

Political storm brewing for Steel in Weston car park row

[Ian Bushnell](#) 4 June 2020



"Cools Park": the land in Weston slated for a new car park. Photo: File.

The ACT Government's plans for a small car park opposite Cooleman Court in Weston that will cost more than \$600,000 is fast becoming a political hot potato for Transport and City Services Minister Chris Steel.

The government has decided to push ahead with the temporary 63-space car park on treed open space at the corner of Parkinson and Brierly Streets, but an e-petition to the Legislative Assembly has been launched by community members opposed to the loss of green space and upset at the running sore that is

the empty Coombs shops and the lack of services in the new suburbs of Molonglo.

It is the pressure on parking caused by Molonglo shoppers that prompted Mr Steel to propose a new 108-space car park as a solution, only for that to be scaled back to the current 63 after community concerns about the loss of trees, green space and increased traffic in Watling Place next to the site.

But the Weston Creek Community Council says the new proposal is not worth the traffic problems it would create and that extra spaces could be found around the centre without building a new car park.

Now, with a development application lodged, the e-petition has attracted 870 signatures, the support of Green Caroline Le Couteur and Liberal Giulia Jones, and the Assembly will have to automatically investigate the matter.

The issue is also a lightning rod for the perception that the Labor government doesn't care about green space, its impotence to deal with the owner of the untenanted Coombs shops, the lack of services in new suburbs and development matters in general.

With the October 17 election less than five months away, Mr Steel is now facing a fight on his home turf that could lose him votes to the Greens and the Liberals.

But Mr Steel seems determined to press on, saying the need for more parking will not go away, particularly with the Kambah shops supermarket redevelopment getting underway after

Christmas and driving even more people to Coleman Court. He is urging the community to have their say on the DA.



The landscape plan for the car park, showing trees to be removed. Image: Canberra Town Planning.

While the DA submitted by Transport Canberra and City Services describes the site as undeveloped, and having been previously used temporarily as a site office for nearby works, the petition calls it parkland and a vital community asset, dubbing it "Cools Park".

Zoned community facility, the site can only be used as car park if it is deemed "temporary", and the petitioners argue that "no reasonable person would consider levelling parkland, covering it in bitumen and felling mature trees" if that is the case.

The government sees the car park as a stop-gap measure until Molonglo has its own shops and group centre, as well as a Park and Ride facility for Coleman Court.

The man behind the petition, Watling Place resident John Davies, says the government's approach was flawed and Mr Steel acted on anecdotal evidence collected by an informal survey of shoppers.

He says the main problem is that people want to park as close as possible to the Coleman Court entrance.

Many Molonglo residents wanting their own shops have backed the petition, Mr Davies says.

Community Council chair Tom Anderson, who has told Mr Steel that at least an extra 65 spaces had been identified around the centre, believes the project is unnecessary and a waste of the \$616,000 price tag.

Mr Anderson called for a new traffic study to be conducted in February. He says the new access point from the Brierly Street roundabout will exacerbate traffic issues there, as will a new pedestrian crossing over Parkinson Street.

Mr Anderson wrote to Mr Steel in April detailing community concerns and advising that the council would likely object to any development application.



Transport and City Services Minister Chris Steel and Labor MLA Bec Cody on site last year announcing the project. What may have seemed a winner could now be a political liability. Photo: File.

”It is council’s view that the key problem is the provision of parking at peak times, predominately mid-morning to mid-afternoon Saturday and some other shorter periods during the week,” he wrote.

”The remainder of the time, while the parking provision is busy, demand for parking is being met. Expediting provision of shopping and other services at Coombs, Wright or the Molonglo Group Centre may mitigate the pressure into the future, or it may not, which means there can be no certainty about the temporary use of the land for a car park.”

Mr Anderson also suggested that more regular policing of parking limits might help ease pressures.

The DA shows that about half of the land will be paved and at least three mature trees will need to be removed, to be offset by new plantings.

New concrete pathways will also be provided to retain and expand access to the existing pedestrian network, and new lighting installed.

Mr Steel said the revised plans directly responded to community feedback including removing the entrance from Watling Place, reducing the size of the car park and further distancing it from residences, planting more trees and minimising the need to remove existing trees.

He acknowledged it was frustrating that the owner of Coombs shops hadn't tenanted his building with a supermarket, but that only added to the need to provide more parking at Coleman Court until the Molonglo Group Centre is built and other supermarkets become viable.