

New approach needed to encourage Canberrans to get involved

Canberra Times 16 August 2015 Tony Trobe and Marea Fatseas

Marea Fatseas is president of the Yarralumla Residents Association

TT: How can we further engage the community in the planning of Canberra?

MF: Most people recognise that Canberra is growing and that change is inevitable. What they find frustrating is consultation that just goes through the motions, with pre-ordained outcomes and little acknowledgement of genuine concerns. There is an opportunity to engage residents more deeply about how they would like Canberra to evolve.

Malcolm Snow, CEO, National Capital Authority, highlighted at a recent University of Canberra forum that the top factor leading to a centre's success is an investment in the creation of a high-quality public realm. Other urban elements are then selected on the basis of how well they support the public realm vision.

He also highlighted the concept of shared urban leadership and positive models encouraging citizens to "actively shape their own city futures through genuine and spirited participation".

Yarralumla has a highly engaged community, and the Yarralumla Residents Association engages with residents actively. We maintain a website and Twitter site, a noticeboard, and regular newsletters to every Yarralumla household and e-newsletters to our members, including to seek their views on proposals. We have excellent attendance at our public meetings. Enthusiastic residents organised a petition in response to the 2014 proposal for the Brickworks and environs that secured over 4100 signatures. We are extremely grateful to volunteers and experts who have given their time generously to help us respond to complex proposals.

Recently we trialled a new engagement approach in the form of a "kitchen table conversation" that brings a small group of residents together in someone's home to have a "blue sky" conversation about what they value and wish to see happen. We piloted this approach with some residents near the Brickworks to gain a more in-depth understanding of their views about the site. This is a valuable addition to our current approaches to engaging the community.

TT: What's the latest on the Brickworks and environs development?

MF: We understand the Land Development Agency is considering feedback from the round of public consultations completed in early April. That feedback made it pretty clear that the community expects a quality development that works with, not against, the character of that iconic site and its surrounds, and that genuinely responds to community concerns.

The government has also capped the asbestos dump in the grounds of the Brickworks until it decides what to do with the whole site. Yarralumla residents are relieved that, for the time being, thousands of tonnes of that waste won't be dug up and trucked past their houses.

TT: What do you think should happen next?

MF: The Brickworks should be at the heart of any proposal. Plans for the surrounding

forested area and environmentally sensitive grasslands should be complementary to the plans for the Brickworks themselves, and take into account current valued uses of the site and its landscape qualities. Brickworks have been transformed into highly valued public spaces and tourist destinations elsewhere in the world, for example the Toronto Evergreen Brickworks in Canada.

Active community participation will help ensure that our wonderful city will evolve in a way that provides for the wellbeing of current and future residents, and in a way that will enhance its qualities as Australia's national capital.