

Your local voice

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Mr Mick Gentleman MLA
Minister for Planning
ACT Government

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The Coombs Shops

Mick,
Dear Minister,

I am writing to you in relation to the ongoing issue of the Coombs Shops. Council believes that the time has come for the ACT Government to take decisive action to resolve what threatens to become one of the greatest planning blunders since the advent of self-government.

On 4 March 2015, this site was sold to its current owner in order to provide a "dedicated supermarket" to residents of the Molonglo Valley. Five years later, the space reserved for a supermarket remains empty, as do eight of the other nine tenancies, with no end in sight for the growing communities of Coombs and Wright.

This issue has become more pressing in light of the possible closure of the Coombs Shops' sole tenant [see the attached article from the Riot Act] and the increasing parking pressures at Cooleman Court. Council does not believe that the proposed surface car park proposed for Weston Section 75, Block 2 can be considered an acceptable substitute for an operational supermarket at Coombs.

Despite the official claims to the contrary, the poor outcomes at Coombs Section 36, Block 3 cannot wholly be attributed to the actions of the site owner. In fact, the problems appear to have been exacerbated by ACT Government policies on supermarkets and shop sizes that misaligned with concurrent planning work that had been done in Coombs and Wright. More information on these issues can be found at Attachment A.

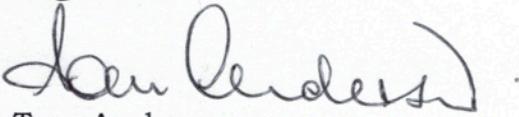
Putting this issue to one side, what the residents of Coombs and Wright really want is for someone to take responsibility. Council understands that there are two courses of action that the ACT Government could take in order to resolve this issue:

1. Resume the crown lease for Coombs Section 36, Block 3, with a view to either redevelop the shops or sell the site to a developer that is capable of delivering an operational supermarket.
2. "Call in" the neighbouring Koko Molonglo development on Wright Section 38, Block 1 (DA No. 201834814), which contains space for a 1,500m² supermarket.

Council understands that these Ministerial "call in" powers have been used around once per year to ensure that significant projects are approved in a manner that prevents further delays. In the event there is no appetite for resuming the crown lease for the Coombs Shops site, Council believes that the Koko Molonglo development should be considered as a candidate for the use of these powers in 2020.

After half a decade of delay, the residents of Coombs and Wright are owed a resolution to this matter.

Regards



Tom Anderson

Chair

Weston Creek Community Council

Your local voice



Coombs Shops Planning – Attachment A

Putting the current owner of the shops to one side, the problems with the Coombs Shops appear to be the result of ACT Government policies on supermarkets and shop sizes that misaligned with planning work that had been done in Coombs and Wright.

When the Coombs Estate Development Plan (EDP) was devised and approved in 2011-12, there was no limit on the size of shops on CZ4 (Local Centre) or CZ5 (Mixed-Use) zoned land. Theoretically, a full-line supermarket of ~3000m² could have been built on any of the sites around the John Gorton Drive/Steve Irwin Avenue/Fred Daly Avenue intersection. However, as the Coombs Shops site was the first site scheduled to be sold, it was expected that a supermarket would be constructed there first, which would significantly reduce the viability of any additional supermarkets on the surrounding sites.

Simultaneously, and in response to the 2009 Review of ACT Supermarket Competition Policy, the ACT Government released the ACT Supermarket Competition Policy Implementation Plan. The actions outlined in this report led to the release of Territory Plan Draft Variation (DV) No. 304 in March 2013. This DV restricted the size of shops on CZ4 and CZ5 sites to 1500m², with a "net selling area" of 1000m² for shops selling food (including supermarkets) as a mandatory planning control. As DV No. 304 had an interim effect, these were the de facto rules on supermarket sizes in the ACT until the approval of the final Territory Plan Variation (TPV).

Two years later, TPV No. 304 was approved. Based on comments received during the consultation period, a number of changes were made which reduced the maximum permitted size of shops on CZ4 sites to 1000m², while keeping the larger 1500m² restriction for CZ5 sites and removing all references to "net selling area" from both zones. This required changes to the sale conditions of the CZ4-zoned Coombs Shops site, which was due to go to auction that same month and had been advertised with the previous shop size restrictions outlined in DV No. 304.

The Coombs Shops site was sold at auction to its current owner in March 2015, who then submitted two development applications that were refused for violating the rules of the Territory Plan. Following mediation at the ACAT, development approval was given in December 2016 for a set of shops that included space for a 1000m² supermarket.

One year later, the ACT Government sold the Koko Molonglo site in Wright (Section 38, Block 1), which is located diagonally opposite the Coombs Shops. Because the Koko Molonglo site is zoned CZ5, the maximum shop size is 1500m² and thus it could attract a larger supermarket tenant than the Coombs Shops. This is usually avoided during the EDP process by the use of location-specific planning controls that restrict the maximum size of shops on CZ5 sites located near CZ4 sites (as seen in newer suburbs like Taylor and Denman Prospect). However, this wasn't done in Coombs and Wright because both EDPs pre-dated the shop size changes undertaken as part of TPV No. 304.

Obviously, none of this would have been a problem if the owner of the Coombs Shops had submitted, built and opened a compliant set of shops in the 33-month period between the two sites being sold.

Unfortunately, that didn't happen, and Coombs and Wright residents are now stuck with a largely empty set of shops and no expectation of an operational supermarket within a 3.5 kilometre radius until some time in the early 2020s.

Latest break-in could be the final straw for Coombs' only shop

[Dominic Giannini](#) 8 March 2020 51



The small grocery at the Coombs shops. The rest of the centre is empty. Photo: Ian Bushnell.

The Ajijo Grocery and Convenience Store – the only tenant at the Coombs shops – has again fallen victim to thieves, being broken into for at least the fourth time in under a year early on Wednesday morning (4 March).

Although no cash was stolen this time, Ajit Kumar, who runs the store, said thousands of dollars of cash and goods were stolen the first couple of times thieves broke in.

After being broken into so many times, Mr Kumar says he is thinking of shutting up shop in the lonely complex and moving his business to Tuggeranong or Belconnen.

“When I spoke to the owner as I was signing the lease, I was told that there were other tenants as well, that they would have more tenants soon,” he told *Region Media*.

“When we started we had hoped that there would be more shops there, but it eventually turned out to not be the case.”

The shop, which is owned by Mr Kumar’s wife Jyotsna, is struggling to make ends meet with the constant break-ins.

“Being a single store in the area we were an easy target because there is no security at all,” Mr Kumar said.

“People who walked in were telling me this when they came into the store. It looks like they are targeting it because it is a lone shop.”



A CCTV image of the would-be thief breaking into Ajijo. Photo: Ajijo Facebook.

Coombs is a rapidly expanding suburb in Canberra's south-west with over 6000 residents, many of whom have become increasingly concerned with the lack of infrastructure, and how the owner of the complex, Renato Cervo, has [dragged his feet developing the shopping centre](#).

A [community petition was launched](#) in June 2018 by angry residents about the lack of progress on the development, which was uncompleted at the time.

Residents also expressed their annoyance at the lack of facilities in the suburb in an open letter to politicians and the CEO of the Suburban Land Agency.

The development took two years to complete and Mr Kumar and his wife opened the small Indian grocery and convenience store in March 2019.

The family is encouraged by the community to fill a gap in the market, a community he has lauded as exceptionally supportive.

“I was talking to my friends in the area and they think that there should be some shops there in the area. I had a lot of support from the locals in the area [to start the shop],” he said.

“The locals have been quite nice. I can see that they come to my store to support us which is quite a nice thing.”



Ajit Kumar and his wife Jyotsna are considering moving their business after multiple break-ins. Photo: Supplied.

Mr Kumar says the owner could do more to secure other leases.

“There have been many people talking to me who say they are serious about renting the space, but when it comes to the owner, they are not getting any deals,” he said.

“At some point in time, we may need to pull the plug and move to another place. We are exploring options and I am not sure how long it will take.”