

Pedestrians and cyclists favoured over drivers in new Canberra planning strategy

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Pedestrians, public transport users and cyclists are favoured over drivers in a new five-year planning strategy released by the ACT government, prioritising population density and compact neighbourhoods.

Planning Minister Mick Gentleman will release the government's new statement of planning intent on Monday, designed to guide planning in the ACT to 2020. The document calls for high quality public spaces and streets to be created through "placemaking" efforts, with a focus on collaboration with experts and promotion of design excellence and innovation.

Transport should focus on "pedestrians first, cyclists second, public transport third then private vehicles" as part of creating "public places of the soul". So-called compact neighbourhoods would cater for diverse lifestyles and the planned increased density would be delivered with improvements to infrastructure and services.

The document calls for a diverse range of destination neighbourhoods and precincts to be created, with strong support for areas including New Acton, Braddon, the Kingston Foreshore and suburban Canberra.

The government will also investigate the use of new technology and visual tools in the planning process, including 3D graphic modelling.

A number of "demonstration precincts" would be created to undergo planning through new processes. The first precincts could include Northbourne Avenue, where light rail construction will begin in 2016 and hundreds of public housing dwellings are set to be demolished, and sites in southern Canberra.

A new guide will be developed for community gardens around Canberra, as a way to encourage residents to grow their own food and to build social capital.

The government should also "facilitate affordable incubation spaces for business start-ups, pop-up shops, and creative art and cultural events" to better value under-utilised spaces across the city.

A series of documents and plans would be reviewed or replaced, including the estate development code, the inner north precinct code and the parking and vehicular and access general code.

As forecast by Chief Minister Andrew Barr, the government would also change the ways it consults with the community during planning processes including using websites and social media.

Mr Gentleman said the document was based on the findings of a community engagement program conducted in February, March and April this year. It comes as Canberra is "transitioning from a regional city to a major metropolitan centre".

"The statement is the result of consistent messages I have received from the community, business and research sectors supporting urban renewal and intensification around existing centres and transport corridors," he said.

"It was great to personally engage with hundreds of people, especially younger Canberrans, and hear their views on the future of Canberra and how to best plan around that. Because of these conversations and consultations I am now able to better focus my goals within the portfolio."

Higher-density housing developments should be built in the city, along transport corridors and in town centres. Medium-density housing such as terraces, town houses and granny flats are called appropriate for the suburbs while in-fill development should be close to buses, the light rail corridor and parks.

Canberra's current planning system is described as being too reliant on codes and regulations, stifling innovation and resulting in poor urban developments. The new strategy should result in "more innovation, less regulation".

Each priority included in the statement of intent has a series of actions for delivery, within 12 months, two to three years or four to five years.

Among immediate priorities is the creation of a single urban design advisory panel to improvement developments and public spaces. It would include independent experts from a range of backgrounds.