, MP, provide for the committee to inquire into:

1. The administration of the National Capital Plan with particular emphasis on the reduction of red tape and duplication of municipal and local planning functions, the jurisdiction of ACT spatial policy and harmonisation of planning systems;
2. Whether the governance arrangements for the NCA provide a sufficient balance between the independence of the Authority's planning decisions and its accountability for its operations;
3. The appropriate level of oversight required to achieve the highest standards in design for areas of national significance;
4. Opportunities to ensure cooperation with the ACT planning authority and increased engagement with the Canberra community;
5. The effective national promotion of the National Capital, and the roles of the NCA and the ACT Government in advocacy for new infrastructure projects including responsibility for events and developing the distinctive character of the National Capital.

Dear Sir/madam,

I am an architect practising in the ACT and NSW and wish to respond to Terms of Reference 1, 4 and 5. I am a Canberran and delight in our city and the heritage we have through Walter Burley Griffin as the original design architect.

TOR # 1, The administration of the National Capital Plan with particular emphasis on the reduction of red tape and duplication of municipal and local planning functions, the jurisdiction of ACT spatial policy and harmonisation of planning systems.

The administration of the National Capital Plan overlaps with the local government's Territory Plan in the most unexpected places – especially in relation to hills and ridges, and on the main arrival routes into the city. I have worked on one project where there was joint planning jurisdiction over 50% of a property. In that case we did not have any planning issues but the maturing of the local planning authority (ACTPLA) indicates they have sufficient capacity and professional judgement to manage development in these areas. The removal of duplication in these areas outside the Parliamentary Triangle, Lake Burley Griffin and Embassy zones would reduce duplication and hence unnecessary red tape.

The ACT Spatial Policy is most readily understood in the local authority's Spatial Plan, which is subject to the Consolidated National Capital Plan. Revision is needed to improve both. The ACT Spatial Plan provides for concentric rings of population density and should be read in conjunction with the ACT Transport Plan, so that the planned more densely populated areas have ready access to bus routes which feed into the main business and office areas located along the central spine of that Plan (from Civic to the Airport). Public Transport is a major component of creating a sustainable city and courageous application of the Spatial Plan is essential to preventing additional urban sprawl into areas where public transport would be stretched. An example is the proposed extension of the urban area into the Molongolo Valley which, by virtue of its dislocation from transport routes to the main employment centres by reason of the lake, does not present a viable public transport solution. The NCA should have a strong review role in the application of the ACT Spatial Plan, to ensure that the national capital does not lose its bush capital feeling for the many residents with increasingly long travel distances. Canberra is unique in having very low densities in the centre increasing towards the peripheries. The National Capital Plan should limit this non-sustainable outer growth and encourage inner growth and densification.

Harmonisation of the planning systems is necessary and requires broad professional input from all the planning professions – the Property Council, the RAIA, PIA and the Institute of Landscape Architects.

TOR # 2 Opportunities to ensure cooperation with the ACT planning authority and increased engagement with the Canberra community;

A joint committee for resolving duplication and the harmonisation of the planning systems, with a completion date of two years, could then roll over into a review committee of all variations to the National Capital Plan and Territory Plan, and to have a twice-yearly review of complaints. This joint committee would ideally be chaired by a State (Territory?) Architect. Why an architect? Adelaide and Canberra are two cities planned by architects and both have benefitted greatly from the foresight of their planners.

TOR # 3 The effective national promotion of the National Capital, and the roles of the NCA and the ACT Government in advocacy for new infrastructure projects including responsibility for events and developing the distinctive character of the National Capital.

The National Capital needs continual national promotion because immigration and new generations need to understand, visit and come to love our city. As in all business, promotion is essential.

The current role (until the hopefully temporary cutbacks for budget reasons following the installation of the Rudd government) of the NCA has been very beneficial to the Canberra community. The annual Australia Day concert has been very well received and the general role for the NCA in developing the distinctive character of the National Capital should be separate from the more administrative and local population emphasis of the local government.

Summary:

- Canberra as the National Capital needs both levels of planning control, with a periodic review to removal real or perceived duplication and the apparently natural accretion of red tape.
- The ACT Territory Plan should be subject to the broader aims of the National Capital Plan, with periodic review to ensure optimal harmonisation of the two documents.
- The initial review and ongoing harmonisation should be oversighted by a State (Territory?) Architect.
- The ACT Spatial Plan should be further developed with the National Plan, to encourage sustainable city growth and transport systems. Increased density in inner areas is essential to achieving a useable public transport system in a city of 347,000 and growing.

Please note that I am currently acting in the role of Chairperson of the Planning Subcommittee of the ACT Chapter of the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (RAIA), and recently attended a briefing in that role from Annabelle Pegrum and Todd Ruhl regarding their concerns and strategies for the NCA to retain an active but more constrained role in guiding the planning of the National Capital. I also attend the local government quarterly forums with community and industry groups chaired by the ACT Minister for Planning, Mr Andrew Barr, which gives me an additional insight into broader community concerns within the Territory.

I wish the committee wisdom and courage as they prepare their report.

Yours sincerely,

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