

WESTON CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL

- Your Local Voice -

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Mr Sandy Hollway
Chair
Non-Urban Study Steering Committee
c/- ACT Bushfire Recovery Taskforce
GPO Box 158
CANBERRA ACT 2601

Dear Mr Hollway

Shaping Our Territory – Options & Opportunities for Non-Urban ACT

The Weston Creek Community Council (WCCC) has been actively involved in Weston Creek as a consultation conduit for the local community since 1991. Over the past 8 months we have discussed issues surrounding the recovery and rebuilding of Weston Creek after the 18 January firestorms. In August 2003 we hosted a large meeting of about 220 people at which Mr George Tomlins presented information on this study.

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 reflected in the degree of engagement in reviews and studies being carried out post 18 January.

The WCCC therefore is presenting the attached submission to the Non-Urban Study Steering Committee as a reflection of the concerns of residents and puts in front of government the agenda of the people of the Weston Creek district for their future.

Yours sincerely

(signed)

Jeff Carl
Chairperson, Weston Creek Community Council.

**Submission of the
Weston Creek Community Council
on the document**

Shaping Our Territory – Options & Opportunities for Non-Urban ACT

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 bushfire recovery matters that the ACT Government has conducted over the last eight months. In principle the WCCC is presenting the range of views of the residents of Weston Creek. These views have been expressed at various public meetings held over the course of the current year, as well as in interviews with some 700 residents at local shopping centres and comments received via email and telephone.

The shopping centre interviews were conducted during February and March 2003 with randomly selected shoppers who were local residents. A significant majority of these residents were very strongly of the view that the Stromlo area should remain green; that a fire buffer zone should be in place between Stromlo and suburban Weston Creek; and that the Stromlo area should remain primarily a recreation area. A substantial number of people also wanted the trees replanted – with more people preferring native trees over pine trees.

Fewer than a third of the residents interviewed expressed the view that limited residential development within the Stromlo area would be acceptable, and that any development should occur at a considerable distance from the existing suburbs. Very few people (less than thirty) thought that extensive residential development would be acceptable, with several people expressing the opinion that residential development within the Stromlo would provide a future 'fire buffer' to Weston Creek's suburbs.

To contrast with the comments above, a small number of residents thought that there should definitely be no more houses. A common comment was that residents bought into the Weston Creek district because the Stromlo forests and Narrabundah Hill played a pivotal role in their recreational pursuits and lifestyle choices. Another popular comment was to retain treed parkland on Narrabundah Hill, especially as an area where dogs could be walked off their leash. A small number of residents thought that the Stromlo forests were as much a victim of the fires as were the suburbs, whilst a similar number of people thought that the problems experienced within the suburbs were solely due to the forests.

The WCCC has also received numerous letters and emails from residents stating that they wish the surrounding green areas to remain green. This view has also been strongly expressed in the numerous public meetings that have been held since the fires.

Stromlo Precinct Option Study

The Weston Creek community is very concerned that the Stromlo area should be "greened" in the near future, both for environmental protection reasons and also to ameliorate the devastated landscape that is currently viewed by a community still suffering the after shock of a massive fire. The community generally believes that an acceptable amount of greening would be achieved by the restoration of Deek's Forest Park on its 18 January 2003 site, with the rest of the Stromlo area being developed as an "Urban Forest" as set out in the Reforestation Business Case developed by ACT Forests and released in June 2003.

This "Urban Forest" concept appears to allow limited urban development in a bushland setting in a manner that offers adequate protection from bushfire events as envisaged by Mr McLeod in his report entitled *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*, whilst also resulting in a commercial forestry area that produces an economic return to the Canberra community. This concept also maintains a large recreational area on Canberra's western outskirts and hence maintains the lifestyle choices of a large number of residents of Weston Creek and elsewhere. In this way, the unique landscape setting of the city, which is highly prized by all Canberrans, is retained.

To satisfy the community's beliefs, it is generally acknowledged that the Option entitled "Deek's Forest Park Option One" is most preferred, with Option Two being least preferred.

Regarding the maps for each of the Stromlo Precinct Options, the areas coloured dark green should be a minimum area reserved for recreational purposes. Clearer definitions of the areas that are shown diagrammatically in the maps are needed since it is difficult for lay persons to imagine where the boundaries are and the actual extent of the various different areas proposed. Furthermore, the recreational area should be large enough to fulfill the recreation needs of the wider Canberra community – just as it was prior to the 2001 and 2003 fire events. The community supports the concept of Deek's Forest Park connecting with the two kilometre 'exclusion area' proposed for the Stromlo Observatory. The connected recreation area will thus offer additional recreational opportunities than would otherwise be available within the boundaries of Deek's Forest Park.

The Stromlo Precinct is on Tourist Route 5 and provides a unique part of Canberra as a "Garden City". Weston Creek residents believe that Tourist Route should be enhanced, but not over commercialized, nor overly urbanised.

The Weston Creek community supports the concept of an International Arboretum as proposed within each of the Stromlo Options since this area would offer additional recreational opportunities. Similarly, an expansion of the Zoo would be supported providing it is environmentally and aesthetically appropriate. The existing equestrian facility in North Curtin should be retained.

Particular comment has been made by members of the Weston Creek community on the need for a fire buffer zone. Whilst tree planting within the zone is obviously a matter for experts, it is preferred that it remains green with trees and is essentially an "Urban Forest" as discussed previously. Particular mention has been made of the residents' desire to see Narrabundah Hill remaining as Public Open Space in some form, but not as part of the Canberra Nature Park as this would remove a number of 'approved' recreational pursuits currently allowed.

In very recent times, there have been proposals to devote part of the Stromlo area to commercial wind farms. Whilst such proposals might be environmentally sustainable, they neglect the aesthetics and noise of such farms. Many Weston Creek residents bought into the area for the bush vistas that could be enjoyed from either their residences or the nearby hills. Arrays of large steel towers with slowly rotating blades will permanently destroy these bush vistas and hence negatively impact on these resident's lifestyles. Also, wind farms are known to generate significant background noise and it appears that buffers of between three and five kilometres are needed between the wind farms and residential areas to minimise the noise problem. Such buffers would appear to preclude the existence of wind farms within most of the Stromlo area.

Cotter Precinct

The Weston Creek community strongly believes that the former character of the Cotter Precinct should be retained and that a large village (200 houses has been suggested) is not appropriate. The community also believes that there should be some additional facilities provided, but no over commercialization. The overwhelming consensus is that the Cotter Precinct should be retained as a family area. The idea of walking trails is supported. It is further suggested that the Casuarina Sands area could have augmented facilities as a recreation area.

The concept of a rural village at Uriarra is generally supported as the area is not considered to have a strong recreational use and does not appear to have so strong an environmental or aesthetic impact. However, concerns expressed by local rural leaseholders about the possible increased impact on their livelihoods from domestic dogs also need to be considered. In view of the closeness of the Uriarra area to working sheep properties and national park areas, it might be appropriate to restrict domestic pet ownership within the proposed rural village so as to minimise their impact on farm activities and nearby ecosystems.

Many residents have commented within the context of the Non-Urban Study report on various aspects relating to the protection against future fires. The community agrees that there should be better management of areas further to the west away from the built up areas of the ACT. In particular, a review of the fire history within the Cotter/Uriarra precinct shows that it is critical that any fires to the west of this precinct must be controlled and extinguished before they cross the confluence of the Cotter and Murrumbidgee Rivers. If the fires are not controlled, the topography and prevailing winds will tend to push any fire into the Stromlo area in an uncontrollable manner. As

the Cotter/Uriarra precinct is close to the ACT/NSW border, this management and control has to be done in cooperation with appropriate NSW authorities.

Windbreaks are believed to be essential to protect the areas to the west of Canberra from the effects of strong winds and also to protect the soil from erosion. The forested areas that previously provided the windbreaks were seriously damaged by the 18 January fires and therefore, they need to be replanted or rehabilitated as a matter of priority. The community believes that this windbreak area should be located on the west of the Murrumbidgee River as a minimum.

Key Principles

The key principles in the report have widespread support within the Weston Creek community, especially the points relating to Bushfire management and the enhancement of water quality.

However there are considerable concerns with various aspects of the discussion document. Firstly there is no explanation of the term "biosphere" and secondly it proposes a "more populated and managed zone between western Canberra and the bush".

There appears to be considerable bias expressed in the discussion document against any ongoing activities for ACT Forests. Commercial forests have been an integral activity in the Weston Creek area since the early decades of the twentieth century. ACT Forests' Business Case makes out a reasonable argument for a return on investment of around 6.5% based on about 14,000ha of commercial activity, whilst also taking account of their "Urban Forest" concept. This "Urban Forest" concept appears to allow limited urban development in a bushland setting in a manner that offers adequate protection from bushfire events as envisaged by Mr McLeod in his report entitled *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT*. Most of the re-establishment costs appear to be adequately funded from insurance payouts. The Weston Creek community does not understand why such a reasonable proposal is largely ignored.

A substantial number of residents are sceptical about the true motives behind the Government's push for urban development in the Stromlo area. Many believe that the development push is only occurring because it results in a large increase in Government revenue from the development of greenfield sites. This rush to development is often seen as an unfortunate result of the devastation wrought by the 18 January 2003 firestorms which has presented the Government with an opportunity for a land grab that would otherwise not have occurred until the pine forests were harvested.

Whilst "economic opportunity " may be appropriate in some areas, large scale residential development in a fire prone area is not in keeping with the wishes of our community. Furthermore, this seems a rather unusual proposal taking into account the history of fires advancing through this area from the west. Weston Creek and its surrounds are colloquially known as 'bushfire-alley'. Why would you put more houses in a known bushfire alley?

The entire Stromlo area has now been effectively declared as a bushfire prone area since the Government has accepted all of the recommendations from Mr McLeod's report. The costs of building houses in a declared bushfire prone area will be significantly higher due to much more stringent building regulations, and there are expected to be higher insurance costs. It is considered unlikely that these houses could be afforded by first-home buyers.

Key Opportunities

Generally the key opportunities are supported by Weston Creek residents with the major reservation that the intrinsic character of the area should be retained. The development of science and education facilities is supported as long as they don't restrict access for the general public to areas which have previously been 'bush' areas. Nor do we want to have 'bush' areas "loved to death" by excessive numbers of tourists as the discussion document appears to suggest is feasible for sites such as Tidbinbilla.

Residential development at the Cotter of the sort described in the discussion document is not supported. Furthermore, any development for commercial accommodation or other commercial building should be very sensitive to the traditional use and character of the area.

The cost of servicing and maintaining isolated communities in the ACT is exponentially more expensive than a co-joined suburb. If these isolated 'villages' are to proceed, they would in no way be able to generate the rates to cover the cost of servicing them (electricity water, sewerage, garbage disposal, schools). The current ACT ratepayers would be significantly impacted in the cost of this approach. The ACT ratepayer base is insufficient to fund this grandiose approach of rural villages.

The use of schools, health facilities and transport links would impact on Weston Creek as it would be the nearest existing provider of such facilities and such facilities are unlikely to be built in the new areas. Our community has realised that in order to maintain our existing facilities and services, the population of Weston Creek must be maintained at existing levels, or preferably, the population must increase. To achieve this aim of population stability, the community accepts that some urban development/consolidation must occur either within or around our suburbs, but there is no single view on how this might occur.

The *Towards the Canberra Spatial Plan* discussion document released in August 2003 estimates a population of 389,000 in 2032, but the five Growth Concepts contained within this document envisage that Canberra will capture more of the growth from the sub-region than is currently occurring. If this happens then it is stated that the city may grow to exceed 500,000 residents by 2032. While acknowledging this additional growth could occur, the WCCC feels that a more conservative figure somewhere between the two extremes is likely to happen. A more realistic measure would be an increase to say 450,000 residents.

The ACT's population in 2002 is stated in the latest Spatial Plan document as being 321,819 persons. A population of 450,000 means just over an extra 128,000 people, and if a reduced household size of 2.4 persons is applied to the whole of this increase, then only 53,409 new dwellings would be required.

The WCCC notes that in Growth Concept 5 from the latest Spatial Plan document, a total of 71,000 dwellings could be provided without developing the Stromlo area. We also note that Growth Concept 1 from the same document provides for 47,000 new dwellings with minimal urban redevelopment. If this projected population growth were tempered slightly, while also completing greenfield residential development Gungahlin and Lawson etc, the projected dwelling target could again be reached without major greenfield development in the Stromlo area.

In any event, the Weston Creek community sees no requirement for large-scale residential development of the Stromlo area within the next 20 or so years based on realistic population projections. However, some limited residential development might be acceptable provided that it is within the bounds of an "Urban Forest" as envisaged by ACT Forests in their Reforestation Business Case released in June 2003.
