

What's the future for planning in the ACT? The National Capital Authority doesn't want you to know

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This is a story the National Capital Authority doesn't want you to read, apparently.

The authority is sitting on dozens of submissions, sent in as it conducts a far-reaching review of the principles underpinning planning in Canberra. However, it will not release the submissions.

Interestingly, a blunt question is posed in one of those documents: Why does Canberra even need the NCA any more, when the ACT government is busy planning and building the city?

The broadside comes in a submission to the current review of the [National Capital Plan](#), the key mechanism for control of territory planning.

When the authority asked for submissions to the review, it received some free character references.

A significant submission has been made by the thought leaders on planning, the ACT branch of the Planning Institute Australia. "PIA ACT now questions the need for strategic planning to sit with the Commonwealth," it says.

The NCA is a federal government body that "performs a special role as the trustee of the national capital".

The authority released an exposure draft of the new National Capital Plan several months ago and received dozens of submissions to the proposed changes that include plans to devolve its powers, on its own volition, such as handing control of Telopea Park and Haig Park to the ACT government.

The draft plan identifies a large area between Tuggeranong and the Tidbinbilla Nature Reserve as potentially suitable for urban development, along with land either side of the new Majura Parkway north and south of the airport, and land near Oaks Estate. However, planning control would move to the ACT government.

The draft contains detailed guidelines for the development of City Hill, including six to eight-storey buildings ringing Vernon Circle around City Hill – plans which are vehemently opposed by the Lake Burley Griffin Guardians group.

The authority's proposal to cede planning control over significant parts of the city to the ACT government has been [pushed by Liberal senator Zed Seselja](#), who wants to see residential development across the Murrumbidgee west of Tuggeranong.

"The current duplication of planning between the NCA and ACT government can increase the cost of housing by delaying the rollout of new subdivisions, changes to the National Capital Plan would remove these significant hurdles," he told Fairfax Media.

"In relation to West Tuggeranong and the possibility of development on the other side of the Murrumbidgee River, this is a process of addressing a restriction placed on development prior to self-government. This restriction has held back Tuggeranong and limited opportunities for affordable housing and jobs in the region.

"A change to this restriction would simply remove a Commonwealth prohibition on expansion in that area and allow the current or a future ACT government to make its own decision as to the future of West Tuggeranong, however, a decision to develop

housing in the area would have the potential to revitalise the Tuggeranong Town Centre."

Recently NCA chief executive Malcolm Snow said the objective of the review of the National Capital Plan was to ["empower the ACT government to manage the future growth of Canberra"](#).

It is also to "adjust metropolitan planning arrangements so as to streamline the planning process and empower the ACT government to manage the future growth of Canberra; reduce ambiguity, duplication and complexity in the planning process by removing most of the NCA's 'special requirements' for a substantial proportion of the ACT; and 'fine-tune' provisions relating to areas identified as having the special characteristics of the national capital (designated areas)".

The plan has not been comprehensively reviewed since it came into effect in 1990 just after self-government for the ACT.

After reviewing submissions, the NCA says it is on track to release a draft amendment at the end of this month.

When the authority would not release the submissions, Fairfax Media approached organisations likely to have made one, such as the Property Council, the Planning Institute and the Inner South Canberra Community Council.

Despite the call for less involvement by the NCA, other submissions raise concerns about the proposed development in the river corridors south of the Murrumbidgee River.

The submission by the Planning Institute Australia, from ACT president Michael Jollon, commends the NCA for the hard work and thought which has gone into the exposure draft.

"Our members understand well the dual role of Canberra as home town and as national capital," it says.

"We support the twin ideals of a liveable, modern city for ourselves and families and a symbolic and stately setting for the nation's capital."

The submission mainly deals with ideas to improve arrangements between Commonwealth and territory planning to ensure that planning for the ACT is "clear, consistent and effective".

"We believe that this is vital to protect the territory's role as capital and home to nearly 400,000 people," it says.

"Given the significant strategic planning initiatives and policy work carried out by the ACT since 2007, and absence of any comparable effort from the NCA, PIA ACT now questions the need for strategic planning to sit with the Commonwealth.

"This is perhaps unsurprising given the persistent underfunding of the NCA both before and after 2008 by the federal government.

"It is felt that the rationalisation of the NCA's budget has left federal planning in an untenable position and close to irrelevance regarding all areas outside of the Central National Area.

"The call is now for a federal withdrawal from planning for the territory in order to sharpen federal focus on the elements of the city that define the capital, such as the parliamentary zone and Central National Area.

"PIA ACT feels that the gulf between Commonwealth and territory planning is not narrowing but is rather widening, and urgent action is needed to redress these issues and begin to work on our shared vision for Canberra.

"The primary message of this submission is that the exposure draft has not put to rest many of PIA ACT's concerns from 2003 and 2008.

"We feel that, if approved, the exposure draft plan would perpetuate an overly complex and uneven planning system. We believe it will do little to simplify and improve planning and assessment in the territory."

"PIA ACT welcomes efforts in the exposure draft to transfer more metropolitan planning functions to the territory; however, we question whether these arrangements will be productive in the long term as the NCA retains oversight in these matters and the plan does not offer a clear term of reference for this oversight.

"PIA ACT believes that further revisions of the National Capital Plan should endeavour to transfer more authority to the territory government."

The Inner South Canberra Community Council says the draft plan appears to be based on the assumption that wherever there is duplication in planning, the solution is to transfer powers from the NCA to the ACT government.

"But the rationale for this view is nowhere articulated," the submission from chairman Gary Kent says. "Indeed, there is much evidence that NCA planning arrangements are more streamlined and effective than those currently administered by the ACT government.

"The ISCCC is itself disappointed in a number of aspects of the ACT planning system and does not accept that this should be the default option where powers overlap.

"We would ask that the NCA revisit aspects of the exposure draft which are based upon what we consider to be a mistaken view of the capacity of ACT government planning system to safeguard national objectives."

Although the proposed excision of the Murrumbidgee and Molonglo River corridors from territory control does not directly impact on the inner south, the council has significant concerns.

"Under the exposure draft, urban expansion could extend into the West Murrumbidgee without an amendment to the NCP [National Capital Plan]," it says

"All that would be required is that the ACT obtain NCA certification that 'the proposed changes are not inconsistent with the principles and policies of the plan'.

"The ISCCC supports the Yarralumla Residents Association concern that 'the exposure draft would put in place a process that allows for approval of the two areas for future urban development without the need for the statutory process of public consultation nor parliamentary scrutiny. This would allow for urban development to proceed based on an specified assessment process'.

"There is a strong view among many sections of the Canberra community that Canberra's urban spread should not extend across the Murrumbidgee.

"The ISCCC is disappointed that the exposure draft, unlike the current NCP, does not include any meaningful discussion of the employment impacts of planning decisions.

"As stated in the explanatory material, the focus of employment location policies on offices and the ability of the Commonwealth government to control their location, has been removed from the draft.

"The ISCCC would like the NCA to be given a prominent role in the shaping of Canberra's development, but there is nothing in the exposure draft that it affords it any effective responsibilities.

"The policies outlined in the draft at 3.5.3 are quite sensible but do not appear to allow the NCA any scope to influence the pattern of the city's growth."

The Deakin Residents' Association's submission highlight issues such as the need for clarity between Commonwealth and territory responsibilities, the lack of heritage listing of Canberra, and the need for the NCA to establish and assert a strong national position on local development proposals.

The Lake Burley Griffin Guardians say the National Triangle needs to be named and fully identified in the list of places that comprise the designated area, with the NCA named as the authority responsible for the continuing integrity of the National Triangle.

"The second objective should stipulate vistas and the importance of open spaces for defining the geometry of the city," its submission says.

"We strongly urge the production of specific masterplan and guidelines for lakeshore. This plan should accommodate the need for lakeshore recreation for the next 100 years."

The Yarralumla Residents Association is concerned "urban development" has been replaced with "urban intensification" in the draft.

"This signals a significant shift in the overarching policy approach from the current National Capital Plan," it says.

Architect and planning activist Jack Kershaw says the NCA has an opportunity to become more involved in the ACT areas of "national significance", especially in the development of territory land over which the NCA will retain planning powers. Those include City Hill, Constitution Avenue, and the City to the Lake areas.

"If you look at the Barton new office development areas east of Parliament House, you'll see that there has been strong, if a little conservative, planning and design control by the NCA and, lately, we've seen the NCA demand no overhead wires for the possible light rail extension along Constitution Avenue," he says.

"This all to the good of the Central National Area, and I believe the NCA should see the plan changes as an opportunity to become more involved there, and to become proactive and more creative in planning and design in the areas it is going to be restricted to.

"Hopefully, the NCA will be able to now more authoritatively temper the excesses of the ACT government, especially the Treasurer's Directorate of Economic Development and Land Development Agency."

The Property Council strongly supports the NCA, the submission by ACT executive director Catherine Carter says.

"Within the context of modernising the plan, we believe it would have been timely and appropriate to propose key policy changes in the draft on matters that have been the subject of debate for a number of years.

"These include a review of building heights in the city centre and further consideration regarding sites and precincts that should be subject to designated area status with regard to national land and territory land," it says. "The Property Council

urges the NCA to take planning leadership to progress these matters as a priority."

The council supports the NCA retaining detailed planning control in designated areas as places that have the "special characteristics of the national capital".

"We believe that the NCA provides a timely and professional development assessment with demonstrable high-quality built outcomes," it says.

"In principle, we support the intent to introduce a 'statement of planning principles' for the entire territory.

"However, we seek assurance that the application of these principles will not add red tape or increase time frames for development assessments or delay the progress of variations to the territory plan.

"The removal of 'the focus of employment location policies on offices and the ability of the Commonwealth government to control their location' requires further explanation.

"In general terms this seems to be a logical planning step. However, the implications for the territory and for employment centre development are not apparent.

"The Property Council notes that significant open space areas are proposed to have special requirements removed including the Haig and Telopea Parks, Murrumbidgee and Molonglo River Corridors, Lanyon Bowl and Namadgi National Park.

"We support this proposal provided that the open space is mandated in the plan and that no land use changes can be made (other than by amendment to the plan)."

The ACT chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects members are concerned to preserve the special significance of Canberra as the Australian national capital, its submission says.

"The Commonwealth has a critical role to play in the long term development of the national capital and the means by which it does this must be robust," it says.

The chapter is also concerned about proposed development in the river corridors south of the Murrumbidgee River.

"This area of rural land is isolated from Tuggeranong on the bushfire exposed western edge of the city," it says.

"The expansion to the south has the potential to negatively impact on the Murrumbidgee River corridor by requiring major road and infrastructure connections.

"Therefore, the Institute calls for removal of the potential development area south of the Murrumbidgee River from the proposed general policy plan."