

WESTON CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL

- Your Local Voice -

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Canberra Social Plan Team
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Dear Team Members

Towards the Canberra Social Plan

The Weston Creek Community Council (WCCC) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the outcomes of the Canberra Social Plan. The WCCC has been actively involved in Weston Creek as a consultation conduit for the local community since 1991. The WCCC is a non-political, voluntary lobby group representing the residents of Weston Creek and is an informed, active and pragmatic contributor to public debates in Weston Creek. Our website (www.wccc.com.au) has further details about the WCCC.

In Weston Creek our community is very active in the affairs of the ACT Government and this has been reflected in the degree of engagement in reviews and studies being carried out post 18 January. We have provided submissions to the many studies associated with and contributing to the Canberra Spatial Plan.

Over the past nine months we have of necessity primarily focused on issues surrounding the recovery and rebuilding of Weston Creek after the 18 January fires. However other social issues such as Rates and Land Taxes; the funding of voluntary groups; and the use and availability of community and educational facilities have also attracted the attention of our community.

The WCCC therefore is presenting the attached submission on the Canberra Social Plan as a reflection of some of the concerns of residents and people of the Weston Creek district.

Yours sincerely

(signed)

Jeff Carl
Chairperson, Weston Creek Community Council.

**Submission of the
Weston Creek Community Council
on the document
*Towards the Canberra Social Plan***

OVERVIEW

Residents of Weston Creek, through the efforts of the Weston Creek Community Council (WCCC) have been very active participants in the various consultation processes on planning matters that the current ACT Government has conducted over the last two years. Whilst our main focus has been on planning matters, there have been other social issues such as Rates and Land Taxes; the funding of voluntary groups; and the use and availability of community and educational facilities that have attracted the attention of our community.

The fairness of Land Taxes is a major issue within our community since the booming Canberra property market has seen a significant increase in property values within Weston Creek. Our community has a significant number of residents who have fixed incomes and who do not qualify for the existing Land Tax relief measures. The recent rapid increase in the amount of Land Tax levied for residential leases is a cause of concern for these residents.

Over the last decade or so, various ACT Governments have outsourced all manner of services and facilities by funding voluntary groups which has resulted in a large number of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and volunteers taking up the provision of services that were previously supplied by government departments and agencies. In recent months Government requirements for NGOs and volunteers to qualify for funding have changed. The latest requirements are much more legalistic and have strict provisions regarding Government liability and indemnity which could result in many NGOs and volunteers deciding that it is no longer worth contributing and they will cease providing services. These latest requirements indicate that the Government may not value and invest in its people and communities to the extent indicated in the discussion document.

The renewal of community facility leases is an issue as we have so few of these facilities in Weston Creek. In an admission of error, Minister Bill Wood noted the mistakes made in not offering an open tender process for a lease renewal on a community facility building which had been a previous commitment to our community. Subsequently Minister Wood has written to our community clarifying the current Government's policy on the renewal of five-year leases for community facilities. The leases will not be renewed by an open and transparent process, but rather, they will be automatically renewed in favour of the existing lessee. The community and other interested parties will have very little (if any) opportunity to participate in the renewal process. This policy denies other potential service providers - who might have offered innovative or different programs - an opportunity to participate in the lease renewal processes.

Also, vacant educational facilities are first offered to Government departments for use as office space, even when there are other community groups unable to lease suitable premises. As the demographic of the area changes, education centres such as the Weston Campus of *The Canberra College*, Stromlo High School and primary schools such as Duffy, Weston Creek and Rivett are ideally placed to enable the fostering of creativity and innovation within our community. These existing facilities provide excellent venues for Adult and Community Education (ACE) classes where community partnerships can be encouraged and enabled. Such integration promotes safe, strong and cohesive communities and enhances economic opportunities.

The trauma experienced by large numbers of residents as a result of the firestorms of 18 January 2003 has meant that they are not able to effectively participate in far-reaching consultation exercises such as the present one. Notwithstanding this fact, the WCCC has tried to gather meaningful comments from members of our community, but we realise that a significant number of residents will be discontented and disenfranchised by the present consultation process(es) being carried out by a range of government agencies.

Weston Creek is a mature district within Canberra and social issues such as Rates and Land Taxes; the funding of voluntary groups; the use and availability of community facilities; and the provision of education services have a great impact on our community. If the Canberra Social Plan can successfully address some of the matters then it will contribute to achieving a number of the social priorities outlined in the discussion document.

Further details follow this summary.

RATES AND LAND TAXES

The discussion document *Towards the Canberra Social Plan* includes under the heading "Improve health and well-being", the statement "access to affordable, good-quality housing is essential for the health and wellbeing of all Canberrans". Whilst it is true that everyone should have access to affordable housing, it is also true that there are a lot of people within the Canberra community who are having trouble retaining their present house since the rates levied on their residential lease are now becoming prohibitively expensive. By and large, these people have limited means with fixed incomes and could be, for example, aged people who have retired from the workforce.

Earlier this year, the ACT Government proposed changes to the present rating scheme which would have pegged future rate increases to rises in the Consumer Price Index regularly computed and published by the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This would have applied to 'long term owners' on all properties which had not been sold or exchanged during the twelve month period commencing 1 July 2003.

The WCCC understands that this proposal had been suggested to overcome the difficulty of some people with limited means being unable to pay the rates on their principal place of residence. This is especially the case where older people relying on pensions for their income are residing in locations where land values have risen markedly in recent years.

Unfortunately, the proposal had a number of disadvantages and it may not always have helped the people it was intended to help. One disadvantage was that neighbours on roughly similar properties could be paying very different amounts in rates. There is no doubt that this would have caused significant comment in the community and may well have resulted in divided communities. Another disadvantage was that the ACT Government would have foregone large revenues when it is clear that the business of government and the standards of the Canberra community will demand high levels of revenue in the future. If revenue is foregone from this source it may have to be found from another.

The Government's proposal was not viewed favourably by the Standing Committee on Public Accounts and the proposal has since been withdrawn and the former rating system reimposed. Whilst the present ACT rating system allows for a deferral of rates, the eligibility criteria are very onerous and lessees have to be virtually destitute to qualify. This has resulted in very few lessees qualifying for deferred rates.

A number of local authorities around Australia (such as the Gold Coast City Council and the South Sydney City Council) have the option for owners with limited means to defer a proportion of their rates. These owners must occupy the property and be holders of a Pension Card, a Health Care Card or a Seniors Card. The deferred rates accumulate as a debt against the property until it is sold or transferred. Hence all rates are ultimately paid.

The Weston Creek Community Council therefore requests that a new, more flexible approach to rates collection is needed. This new approach would allow those who wish to take advantage of a rate concession or deferral to be free to do so while those who did not would be free to opt out of the scheme. In this way elderly and those on fixed incomes would be able to stay in their present house and young families getting started could defer rates and these be paid when the house is sold or transferred, or when financial circumstances improve.

FUNDING OF VOLUNTARY GROUPS

Over the last decade or so, various ACT Governments have outsourced all manner of services and facilities - in common with most other governments throughout the western world. This outsourcing has seen a very large number of Non-Government Organisations (NGOs) and volunteers take up the provision of services that were previously supplied by government departments and agencies.

Government in the ACT is unique in Australia because the responsibilities of local and state government have been given to one elected body. In some ways, this dual role for our government has tended to isolate or at times confuse residents, particularly in areas like planning, education, disability services and health.

In recent months Government requirements for NGOs and volunteers to qualify for funding have changed. The latest requirements are much more legalistic and have strict provisions regarding Government liability and indemnity which could result in many NGOs and volunteers deciding that it is no longer worth contributing to our community and they will cease providing services when their funding agreements expire.

These latest requirements indicate that the Government may not value and invest in its people and communities to the extent indicated in the discussion document.

The community generally agrees that the Government should take all reasonable steps to protect itself against possible legal challenges and claims for damages arising out of the activities of funded NGOs and volunteers. If the Government is no longer able to provide these services itself, and it is unwilling in today's litigious climate to have them supplied by NGOs and volunteers, then perhaps the laws on liability and indemnity need to be changed.

The Weston Creek Community Council therefore requests the Government to re-evaluate the current approach which is reducing the number of NGOs and volunteers providing essential services to members of our community. The community does not agree that it is reasonable for the Government to legally protect itself at the cost of losing essential services and reducing the number of volunteers assisting the community.

USE AND AVAILABILITY OF COMMUNITY FACILITIES

The district of Weston Creek has only a finite amount of land designated for "community facility" uses and we have a limited number of community facility buildings. With a static population, it is unlikely that any new community facility buildings will be constructed in the near future. Therefore, our community is very concerned that our present community facility buildings are used to the best advantage of our community. To this end, the WCCC has lobbied the ACT Government for several years to have all lease renewals for community facilities conducted by way of an open, public tender process.

Weston Creek is a district that has experienced a demographic change over the last decade or so and we have an aging population. This demographic change has resulted in the community requiring different services and community facilities to those that were required during the 1980s or 1990s.

As an example of how a social plan in Canberra is not working, the WCCC wrote to (and had meetings with) Mr Simon Corbell MLA, then Minister for Education, Youth and Family Services regarding lease renewals for community facilities. We sought assistance from the Minister to improve the Government's management of community facilities.

The two issues of concern to our community are:

- Are the current services being delivered by leaseholders appropriate and relevant to the contemporary needs of Weston Creek residents?; and
- Has 'due process' been undertaken with respect to identifying appropriate leaseholders?

Our community is concerned that the current Government has not examined the needs of the community in Weston Creek in respect of the demand and usage of community facilities be they sporting, recreational or cultural. It is therefore difficult to understand the justification the Government has had in continuing with the current provision of services from community facilities. We requested that facilities be offered to a wider range of possible tenants working in the sporting, recreational or cultural fields. The WCCC anticipates that such tenants could offer a broader, and perhaps more appropriate, range of services to the Weston Creek community than those presently being offered.

The opportunity for a wider range of organisations, each with a viable and cost effective business plan, to manage community facilities will work towards addressing the services needed in Weston Creek. The tendering process will identify what services are the appropriate and relevant to the contemporary needs of residents. The tender documentation for community facilities needs to be wide ranging and not restrict the type of organisation eligible to bid, nor significantly restrict the type of services that can be provided from community facilities. The narrow views currently held within government substantially impede others from tendering for the leases.

The issue of community facility leases has moved from Minister Corbell to Minister Bill Wood. Minister Wood gave assurances that the leases in Weston Creek would have a temporary extension until a community needs assessment study being undertaken by the ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA, then known as PALM) was completed.

In an admission of error, Minister Wood noted the mistakes made in not offering an open tender process for a lease renewal on a community facility building which had been a previous commitment to our community. Subsequently Minister Wood has written to our community clarifying the current Government's policy on the renewal of five-year leases for community facilities. The leases will not be renewed by an open and transparent tender process, but rather, they will be automatically renewed in favour of the existing lessee. The community and other interested parties will have very little (if any) opportunity to participate in the renewal process. This policy denies other potential service providers - who might have offered innovative or different programs - an opportunity to participate in the lease renewal processes.

In older parts of Canberra, there are various community facility buildings that are no longer used for their original purpose and have been declared surplus by their original Government department. These surplus facilities now accommodate other Government agencies or departments having completely different purposes or offering completely different services to those originally supplied from the buildings. Examples of this include the former Holder Primary School which is occupied by Therapies ACT and the former Holder High School which houses a number of different agencies and other service providers from areas outside the education sector. In these examples, the former school oval has either not been maintained, or has been sold off for development. In both cases, the local community loses valuable open space.

The local community is generally supportive of the Government reusing these buildings whilst ever there is no prospect of the buildings being used for their original purpose. However on occasions, an opportunity arises where a community organisation - such as an education provider - requires accommodation. The availability of a surplus educational facility together with an interested education provider makes an ideal match since it results in an appropriate utilisation of a specifically designed, surplus educational facility. The local community is generally supportive of this match-up since the education provider would maintain the grounds and the community regains the use of the open space.

The Weston Creek Community Council requests that the current ACTPLA community needs assessment study expand its scope so as to investigate such compatibility of community and educational assets and community needs. In this way it should be possible to build and support participation in our community based on factors such as common interest, neighbourhoods and schools.

PROVISION OF EDUCATION SERVICES – ADULT AND COMMUNITY EDUCATION (ACE)

Students who have graduated from Weston Creek schools and colleges over the past thirty years are already contributing at the highest levels to Australian life. Weston Creek has the opportunity to continue to lead Australia in education and training at all levels of society from early childhood to senior post-employment years. Weston Creek is not just a corridor suburb but a nurturing environment.

Our community wants to retain and enhance existing education facilities in Weston Creek during and beyond their initial purpose as schools or colleges. These existing facilities provide excellent venues for Adult and Community Education (ACE) classes which may not be initially vocational, but certainly can act as pathways to further life-long learning. The 'Brain Gym' at *The Canberra College - Weston Campus* (the former Stirling College) is one first class and popular learning and social facility.

The provision of ACE is important for the local culture of Weston Creek and the enhanced literacy, health and well-being of its residents. ACE is often delivered in an informal manner to groups as a means to literacy (examples include written, spoken, financial, cultural and electronic literacies). It also contributes to the strengthening of social fabric by providing places to meet neighbours and make friends.

There are diverse cultures within our district where English is spoken as a second language. This diversity is respected and contributes to the fabric of our community. It is essential to the social fabric of Weston Creek to retain and enhance existing structures and provide new buildings which are suitable for groups and which are equipped with the workshops and up to date electronic facilities to further disseminate essential literacies.

As the demographic of the area changes, education centres such as the Weston Campus of *The Canberra College*, Stromlo High School and primary schools such as Duffy, Weston Creek and Rivett are ideally placed to enable the fostering of creativity and innovation within our community. Community partnerships (such as those which link parenting groups, schools, libraries, cultural centres, senior citizens, industry, sports and business) can be encouraged and enabled. Such integration promotes safe, strong and cohesive communities and enhances economic opportunities.

These education structures act as strategic community gathering points, as can be seen during and immediately after emergencies.

The Weston Creek Community Council therefore requests that space in existing under-utilised education facilities in Weston Creek be refurbished and enhanced, and made available to our community to provide additional venues for Adult and Community Education (ACE) classes.

Weston Creek Community Council -
October 2003