

WESTON CREEK COMMUNITY COUNCIL

- *Your Local Voice* -

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Established 1991

(Weston Creek Citizens Council Inc. – Reg. No. A2637)

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Mr Neil Savery
Chief Planning Executive
ACT Planning and Land Authority
GPO Box 1908
CANBERRA ACT 2601

By email: cityhill@act.gov.au
City Hill Concepts,
Urban Design.

Dear Mr Savery

WCCC Comments on the Vision for Civic

The Weston Creek Community Council (WCCC) welcomes this opportunity to contribute to the public consultation process on the vision for Civic. We appreciate the additional time afforded by the ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA) for the WCCC to make a formal submission during early July. Unfortunately, it was not possible to complete a formal submission during this timeframe as additional concepts and ideas were continually being proposed – some of which impacted on these comments.

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.

The WCCC appreciates the on-going support of ACTPLA in this endeavour.

The general consensus of the Weston Creek community is that much needs to be done by ACT Government agencies like ACTPLA in setting the strategic direction for planning of the ACT so that we achieve a city we are proud of. The WCCC accepts that Weston Creek is not, and will not be, a major employment centre and many residents commute to the Civic and other centres for employment.

In addition any works contemplated by the ACT Government affect all ratepayers and the use of funds in Civic conversely reduces the funds available for infrastructure in residential suburbs.

It is in this vein that the WCCC considers that planning in Civic impacts on the residents of Weston Creek. All residents of Canberra need to contribute to the debate on the re-development of their principal city centre.

Please find attached the comments of the WCCC regarding the current three proposals (the *City Hill* plan, the *Living City* proposal and the *Moving our Future* proposal). Undoubtedly the coming months will see further proposals developed for rejuvenating Civic and its environs, as well as further refinement to one or more of the three existing proposals.

Members of the WCCC Committee are available to discuss the comments raised in this paper at a mutually convenient time.

These comments will be made available to residents through our website in accordance with our usual practice.

Yours sincerely

(signed)

Jeff Carl
Chairperson
Weston Creek Community Council

cc

Mr Simon Corbell MLA, Minister for Planning
Mr Zed Seselja MLA, Shadow Minister for Planning and Infrastructure

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

CANBERRA'S CITY CENTRE - Civic

Weston Creek Community Council (WCCC)

INTRODUCTION

1. In the past year there has been an accelerating interest in the future planning for Civic, the business centre of Canberra. At least three conceptual proposals, rather than detailed plans, have been brought forward for consideration and these proposals need to be actively debated within the broader Canberra community. It is hoped that whichever proposal is adopted is consistent with the recommendations of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) 2002 report *Canberra: A Sustainable Future*.
2. The Weston Creek Community Council (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.
3. Whilst the WCCC's primary concern is with matters concerning Weston Creek it is appropriate to make a submission on the future of Civic because of its importance for all of Canberra and for Weston Creek residents as a place to work, for cultural activities and as a business and retail centre.

PRELIMINARY COMMENTS

4. Currently there are three proposals for future development of Civic which have been put forward for comment. These are the April 2005 *City Hill* plan put forward by the ACT Government; the *Living City* proposal by Mr Terry Snow and architect Mr Colin Stewart launched in late April 2005; and the mid-July 2005 *Moving our Future* concept proposed by a consortium of local architects, planners and engineers.
5. Even though each of the proposals have indicated that they are not intended to be detailed plans, the principles they contain will affect the future development of Civic for many years to come. The decisions made on these proposals today will make permanent changes to Civic which will be difficult to alter should it be decided at some time in the future that they need to be altered. In the past the construction of open-air car parks, which some residents believed were ugly and quite obviously temporary, posed little problem because re-development of these sites can be accomplished easily.

RATE OF CHANGE

6. An issue which is developing and raising concern is that, after years of little change in Civic, it seems that rapid development is now being contemplated. This comes against the background of a recent slowing of population growth in the ACT and the uncertainty that all of the new office developments will be needed in the next few years. The WCCC urges government agencies to consider all development proposals carefully so that their decisions are commensurate with a realistic population growth of the ACT. On this point it appears that some new office developments are being considered for construction on the premise that tenants of existing buildings will transfer to the new buildings. This raises questions of the future use of the earlier buildings - some of which were constructed over 30 years ago. The WCCC has noted recent announcements by the Minister for Planning that vacant office buildings could be renovated for inner city residential accommodation.

PRINCIPLES FOR THE FUTURE PLANNING OF CIVIC

7. The WCCC considers that the following principles should be kept in mind in the future planning of Civic so that we get **a city we are proud of**. These will be elaborated in this submission.

I: Civic should be the principal centre for Canberra and identifiable as the “municipal” part of our city.

II: Civic should be the site of cultural institutions of ACT-importance including those educational, theatrical, entertainment and some sporting activities which are for Canberra’s citizens rather than for the nation.

III: Civic should be proudly Canberran and easily identifiable as such

IV: Civic should always be the site of the ACT Legislative Assembly

V: Civic should always be the principal business centre.

VI: The present open spaces in Civic should be retained as much as possible

VII: Civic should be the site of a major public transport hub.

I: CIVIC SHOULD BE THE PRINCIPAL CENTRE FOR CANBERRA

8. In putting forward their *Living City* proposal Mr Snow and Mr Stewart commented that visitors to Canberra had no idea where the “city” or the “centre” was. Even when they had passed through it some people had no idea that they had passed through the centre of Canberra. While this may not be an important reason for building up Civic as a business and municipal centre, the point does have some relevance. Canberrans need to have a sense of ownership of their city. Thus while the city is the nation’s capital and every Australian ought to be proud of this part of Canberra, thousands of ordinary people in Canberra want to show off what they have achieved and where they live.

9. Civic should be of an appropriate size to reflect that Canberra is one of our largest cities (eighth in size) and that it is of commercial and economic importance to Australia. For this reason it is important that Civic should be our biggest centre. The WCCC understands the arguments put forward that other town centres should be the focus of development, but given recent population trends and the resources at the ACT Government's disposal, the WCCC considers that top priority should be given to Civic and its immediate environs.

II: CIVIC SHOULD BE THE SITE OF CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS OF ACT IMPORTANCE

10. To an extent major cultural centres have already been built in Civic. These include the Canberra Theatre complex. It is not practicable, or financially viable to hold major sporting activities in the city centre (as is the case elsewhere in Australia). Various codes of football, athletics, netball and basketball to mention just a few can utilise excellent facilities at Bruce and elsewhere in Canberra. However scope exists for the location of some sports in the city, such as table tennis, squash and even dancing have possibilities. The relocation of the sports offered by the YMCA on London Circuit to other parts of Canberra is to be regretted as this removed an amenity frequented by people who work in Civic. The provision of a replacement healthy lifestyle facility that operates both during working hours and at other times is therefore a high priority.
11. While it may be true that many visitors come to Canberra to visit the nation's capital and the national institutions which are part of that experience; others visit because they participate or compete in activities which are enjoyed by Canberrans and other Australians. These include a wide range of activities from visiting sporting teams, musicians, actors and dance competitions or simply to visit friends and relatives. A disturbing fact is that many Australians visiting Canberra are unaware that the Territory has its own government – especially as there is minimal reporting of our Legislature outside the ACT. A popular misconception is that we are kept in the lap of luxury by a beneficent Federal Government which they, the visitors, pay for. Indeed, the Federal Government is always reported in national media reports as “Canberra” – not the Federal Government! Addressing this issue is outside the planning of the city but we need to achieve **a city we are proud of** which would at least raise in the mind of a visitor the duopoly of Canberra.
12. It would not be appropriate for sporting teams visiting from other parts of Australia, for example, to be welcomed to Canberra at Parliament House. The present practice is to welcome these people in the open air in the square outside the Legislative Assembly and this has its limitations in a Canberra winter and on inclement days. What Civic and Canberra needs is a “Town or City Hall”. The WCCC is well aware that Canberra is not seen as having indoor facilities available in other cities and towns in Australia for civic receptions and other municipal activities.
13. An opportunity exists to create such an amenity with the recent purchase of the Convention Centre by the ACT Government. Consideration should be given to converting this building to a Town Hall. These facilities could be used for civic welcomes and receptions, visiting concert groups, visiting art shows and some commercial applications. As a minimum the facade of the building would have to be re-designed to show its real purpose. The opportunity should be taken to fly the

ACT flag in front of or on top of the building to emphasise its “municipal” function. Similarly the opportunity should also be taken to prominently display the ACT flag outside the current probably inadequate ACT Legislative Assembly building (or its replacement).

14. The Committee of the WCCC believes that a city will always be sterile without arts activities in the city centre. In the past in Canberra these have been done on a “show string” budget with subsidies from the ACT Government. A revitalised Civic including a Town Hall could provide opportunities for big business to support arts activities in the city centre.

III: CIVIC SHOULD BE PROUDLY CANBERRAN AND EASILY IDENTIFIABLE AS SUCH

15. A criticism of the *Living City* proposal is that they have only proposed what every other city centre in Australia has - large non-descript buildings. To be fair it is assumed that the buildings that they have shown on their proposal are only meant to be indicative and not final designs. An example of this is their proposal to erect very large buildings on both sides of Northbourne Avenue in the vicinity of Cooyong Street and Barry Drive as a way of saying that “you have arrived in the city centre”. This may announce a city centre but it does not announce Canberra.
16. In other parts of Australia there are apparent “contests” where different cities compete to have the tallest/longest/largest buildings and often the constructions have no other merit. It is not enough to simply have tall buildings because these are much the same around the world. In the 1980s the city centres of Australia's state capitals were criticised for being “concrete jungles” and “uninhabited canyons after 5 pm” and that mistake should not be repeated.
17. Obviously nobody would want to compare the Sydney Opera House with other buildings in terms of its dimensions but rather in the drama and uniqueness of its architecture. For this reason the Opera House is a dramatic and unique building and it has become an icon of Sydney. In Brisbane, for example, the city’s Town Hall has become an icon of the city while the Parliament House of Queensland is less well known. Perth has a unique and beautiful Town Hall, which though small in its dimensions, deserves to be better known. While it could be argued that Parliament House and the National Museum have become icons of Canberra as the nation’s capital, there are no icons which celebrate the city of Canberra as a place where people live. There is a therefore need for unique buildings to be designed and constructed to create a city which the Canberra community can be proud of.
18. Some cities have dramatic natural features which make the city attractive and unique. An important advantage of the Government's *City Hill* plan is that it integrates the shores of Lake Burley Griffin with the rest of the city. This would be a good “backdrop” to the city which could be used in promoting the city. City Hill itself is also a unique feature which would help “identify” Canberra as a unique place.
19. City Hill, with its flagpole says that the ACT is an independent Territory. It is also the site of Charles Weston’s tree plantings which were planned by Walter Burley Griffin himself. For these reasons they are historic and worth keeping. A criticism

of the present City Hill open space is that it cannot be used because it is surrounded by a major road preventing access by pedestrians. This is a valid criticism. However, it should also be pointed out that open spaces don't always have to be used in an active sense but can be valuable by opening vistas and views which are much appreciated. Nevertheless it would be better that the space be actively used as much as possible and this can be achieved by improving pedestrian access.

20. Under the *Living City* proposal it appears that City Hill would disappear altogether and be reduced to ground level with a water feature. The flagpole would go with it. Furthermore, the proposal has this space enclosed by a ring of medium height buildings so that the views and vistas of the water feature would be blocked by these buildings from the rest of Civic. The views and vistas would then be restricted to a fortunate few who occupied space in the ring of buildings. A key feature of the *Living City* proposal is the construction of a new Legislative Assembly building set into City Hill which could easily be interpreted by visitors and local residents as a poor imitation of the Federal Parliament building at the opposite end of Commonwealth Avenue. The *Living City* proposal may also give the unfortunate impression that retailing is the poor cousin of the activities carried on in Civic.
21. The *Moving our Future* proposal also shows buildings on the southern part of City Hill, proposing a comparatively modest Legislative Assembly building. However, unlike the *Living City* proposal, the *Moving our Future* proposal does maintain a large percentage of the open space and provides very good pedestrian access via landscaped land bridges to and across the City Hill precinct. After consideration, the Committee of the WCCC is of the opinion that it would be better to retain the open space of City Hill and the flagpole but make it more accessible to pedestrians.
22. A feature of both the *Living City* proposal and the *Moving our Future* proposal worth further consideration is the suggestion that Vernon Circle be closed to vehicular traffic and that as much through-traffic as possible is directed to alternative routes including the upgrading of Limestone Avenue. In this respect some consideration should be given to resurrecting the Monash Drive proposal possibly altering the proposed exit to go along part of Antill St. However, even in the *Living City* proposal it is recognized that alternative routes will not be enough to divert all through traffic and it is proposed that widening London Circuit to cater for this and as a substitute for Vernon Circle. This part of the *Living City* proposal has drawn criticism that the widening of London Circuit will be a barrier and further isolate those people on the outside of London Circuit. It will certainly further isolate the retail side of Civic. If Vernon Circle is to be retained then ramps for pedestrian access should be given to City Hill so that it can be more actively used. This issue will require its own unique consultation process to meet a range of needs. The community of Canberra needs to have a city that we are proud of and one that can also manage significant traffic flows.

IV: CIVIC SHOULD ALWAYS BE THE SITE FOR THE ACT LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY.

23. The size of the ACT Legislative Assembly may need to be increased in the future. Both major political parties have agreed on this, but they differ on the actual proposals and the amount of the increase needed. The WCCC notes that no change

can be made to the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly without the approval of the Federal Government. That aside, space will need to be allocated for an appropriate ACT Assembly building as the present accommodation is probably inadequate, and will never be adequate for a larger Assembly. This need for a new Assembly building has been catered for by all three proposals. Moving the Assembly to another part of Canberra would destroy part of the raison d'être of having a Civic centre in the first place and lead to difficulties as to where else in Canberra the Assembly could be located. For these reasons the WCCC strongly favours that Civic should always be the site of the ACT Legislative Assembly.

V: CIVIC SHOULD ALWAYS BE THE PRINCIPAL BUSINESS CENTRE

24. The WCCC is aware of the claims of other town centres in Canberra. However, if Civic is to be the major centre, it must also be our principal business centre. Not only as the site for most of the ACT Administration but also for Federal Government departments, national organizations and also possibly as the site for the headquarters of national companies. Companies which need access to Government at all levels should be particularly encouraged to locate to central Canberra. Modern communications enable fast and cheap contact with the rest of the country and the world so that company administration does not always have to be where the "factory" is located. Canberra has much to offer in this regard and it should be "sold" as much as possible. Of course Canberra is in competition with many other centres for this kind of activity and we should not retreat from the competition.

VI: THE PRESENT OPEN SPACES IN CIVIC SHOULD BE RETAINED AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE

25. The WCCC suggests that "national symbolism does not have to be concrete; it can be smell or sound and textures of a place". While everybody appreciates green open spaces and these are needed, not all open space need be green. It could be a plaza which will bring "cultural vitality" like musicians, artists, sports people and activists. It could also embrace technology and be the site, for example, for a Stock Exchange information screen or a large permanent TV Screen used to show national events taking place elsewhere. Climate needs to be taken into account so that appropriate shelter for our open spaces can be provided such as shade on a sunny day and a wind break on a windy day and hence our open places are warm and cool as needed and always welcoming. The WCCC accepts that Canberra's climate is a challenge and that not every activity can be catered for in an open arena. For this reason the WCCC suggests creation of a multi-function Town Hall. All these facilities should be as "people friendly" as possible. Without people there can be no vitality and no "life" in Civic.

VII: CIVIC SHOULD ALSO BE A MAJOR PUBLIC TRANSPORT HUB.

26. As the major centre for Canberra, Civic will also be the site for a major public transport hub. However, this will need to be carefully thought through. In the 1970s there was criticism of major CBDs in Australia because they emptied out at night and became "empty concrete canyons". This occurred even though major nighttime entertainment venues were located in the city centre. While people living reasonably close to the city on a major transport route are catered for, those who live further out and have to change or face infrequent services find that public

transport is too slow to venture out at night except on rare occasions. People on major transport routes should be encouraged to use these services to access Civic. There needs to be an examination of various versions of the “Park and Ride” concept with the parking located closer in than the town centres. Off-street car parking will still be needed for people who use cars. Those living further out and distant from an interchange or a major transport route will need to be catered for if the entertainment centres are to be viable.

27. The transport hub concept should take into account Canberra’s generally more severe climate compared to coastal cities. This affects non-essential travel (eg to recreation centres) more than essential travel (eg to work) both in the summer and the winter.
28. A key feature of the *Moving our Future* proposal is the construction of a high-speed monorail network linking Civic and the town centres, with the monorail route passing to the west of City Hill in a cutting which follows the present path of Vernon Circle. Whilst the WCCC applauds the proponents of the *Moving our Future* proposal for having the foresight to maintain Civic as the hub of a public transport network for Canberra, we cannot endorse such a grandiose concept which seems to be directed more at putting Canberra on “the map” rather than being directed to a cost-effective public transport system that can be maintained within the ACT Government's modest public transport budget, especially as monorails have become associated with “theme parks” and may possibly cheapen the image we wish to create.
29. While the *ACT Sustainable Transport Plan* encourages the use of public transport it also recognizes that it will be always be insufficient to provide for every journey in Canberra. The use of private car transport will continue to be the most important factor in the transport scene in the ACT – to argue otherwise is to go against the findings of several studies conducted both within Australia and overseas. Current plans to improve public transport in Canberra have concentrated on improving services on major routes between interchanges (eg see *Canberra Public Transport Futures Feasibility Study*). It is not practicable to improve current public transport services for people living a distance from interchanges, even when community service obligations are in place. Public transport is not a profit making exercise – nor can it easily achieve a “loss neutral” position – and this needs to be taken into account when governments have their hands in the pockets of ratepayers. People will want to travel to the centre at night by car and car parking will need to be provided. This is not an argument that car parking should be provided free but an argument that it should be provided for those who want to use it. Older people especially find that using public transport is inconvenient and daunting and will want access to car transport.
30. Off-street car parking is important for retail activities. In recent years conventional CBDs in other jurisdictions have lost much of their retailing to suburban drive-in shopping centres. This trend has also had some impact in Canberra with the expansion of the large shopping malls in the town centres of Belconnen, Woden and Tuggeranong, and plans for a large shopping precinct in Gungahlin. However, we note that an active retailing sector plays a major role in all three proposals for the future direction of Civic. If there is any idea of retaining this activity in the City, the plan will need to cater for those who want to use it to achieve **a city we are**

proud of which would at least encourage living and working in Civic. There may be insufficient customer numbers to retain the present volume and standard of retailing and to encourage more consumer spending would need the maintenance of off-street car parking. It is to be anticipated that any such moves would be actively resisted by existing “retail interests” located in the various town centres.

31. The WCCC notes that public car parking will be provided in the ACT Government’s *City Hill* plan but it appears that this will be underneath buildings used for other purposes rather than buildings specifically erected for car parking. The WCCC understands that this has been done for aesthetic reasons but it should be made clear that this is ‘public’ car parking, at a price, and not solely parking for the tenants of the building. There may be community support for parking structures on the fringe of Civic if they were aesthetically pleasing and not built at the expense of open space.

WCCC August 2005