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Planning Bill Reforms and District Strategies - BCC Submission

The Belconnen Community Council (**BCC**) is a not for profit, government-funded community advocacy group who represent the interests of our members and the community to the ACT Government on a range of matters affecting people who live, work, and play in the Belconnen District.

As the voice of Belconnen for over three decades, and with over 100,000 people in our catchment, we are intimately engaged with processes both good and bad and are uniquely positioned to offer observations on what works for all sides of the channels we engage with.

This submission builds on our original submission during the consultation of the Planning Bill, our submissions to the Inquiry into Planning Bill 2022 in November 2022, and our oral submissions at the public hearings for the Inquiry. We do not intend to replicate those documents here but have included references to it where necessary based on the feedback from our members, the community and our committee members who have invested their personal time, energy, and effort into a decade of planning processes in our district.

Summary of Recommendations

These are a summary of the key recommendations made by the BCC. Further detail on these recommendations can be found on page 10.

1. The District Strategy be redrafted to include greater detail on the planning framework, the proposed changes for the district and the implementation of the District Strategy. They should also clearly feature integration of the relevant ACT Government directorates forward plans and infrastructure proposals.
2. The Territory plan and District Strategies must contain a clear framework outlining how effective ongoing collaboration across the ACT Government will be achieved as a priority.
3. The District Strategies should be subject to a life cycle review every two years to evaluate their effectiveness against desired outcomes.
4. Remove Lake Ginninderra (East) and Lake Ginninderra (West) from the possible investigation areas for more development.
5. That a mixed-use design guide is developed to provide clear guidance on best outcomes for mixed use developments.
6. The Canberra Stadium should remain in Bruce at its current location.



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Key principles for planning decision making:

The BCC submits that the planning system should be subject to several key principles that guide the necessary decision-making process in a way that can restore trust in the planning system. These principles include:

- Integrity of process, consistency, and confidence with clarity of purpose – the community expects that the Government of the day and its Directorates will provide the District Strategy documents and a revised draft Territory Plan for public scrutiny before formalising these documents and legislating the *Planning Bill 2022*. The BCC supports Canberra Planning Action Group’s (CPAG) recommendation to “improve the current Territory Plan rather than starting again”; there is limited value in starting from scratch without compelling cause as the requirements for better compliance and outcomes based on stringent principles and guidelines already exist.
- Establishing panels to strengthen trust, transparency and decision making – the Assembly has a role to play in many of the matters being dealt with from a non-technical perspective, and we encourage MLAs to use the expertise in their offices to assist with transparency. We note that there are different approaches to implementing these principles: CPAG suggest “minimising Ministerial ‘guidelines’ and regulations with limited public input; take decision-making on non-minor DAs away from the planning authority (e.g., NSW Local Planning Panels);” with other suggestions like establishing an overarching Planning Commission. These options are a sensible way to examine, review and promote trust in process. We also support the establishment of a much stronger mechanism to hold the Chief Planner accountable to the Minister and the Legislative Assembly allowing for transparency as to where the ‘buck stops’ for planning decisions and ensuring that these decisions are left in the hands of a democratically elected Legislative Assembly and Minister. This should include precise reporting requirements to report to the Legislative Assembly and the public on planning outcomes.
- Genuine consultation to ensure community participation and confidence.
 - To ensure confidence in the DA process, the BCC supports a commitment to continuous active consultation throughout the planning process.
 - The BCC also supports the introduction of Community Participation Plans. These plans should act as a framework to outline the processes, activities, and methods that will be used to ensure meaningful and effective community participation. This consultation should be structured to ensure that a broad sample group from the



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local area is consulted and that all sectors of Canberra's community can express their views. This could employ a form of sortition to ensure a wide spectrum of respondents.

These key principles remain the focus of our Council. Involving the community at every level where they are directly affected by an application, variation, use of a discretionary power or legislative change is fundamental to the people of our district understanding consequences, co-existing with the built and natural environments around them and dealing with the ongoing effects that planning decisions have on our neighbourhoods.

Belconnen District Strategy:

We live in a district resplendent with natural beauty and a barely sustainable level of infrastructure to support it. Belconnen's population is due to increase by 70,000 by 2060¹, and the District Strategy should plan for this increase with our infrastructure capacity in mind. The District Strategy must sustainably provide for population growth within Belconnen's existing footprint to limit expansion onto existing green space and natural beauty areas that make Belconnen such an attractive place to live.

The BCC agrees that district planning should not just consider where development will occur, but the social, environmental, economic, transport, and amenity factors that are essential to creating liveable places. However, the District Strategy, in its current form, lacks the necessary level of detail to make these planning documents useful, and fails to articulate the future vision and plan for the Belconnen District.

There is an opportunity here for the District Strategy to provide a clear vision and framework for Belconnen to absorb the projected population increase, with detailed plans on how it will be achieved and how greater amenities can be delivered to Belconnen residents. Currently the Belconnen District Strategy does not accomplish this and instead appears to be a plan to make more plans, leaving Belconnen residents without clear direction on the future of their district. To assist this, the BCC submits that the District Strategies should be subject to a life cycle review every two years, which reviews the outcomes and considers community views.

It is critical that the legislation and District Strategies operate with common purpose and are navigable by members of the public.

¹ ACT Government population projections 2022-2060

https://www.treasury.act.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/2181985/ACT-Government-population-projections-2022-2060.pdf



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This will allow the ACT Government to avoid issues and delays on delivering infrastructure, as occurred with the proposed green waste facility in West Belconnen, by highlighting issues prior to the DA stage and allowing time for solutions to be found.

Delivering on the district strategies – 12 implementation pathways

The following feedback on the implementation pathways highlights fundamental gaps in the ‘five big drivers’ and their implementation. These should be read considering our recommendations to enable the District Strategy to contain clear and sufficient detail for the community to understand the future of Belconnen.

1. Blue-Green network preservation and expansion

The District Strategy contains objectives around the desired outcomes associated with the Blue-Green network but provides limited information on how these objectives will be achieved over the short, medium, and long term.

Connecting gaps in the nature reserves should consider where these areas interact with active travel and other common infrastructure connections. For example, the Blue-Green Network should also include pathways that connect shops, schools, and health precincts.

However, while there is support for the enhancement and utilisation of “green network as areas to provide greater ...connectivity within and between suburbs according to ecologically sensitive urban design provisions, including enhanced canopy coverage for new path networks,” new pathway networks must not detract from or diminish green areas or fauna habitat.

The current District Strategy does not seek to preserve the green spaces or the habitat of native species, which should remain a key priority.

There must be more details and clearly articulated targets with time limits to achieve the outcomes of the Blue-Green network.

2. Detailed planning for future housing and employment

Currently, the planning documents are inconsistent with other estimates and reports across the ACT Government. For example, the population predictions in the Belconnen District Strategy are inconsistent with those published by the ACT Treasury. This creates confusion as to the applicability of the District Strategy and prevents the community from relying on it as a clear source of information on the region's future.

Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate’s (EPSDD) should be integrating the work of other ACT Government agencies with policy responsibilities in the housing and employment space, such as the Suburban Land Agency (SLA), the ACT Treasury, the Education



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Directorate and Transport Canberra into the planning documents to ensure better housing and employment spaces. This should include the use of scoping reports and integrated planning work. Additionally, EPSDD should push these agencies to work in accordance with the District Strategy and evidence-based planning approaches, including the provision of public transport and connections between new housing and local amenity. This will provide a stronger position in any negotiations with the NCA and Federal Government, as well as the NSW Government and local councils the ACT Government may interact with.

Where EPSDD does plan for additional housing, it should articulate what that would look like and provide evidence-based reasons for its decision making. Housing should not just be concentrated in the town centre but spread to spaces close to other existing amenities. Planned housing should also look at the potential externalities, both negative such as the urban heat effect, and positive such as the possibility for renewal of local shops and better financial stability for existing schools. It should also provide guidance on how negative externalities will be mitigated and positive externalities can be enhanced.

In the pursuit of gentle urban infill in existing suburbs, infill should be done in a way that is sympathetic to the existing residents and considers their concerns. Belconnen community members have identified that block amalgamation inconsistent with existing zoning requirements is a major source of tension with new developments. To address this, the definition of new residential development should be extended to cover situations where blocks are amalgamated to allow multiple dwellings on a site. Where developers seek to amalgamate adjoining properties, they should be subject to the same best practice standards and community consultation provisions placed on larger development projects.

The District Strategy should clearly consider the infrastructure needs where additional dwellings are added to suburbs. This should look specifically at schools, shops, green spaces, parks, and waterways. New developments should also be required to abide by the ACT Government's 30% canopy goal as a mandatory consideration of their DA.

3. Territory Plan – applying urban character and design principles

The National Capital Authority (**NCA**) has substantial control and influence on much of the Belconnen Town Centre (**BTC**) - the District Strategy should outline how this will be managed and what the process for undertaking consultation with the NCA on a bi-partisan footing to improve accessibility and infrastructure will be.

This includes treating them as an essential stakeholder to avoid future jurisdictional issues that could create issues for BTC residents. Ensuring that this relationship is well maintained and that



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common ground is found where possible will allow for the easing of tensions and the mitigation of issues relating to the overlapping powers of both governments.

4. Transport and land use integration

Concerns regarding the mismatch between the existing District Strategies and documents published by other ACT Government directorates extend beyond housing. The District Strategy needs to give assurance to the community, businesses, and operators of community facilities. The ongoing DA issues concerning the proposed green waste facility in West Belconnen are an example of how land use cases that are not fully developed due to a lack of community consultation can impact the infrastructure delivery for the Belconnen region.

The District Strategy must also consider the impact of transport changes and use. The latest Transport Canberra timetable reduces the public transport services available to the community. There are fewer buses now than there were in 1993, and without expanding the bus fleet, the growing demand from the increased population and housing in Belconnen cannot be met. EPSDD should engage earlier with Transport Canberra in the planning process to allow future proofing of both housing and public transport routes. This could include considering if the reintroduction of the 700 series routes would better serve the needs of commuters and reduce the need for daily car commutes.

The District Strategy should involve greater contemplation of these transport links, include additional information on how transport links will be managed, better integrate active travel, and the potential Stage 3 of Light Rail. Currently, EPSDD predictions for Stage 3 Light Rail do not align with those published by Transport Canberra.

The District Strategy should be based on a clear consideration of commute times, the favourability of public transport and where new housing can be directed to best take advantage of the existing transport links. Additionally, how will an integrated education and sports precinct operate under the current arrangements with the NCA and Federal Government in the Bruce precinct? How will this impact the potential Stage 3 Light Rail?

It is worth considering the desirability of documenting new and pre-existing transit corridors in the District Strategies, to ensure the community and developers are well-informed of potential opportunities to improve liveability. For example, Florey contains a potential rapid mass transit route between Coulter Drive and Ginninderra Drive; it is unknown whether this will be used for light rail, yet the failure to preserve limited opportunities such as this would limit Belconnen's transit options in future. During the 2014-16 Master Plan consultation period, the BCC successfully campaigned for remnants of the Belconnen bus lane between the BTC and Coulter Drive to be transformed into a cycle path, noting that the route could potentially be repurposed for other



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transit in future. The BCC suggests greater documentation of these routes would enable coherent long-term planning for improved active transit, without being wedded to any transport mode.

5. Employment and economic focus areas

This implementation pathway lacks sufficient detail to enable its consistent application. What criteria will be used to identify these centres, and how will the community be able to provide their input on those criteria? When these areas are identified, what processes will be used to develop them and how will this be factored into the housing, infrastructure and environmental plans for Belconnen. The BCC submits that these criteria should include how existing employment hubs can be maintained and extended. This should include ensuring that commercial spaces are included in mixed-use developments.

To this point, the BCC endorses the call for a mixed-use design guide to provide clear guidance on the best outcomes for mixed-use developments.

6. Establish new innovation precincts

Following employment and economic focus areas, we are yet to see any examples of how innovation precincts will be established, the timeframe for their establishment or any other details that will assist the community in understanding the ACT Government's vision for these areas. The Bruce precinct and adjacent University of Canberra (UC)/Lawson areas have been identified as a potential innovation precinct, but it is not clear how they will integrate into the rest of the district or what further investment the ACT Government will make in these areas.

The ACT Government should provide a clear vision of this innovation precinct. The BCC believes that the Canberra Stadium should remain in Bruce at its current location, with the necessary investment to make this a quality facility for all of Canberra and be integrated with public transport and the future Light Rail Stage 3.

7. Group and local centres initiatives

Greater interaction with the group and local centres has been a cornerstone of planning for over a decade. There has been mixed success with this method, and there must be a comprehensive examination of previous failings across the Belconnen district, such as in: Kippax, Charnwood, Scullin, Weetangera, Mackellar, Giralang and Spence/Evatt. This should include examining the appeals process that held up Giralang shops for decades. While there are a few examples outside the Belconnen district where these principles have driven the desired changes and outcomes, they have yet to be realised here.

Leaving the realisation of these goals to an undefined process to drive consideration of whether further action is required will result in the same failed outcomes that occurred in the precincts



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mentioned above. For example, the BCC has serious concerns about the progress of the Kippax Group Centre expansion, given the lack of agreement and discernible timeframes on its completion. What will the proposed new process look like, and how will it address these existing experiences and issues?

The ACT Government should be clear at the start of a project on its timeframes and set clear, enforceable targets for the completion of planning work and construction works. There must be certainty over the direction and priorities of the project's outcomes, with clear boundaries and requirements guided by community feedback.

The BCC supports targeted planning and non-planning initiatives to support declining group and local centres; however, this strategy needs more detail to provide confidence that there will be revitalisation and positive change, not another wasted decade. Furthermore, there must be a strategy to rescue group and local centres in the early stages of decline; proactive engagement at the first sign of economic distress from a business unit set up in the EPSDD/SLA structure to identify and help address the initial indicators of decline.

8. City making and 'urban improvement'

The BTC acts as Canberra's second CBD in many respects and is currently the densest part of our city. It presents a substantial opportunity for city making and 'urban improvement', and the District Strategy could clearly guide the BTC's future development to achieve this.

The District Strategy states that urban improvement is achieved by bringing amenities and density together; however, as outlined throughout this submission, there needs to be more detail on how the necessary infrastructure and services will be implemented. If the District Strategy could articulate how future housing will be integrated with the existing facilities within the BTC, as well as outline and plan for future facilities, the open and public spaces could be improved and act as proper 'third places' between work and home. In this approach, the District Strategy could greatly benefit the region. The BCC would support this and would be happy to lead the discussion with the local community to pilot this approach.

9. Facilitate the zero-carbon transition

The ACT Government is committed to net-zero emissions by 2045. It should be noted that the only initiative referencing this commitment is an ongoing general initiative for development precincts to provide the infrastructure needed for this transition. Further work should be done to investigate and plan network infrastructure like battery storage systems and transport infrastructure like electric bus recharging. Additionally, public transport must be efficient and accessible across the district, especially in underserved areas in West Belconnen.



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10. Integrated infrastructure planning

The BCC agrees with the following statement from the District Strategy: “Different directorates and agencies have a role in planning [for the infrastructure, services, and facilities] requiring a cohesive approach and collaboration across ACT Government to align plans for these pieces of infrastructure with the objectives and aims of the district strategies.” Collaboration across the ACT Government is essential in delivering the objectives of the District Strategy. However, we are concerned that there is no framework or plan to develop a framework to enable and encourage this. The Territory Plan and District Strategies must contain a clear plan outlining how effective ongoing collaboration across the ACT Government will be achieved as a priority.

This framework should be transparent and promote accountability to the community. Achieving meaningful progress on the objectives of the District Strategy will require this collaboration, and the community must know who in government is responsible for delivering specific infrastructure and services. This approach should consider the consultation principles outlined earlier in this submission to ensure quality consultation occurs and that feedback is referred to the right area of government.

While the BCC supports the limited proposed collaboration identified in the District Strategy, a framework is required to allow this approach to be experienced across the district and provide detail and clarity on the required infrastructure and amenities to cater for the expected population growth in Belconnen. For example, the planned P-6 school at Strathnairn is listed as an initiative covered by the implementation strategy, but other necessary infrastructure such as a P-6 school and better travel links into the surrounding suburbs for the BTC, or a public pool, an Access Canberra centre, and a police presence in West Belconnen are not considered. The BCC submits that these are examples of vital community infrastructure projects that should be clearly included in the District Strategy.

11. Governance for comprehensive redevelopment

The key principles for planning decision making discussed earlier in this submission outline some of the BCC's key concerns regarding governance. The BCC firmly believes that good governance is essential to achieve good planning outcomes.

12. Social and affordable housing contributions

The provision of social and affordable housing is an essential consideration of the planning system and yet is barely touched on in the District Strategy. While multiple factors influence housing availability and affordability, the ACT Government is the most important actor in this space. The only reference to addressing this in the District Strategy is an investigation into the planning and design principles of social and affordable housing as a medium-term (10 years) timeframe. This



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investigation should occur sooner, with extensive community consultation, and consider models to draw on internationally from other cities. There should also be a goal of ensuring that affordable and social housing is spread fairly across our city to ensure that public housing residents have the same opportunities to live in a well-suited location as other residents.

Where public, social and affordable housing is planned for Belconnen, there should be clear targets and potential barriers to its construction identified and removed. The sufficient provision of social, affordable, and public housing is a desirable outcome, and all districts should take their fair share. But there needs to be clarity, and a detailed strategy, on how this will be implemented.

Recommendations:

The BCC believes that the District Strategy component of the planning reforms has potential and is worth pursuing. However, while it can potentially deliver significant benefits to those who live, work, and visit our district and guide how Belconnen will grow in a sustainable, liveable, and affordable way, the District Strategy in its current form does not achieve this. Much work needs to be done to ensure fairness, equity, genuine consultation, and clear pathways to achieving a better Belconnen. The BCC provides the following recommendations to assist in achieving this outcome.

Recommendation 1: The District Strategy be redrafted to include greater detail on the planning framework, the proposed changes for the district and the implementation of the District Strategy. They should also feature clear integration of the relevant ACT Government directorates forward plans and infrastructure proposals.

In their current form, the District Strategies fail to articulate the future vision and plan for their respective region. This is especially true for the Belconnen District Strategy. While the BCC is supportive of this initiative and the development of the District Strategies, far more work is required to be undertaken, particularly for our district.

We have the largest footprint of any district and more educational facilities, community infrastructure, and public service employment hubs than any district outside the City Centre and Parliamentary Triangle. Belconnen also faces unique challenges as the densest district outside the city centre and with the largest parcels of NCA-controlled land. The ACT Government needs to provide the details necessary for Belconnen's residents to understand how our district's unique features and challenges will be accounted for as Canberra grows. To achieve this, the plans must be detailed, comprehensive, clear, and subject to ongoing consultation and inclusive practice to reflect community expectations accurately. This can only be achieved if the consultation is balanced, diverse and gives the residents the necessary information on District Strategies.

The BCC should remain a key point of contact for the ACT Government for proposed changes to the District Strategy. The BCC stands ready to provide any assistance necessary to bring this process to



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a decent and reasonable conclusion and commits to establishing regular consultation with its community to assist in this process.

Recommendation 2: The Territory Plan and District Strategies must contain a clear framework outlining how effective ongoing collaboration across the ACT Government will be achieved as a priority.

The District Strategy highlights the importance of collaboration across the ACT Government in the following implementation pathways: 'Employment and economic focus areas', 'New innovation precincts', 'New innovation precincts' and 'Integrated infrastructure planning'.

This framework should be transparent and promote accountability to the community. Achieving meaningful progress on the objectives of the District Strategy will require this collaboration, and the community must know who in government is responsible for delivering specific infrastructure and services.

Recommendation 3: The District Strategies should be subject to a life cycle review every two years to evaluate their effectiveness against desired outcomes.

The review provisions in the Territory Bill currently before the Legislative Assembly requires improvement. The Executive only needs to consider, every five years, whether the District Strategy should be reviewed. Considering that the existing strategy appears to be a plan to make more plans, there must be a clear direction or aspiration for the Belconnen District.

A regular life cycle review process would provide the opportunity to examine the progress and outcomes of the objectives and initiatives of the District Strategy. There must be transparency in analysing the strengths, weaknesses, and opportunities available in the Belconnen district. This is essential to meet community expectations and foster community confidence in planning and development.

Recommendation 4: Remove Lake Ginninderra (East) and Lake Ginninderra (West) from the possible investigation areas for more development.

During the consultation conducted by the BCC for the ACT Planning System Review and Reform, and consultation conducted over the past thirty years, there has been overwhelming support for no urban development in these green space areas adjoining the lake.

The investigation areas around Lake Ginninderra, particularly along Diddams Close would be unserved by public transport with the nearest bus station requires crossing Ginninderra Drive to reach the rapid route on Gundaroo Drive. As a result, any proposed development would not only result in the loss of valuable green space but also encourage car use with its associated noise, pollution, and health hazards.



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The BCC recommends investigating better 'gentle' and middle density options in established areas rather than compromise the public green space around Lake Ginninderra.

Recommendation 5: That a mixed-use design guide is developed to provide clear guidance on best outcomes for mixed use developments.

To restore confidence in the ability of mixed-use zoning to deliver a genuine mix of compatible uses in our suburbs and centres, the BCC recommends that EPSDD develop an ACT Mixed Used Design Guide (the Mixed Used Design Guide) to accompany the proposed ACT Urban Design Guide and ACT Housing Design Guide. This document should contain benchmarks and guidelines to ensure developers deliver building spaces that are attractive and useable by prospective tenants. Consultation should be undertaken with the local business community and community service providers to ensure the guide is tailored to the specific needs and commercial realities of the ACT.

Recommendation 6: The Canberra Stadium should remain in Bruce at its current location.

The Bruce stadium district presents an excellent location and opportunity to continue serving the needs of Canberrans when it comes to sporting facilities. With the necessary investment to ensure the facility is in line with modern expectations, the AIS and stadium district could become a vibrant part of the city and require significantly less funding than a new facility in the city centre. It could easily be accessible to all Canberrans via public transport and the future Light Rail Stage 3.

Concluding Remarks

The BCC overall is supportive of the creation of District Strategies. However, the proposed District Strategies require far more work to be useful planning instruments and must be available in a form that allows residents to understand the vision for their suburb and Belconnen more generally. We strongly encourage the ACT Government to consult with the BCC on future changes to the District Strategy and Territory Plan and establish a regular dialogue through the BCC Committee and our monthly meetings.

The BCC is willing to engage further on this process and provide any assistance necessary to ensure that the best outcomes are achieved for the residents of Belconnen.

Regards

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