

Your local voice



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Mick Gentleman,
Chair,
Standing Committee on Planning and Environment,
ACT Legislative Assembly,
GPO Box 1020,
Canberra,
ACT 2601

Dear Mr Gentleman,

Submission Relating to Draft Variation 281 - Molonglo

1. The following is a submission relating to the Planning and Environment Committee's consideration of Draft Variation 281 - Molonglo development.
2. The submission is made by the Weston Creek Community Council (WCCC) - funded by the ACT Government to represent the residents of the 8 suburbs of Weston Creek.
3. The WCCC made a submission on this matter to the ACT Planning and Land Authority (ACTPLA) in December 2007, of which the Committee has a copy. We request that Committee members read it, because it is pertinent to our present submission.
4. In essence, the WCCC seeks the reinstatement of the Deek's Forest portion of the Molonglo development as a green buffer recreational area. The submission does not oppose the Molonglo development overall and in fact contends that the Molonglo development would be greatly enhanced by our recommendations.

Subsequent Developments

5. In April 2008 ACTPLA released a revised version of Draft Variation 281, and a summary of submissions received during the consultation period. These documents announced that ACTPLA had rejected the WCCC submission of December 2007 in its entirety.
6. The WCCC had met with ACTPLA to discuss its submissions before ACTPLA rejected the WCCC proposals. It was apparent then that ACTPLA did not intend to accept any of the WCCC views, although the reasons were not known at that time.

ACTPLA rejection of the WCCC submission

7. The rejection of the WCCC proposals is contained in paragraph 42 of the "Molonglo Draft Variation to the Territory Plan No 281 Public Consultation – Issues Raised" document issued by ACTPLA in April 2008. In that document, ACTPLA made 2 main points.

8. The first point was that the area proposed by the WCCC would take up 160 ha of residential land – equivalent to 2,250 dwellings plus ancillary facilities. However, there was no consultation, negotiation or participation with the WCCC about the possibility of a lesser sized differently shaped parcel of land being used as Deek's Forest. Also, if ACTPLA considered that the WCCC proposal entailed the loss of such a significant amount of land and houses that it threatened the Government's urban consolidation policies and revenue, why were there no such concerns for the development of the new huge Stromlo Forest Park? (The WCCC supports that facility). One could conclude that ACTPLA has not taken into account the concerns of the voting block of the residents within the 8 suburbs of Weston Creek.
9. The second point made by ACTPLA was that the area identified by the WCCC and known as "Deek's Forest" will "be surrounded by large amounts of open space such as the International Arboretum, Stromlo Forest Park, the river corridor, surrounding rural lands, the area between Molonglo and the suburbs of Duffy and Holder, and the allocation of open space within suburbs as part of estate development plans".
10. The WCCC accepts that the eventual residents of the new suburbs of Molonglo will be surrounded by the International Arboretum, Stromlo Forest Park, the river corridor, surrounding rural lands". That will be fine for them.
11. However, the WCCC submission was on behalf of the current residents of the 8 suburbs of Weston Creek who are NOT surrounded by the International Arboretum, Stromlo Forest Park, the river corridor or the , surrounding rural lands". Put more simply, the WCCC does not represent the future residents of Molonglo but the residents of Weston Creek. It is not clear how "the allocation of open space within the suburbs as part of estate development plans" is going to benefit the residents of Weston Creek. The point being made by ACTPLA here is irrelevant at best. It appears that it was always ACTPLA's intention/brief to reject the WCCC proposal - the reasons given were clearly not important.
12. The reason why the Deek's Forest land was selected by the WCCC was because that particular land was next to Weston Creek (easy walking distance for many residents) and because it had a proven history of very heavy use prior to the fires and it provided a unique wildlife family orientated refuge. Far fewer residents of Weston Creek ventured as far as Stromlo Forest Park and the land that is to be the arboretum.
13. We accept that residents of Weston Creek will be able to travel to Stromlo Forest Park (whose entrance is far away on the northern side) and the International Arboretum (near the Tuggeranong Parkway) etc just as other Canberra residents. But these facilities do not provide the type of facilities that used to be provided by the Deek's Forest area especially for the younger and older sectors of the community. The Stromlo Forest Park is a sporting facility for mountain bike riders, racing cyclists and runners. This is what it is promoted as and this is how it is being physically built. Deek's Forest on the other hand is a less specialized facility and it is still needed to complement Stromlo Forest Park– hence this submission.

14. The WCCC also acknowledges an argument subsequently put by ACTPLA that the Deek's Forest area was never zoned as an area for the use of the residents of Weston Creek. This view implies that the Weston Creek residents had been using more facilities than they should have used. From a community and WCCC perspective the zonings are a planning aid only and should be used for the benefit of citizens rather than a justification of problematic policy goals such as revenue raising or extreme urban consolidation. The Weston Creek residents had the use of Deek's Forest for over 35 years and now take the view that its use has been taken from them – they do not look at this as a request for a new allocation of land.
15. ACTPLA's reference to the land between the suburbs of Holder and Duffy and Cotter road as being sufficient green space for Weston Creek is noted. While this land has also been utilized by the community over the last 35 years, it was used far less than Deek's Forest. This was because Deek's Forest was a much more diverse amenity. The WCCC notes that the Government has planted trees on this land to the south of the Cotter road however, many have died through neglect during the drought. The fact that the Government has failed during the years since the fires to properly rejuvenate and maintain this land raises serious concerns about the Government's long and short term commitment to the Weston Creek community.
16. Furthermore, given the much larger green buffer zone planned between Molonglo and the suburbs of Belconnen and the existing green buffer zones between Woden and Tuggeranong and also O'Connor and Bruce, when is it expected that these areas will become subject to consultation prior to urban infill? These are but some examples of green buffer zones that make the Deek's forest land relatively insignificant for development as residential housing.

Recent ACTPLA proposals

17. The wider Weston Creek community was offended by the ACTPLA document released in April 2008 which rejected the WCCC submission. This led to community protests and WCCC meetings with Minister Barr and ACTPLA.
18. On 4th June 2008 ACTPLA presented its revised development proposals for North Weston and Molonglo to the Weston Creek Community at a well-attended public meeting. At this meeting, ACTPLA showed a proposal for an access corridor about 80 metres wide from the cotter road to the Molonglo river in the general area of where Deek's drive ends. It was argued that a wider corridor would raise personal security problems in a residential environment. While the WCCC sees this access to the suburbs of Molonglo and the river as an important and necessary improvement, it falls far short of the amenity that the Weston Creek residents are striving to regain. The security within Deek's Forest was manageable.
19. Also on 4 June 2008, ACTPLA advised of its plan for a large pond at the site of the old sewerage works with significant landscaping around the lake. It was suggested by ACTPLA that this would, to some extent, compensate for the loss of the Deek's Forest amenity.
20. The residents of Weston Creek have been asking for this sewerage site to be cleaned up for over 35 years and so the long overdue ACTPLA plans are not now regarded as a meaningful concession by ACTPLA. The prime reason for cleaning up the site at this time (including the possible removal of dumped asbestos - currently under inquiry by ACTPLA) is not to provide a facility for Weston Creek but to allow the Molonglo development to proceed and be marketed. The sewerage works would have increased the risk of the new development being regarded as a slum.

21. Further, the creation of a pond is probably one of the cheapest options for cleaning up the site which probably has no alternative development potential. The opportunity has been taken by ACTPLA to make the pond large to enhance the new Molonglo Development.
22. This facility was not sought by the residents of Weston Creek and the formal green buffer area around it is not a sufficient substitute for the less formal amenity of Deek's forest. However, irrespective of what ACTPLA's reasons may be for developing the pond area, the WCCC strongly supports having the pond which would complement a restored Deek's Forest.

The true reasons for covering Deek's forest with housing and roads.

23. The arguments presented in the ACTPLA are weak and not convincing. In discussions with ACTPLA and the Minister, it has become apparent that the prime reasons for rejecting the WCCC submission were not those outlined in ACTPLA's document of April 2008. Rather, the overriding reasons for rejecting the WCCC submission related to the urgent need to supply housing to overcome the current and the projected shortage of accommodation in the ACT and the need to do that by adhering to an extreme policy of urban consolidation.
24. Whether the population of the ACT will in fact grow as projected is subject to several factors including immigration and employment growth in the ACT (which will be strongly influenced by Commonwealth Government decisions). As Deek's Forest is part of the initial Molonglo Development, it is likely to develop before any substantial decrease in population can occur. So, in the context of this submission which is confined to Deek's Forest, the growth in population is regarded by the WCCC as a given. That leads to the issue of urban consolidation and the location of the residences for the population increase.
25. The issue of urban consolidation has 2 sub issues.
26. Firstly there is the issue of developments of more than 2 stories and the current trend to small blocks in Molonglo (as distinct to North Weston). Again, these issues are not relevant to the WCCC submission to reinstate the Deek's Forest land. The number of stories and the size of the blocks are not a pressing issue within the Weston Creek footprint although as a neighboring development, the Weston Creek residents prefer to see Molonglo develop as a high quality amenity.
27. Secondly, and more importantly, there is the issue of developing land which is as close as feasible to Civic to reduce the use of petrol by residents, to facilitate the provision of public transport infrastructure and to save on the provision of building costs and services generally by keeping travel to a minimum. It is also argued that this urban consolidation is in line with overseas trends and this policy will keep the cost of housing and the cost of living down. On this basis it is argued that the Deek's Forest land is too valuable to be used as a green recreational area.
28. The cost of fuel is a valid argument in favour of extreme urban development only if the price of fuel is to be high for the longer term and if there are to be no cheap alternatives. While there are indications that there might be a period of high fuel prices there is no proof that this will last for long. In fact, there is a possibility that fuel and power will, in the medium to longer term, become cheaper and be sustainable. The problem to be resolved is which fuel option or options should be chosen.

29. Given the uncertainty about the future, there is no need to adhere so aggressively to an urban consolidation policy in relation to the relatively small Deek's Forest. It should be added that if the fuel situation was so dire that serious urban consolidation was necessary, then it could well be that Canberra's viability is at risk – not just a few suburbs. Deek's Forest is insignificant in terms of contributing to a reduction of ACT fuel costs.
30. As far as overseas trends are concerned, our cities are relatively small and unlike many overseas cities, Canberra does not already have a consolidated infrastructure in place. Even with other more similar overseas cities, our environment and expectations are different to most and a uniform approach around the world is not necessarily the best approach for all cities.

Summary

31. As indicated in the initial WCCC submission, the WCCC does not oppose the Molonglo development as a whole as it is outside of the WCCC area. Also, the WCCC does not oppose urban consolidation in general as some people may prefer it. However, in respect to Deek's Forest, the WCCC recommends it not be used for residential purposes and that if necessary, the growth in population in the ACT be housed marginally further out from Civic. The development of Deek's Forest (rather than land further from the CBD in Canberra) is not going to make a significant difference in the longer term especially as residents do not travel only in that direction. Once that area is built on, the amenity will be permanently lost for the residents of Weston Creek, Molonglo and the residents of other suburbs.

Signed John Burke, (Treasurer Weston Creek Community Council)

for

Tim Dalton

Chairman

Weston Creek Community Council

Date