

10th April 2008

The Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on the
National Capital and External Territories
Department of the House of Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

Dear Secretary

Inquiry into the Role of the National Capital Authority

I refer to the Joint Standing Committee's notice seeking submissions to the above Inquiry and have pleasure in providing the following comments on behalf of the Master Builders Association of the ACT.

We welcome the opportunity to participate in this discussion and to comment on our perceptions of the appropriate role and responsibilities of the National Capital Authority (NCA).

In summary form, we consider the NCA has an important role to play in the continued planning and development and promotion of Canberra as the National Capital. The Authority's participation and involvement with the Capitals Alliance, including cities such as Washington, Ottawa and Brasilia, provides an appropriate and high profile opportunity to advance our development and exposure.

Whilst there are a number of ways of improving the effectiveness of the organization, we consider that the NCA should be retained and appropriately funded to undertake its nominated role. It must be remembered that the National Capital Plan, as administered by the NCA, is owned by the parliament and enshrined in our constitution as a way of protecting the interests of all Australians.

The MBA (ACT) represents a substantial industry sector whose members, management and staff also reflect a wide cross-section of the Canberra community.

Whilst our membership is naturally focused on business opportunity in the ACT, we make a substantial contribution to the built form of Canberra and the National Capital in all aspects of city development from roads and earthworks to the design and construction of houses, commercial offices and community facilities.

In addition however, we have a strong interest in the quality of development in the National Capital. This interest is in enabling Canberra to fulfill its highly important role as Australia's capital city and a focal point of the increasingly influential Asia Pacific region. We additionally have an interest in the development of the National Capital as home to more than 340,000 people and central to a regional population in excess of half a million people. The need for a continued capital works program to develop the city, and the efficient and effective planning and management of the National Capital is essential.

The experience of most of our members in dealings with the NCA has been of an organisation that is professional, efficient, timely and generally supportive of local business, although we would always argue the case for more use of local resources where these can be delivered in a cost-effective manner to meet NCA requirements. With what might be considered a few exceptions, it is not our belief that the NCA has acted to stifle development in Canberra, rather, it has acted to grow and develop the city for a contemporary society and respecting the vision of those who determined the city's creation for the nation.

Whilst from time to time there are disputes over the role and responsibility of the NCA versus the ACT Planning and Land Authority, we note that all jurisdictions around Australia have a form of two-tiered responsibility for planning of their respective cities and regions in the form of local Government and State Government tiers of responsibility. In this context the existence of the Commonwealth and Territory government fulfill a similar role to other states.

The key issue is better co-ordination and communication, rather than transfer of all responsibilities for planning to one single authority. This could be achieved by the following improvements:

- Provision of a Territory representative on the NCA Board
- Better co-ordination between planning officials
- Adoption of common terminology in planning schemes
- More discussion about the impact of key policies and decisions between the Commonwealth and Territory before these matters are implemented
- Joint agreement on land use, then determine consent authority
- Clarify lines of planning consent in specific geographic areas of the city

- Update the National Capital Plan and consolidation of the National Capital Plan and the Territory Plan into one document to streamline the planning process
- Better co-ordination of Commonwealth land release (not specifically an NCA responsibility)

A significant example of the lack of co-ordination and uncontrolled planning and development activity impacting on other planning outcomes is evidenced by the growth of office, retail and other activity at Canberra International Airport. This in itself is a very good reason to ensure that the Territory and the NCA must continue to review overall planning for the ACT and review planning activities at least every five years.

We do not subscribe to the notion of NCA not consulting. In our view, NCA has clearly moved towards more publicly accountable protocols for community liaison without unnecessary and often spuriously motivated third party appeals. This seems to have provided a more acceptable form of consultation than the situation in the Territory, where third party appeals can cause, and have caused, delays for many developments, often with detrimental consequences.

We recognise that the Commonwealth Government makes a substantial contribution both to the rationale for the National Capital as well as to its funding and management and we acknowledge the need for the Commonwealth to have a continued role in this area.

We see no value or indeed broader national interest in transferring all works approval and development assessment to the ACTPLA because of the overloaded and under-resourced nature of their own operations. This also means that there is no need to contain the role of NCA planning and works approval to the Parliamentary Triangle, provided a better form of co-operative planning can be established between levels of government.

The NCA should be the advocate for new infrastructure in Central National Area acting in the interests of all Australians. Any view that the building of the National Capital is complete is ill-founded and demonstrates a complete abrogation, responsibility and will.

Disposal of national land in clearly defined Territory space should go under Territory jurisdiction/development consent and be applicable to Change of Use Charges locally to simplify the decision-making process and clarify lines of responsibility.

It is our view that there are a number of areas for legitimate National Capital Authority interest including:

- Main open space (hills, ridges and valleys)
- Lake Burley Griffin
- Central national area
- Main avenues/entry routes

There should be some consideration for the Territory's role in the supply/access to water in Lake Burley Griffin given its impact on Territory activity and water management responsibilities.

The role of NCA in continuing to foster awareness and understanding of the National Capital is very important and should not be left as a sole responsibility of the Territory. This also includes the need for continued NCA involvement in major promotional events that can be accessed by Australians beyond those who are resident in the National Capital.

The Master Builders Association of the ACT welcomes this opportunity to provide the committee with some of our perspectives on the role and functions of the National Capital Authority. Whilst we agree that it is an organisation that has not been without criticism, some justified, some not - it has served the Territory well and importantly Canberra as the National Capital.

We would urge the committee consider judiciously the impacts of significant changes to the NCA which could lead to unintended consequences far beyond the remedy of future generations and a loss of the international recognition of Canberra as a model city.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Miller', written over a large, stylized circular flourish.

John Miller
Executive Director