

Heritage expert condemns planning processes at Manuka Oval

The Canberra Times February 23 2016 Emma Macdonald

The ACT government says heritage-listed buildings in Manuka will be protected if a proposed \$800 million redevelopment of the oval precinct goes ahead.

Community groups have raised concerns over city planning processes following last week's revelation of an unsolicited bid by the GWS Giants to redevelop the oval and build 1000 units as well as commercial and retail space on surrounding land.

Emeritus Professor Ken Taylor, a world-wide expert on historic urban landscape within the Australian National University's Centre for Heritage and Museum Studies, echoed community group concerns over the bid process, saying the government needed to institute independent oversight of the plan in order to assess whether it was appropriate for the area.

He also warned of the need to ensure heritage landmarks such as the 1937 Mothercraft centre were protected and said it would be of "enormous concern" if the heritage-listed buildings were swallowed up by the new development.

But a spokesman for Chief Minister Andrew Barr said on Tuesday the heritage-listed buildings would have to be incorporated into any new development – retaining their structural integrity.

"Whatever development happens on that site and whoever is using them, the heritage buildings will continue to be protected," the spokesman said. "If a developer were to redevelop the site, they would have to retain the heritage-listed buildings."

Meanwhile, the GWS Giants have defended the redevelopment blueprint.

A spokesman for the AFL team, which is working in partnership with Grocon, rebutted suggestions that the team had been "consulting" with the government over the proposal for more than a year prior to making it public, or that it had been given any sort of green light.

"As part of the unsolicited bid process, the first time we provided any meaningful detail of this proposal to the ACT government was in November last year when we tendered our full submission. Until that time we hadn't provided any real detail to government," the spokesman said.

The consortium has also distanced itself from concerns over the future of heritage-listed buildings in the Manuka Arts Centre.

The ACT government had previously announced the arts bodies currently using the buildings would be relocated to the Kingston Foreshore but it was unclear what future plans it had for the vacated buildings which include the former Griffith Child Welfare Centre, an 80-year-old building which was heritage listed in 2012 for its significance and role in women's history in the local area.

Associated with the Mothercraft Society, which was formed in 1927, the centre was established in 1937 as a place dedicated to the education and promotion of health and welfare of women and children.

The Giants said the Manuka Green project had been developed "on the assumption that the long-standing proposal to move the Canberra Arts centre tenants to the Kingston Foreshore will eventuate".

"Should this not eventuate then our planning and final designs would obviously accommodate the arts centre tenants remaining on the Manuka Oval precinct – perhaps either in their existing buildings or in another part of the site."

Professor Taylor said: "A man should choose his enemies wisely. To make enemies of those people in Manuka – who have a strong sense of attachments to a place which does have character and history – would be foolish."

He also condemned media and social media criticism of a "NIMBY" culture of opposition when it came to the proposed redevelopment.

"The NIMBY comments come from an uneducated lobby that doesn't think people are important. It is uninformed, rude and dismissive. Manuka is a well-mannered suburb that has important character and the views of its residents should be respected."

He said the unsolicited bid risked undermining impartial and transparent city planning in the ACT.

"My view has always been that the planning authority should be doing the strategic and forward planning for the city and not being put in a position of having to react to grandiose schemes put up by third parties and enthusiastically supported by the Chief Minister.

"We need a metropolitan plan for the city, not a system which encourages developers to skim off the parts that they want to develop."

But Professor Taylor also conceded that Canberra needed to grow through development.

"Cities can't and shouldn't stand still, they have to change, develop, and continue to be dynamic entities from the point of view of social, cultural, economic, political factors."

Of the Giants Grocon bid and its promise to include a design competition and undergo community consultation, Professor Taylor said the developer "seems to be trying to engage with local communities as well as wider Canberra communities and the key here is ensuring the developer and government do have meaningful interaction with communities – getting them to participate in the redevelopment process rather than being merely consulted and then ignored".

"What also has to be teased out is what the area will gain from new development and investment. Sure it will be a different place, but if there are reflections to what makes Manuka a special place and these are carried forward then there is a blueprint for the future. Not everyone will be happy."