

Comments not so diplomatic

Stirling Ridge plan angers residents

By Joni Scanlon

RACIST submissions about the proposal to make Stirling Ridge a site for diplomatic estates have been condemned by the National Capital Authority as sinister.

Numerous xenophobic submissions have been lodged in the first weeks of the consultation process of Draft Amendment 78. But an inquiry into the management of diplomatic estates in the ACT could end the fight for Stirling Ridge before it has begun.

The National Capital and External Territories Committee announced on November 28 an inquiry would be undertaken to provide a clear understanding of diplomatic supply and demand issues.

Member for Canberra Gai Brodtmann initiated the inquiry following a committee hearing in which the NCA was questioned about recent developments concerning the diplomatic estate.

"As a national capital, we must be able to respond to the changing needs of the diplomatic community, but as a city we must have in place plans that meet the needs of the Canberra community," Ms Brodtmann said.

"We need to explore a broader range of options that take into account today's Canberra, not the Canberra of the 1950s."

NCA chief executive Gary Rake said the committee took into account the draft amendment consultation process currently underway until December 14.

"We will let that consultation keep going and after that consultation process closes we will prepare a consultation report," he said.

"The authority will hold off any further consideration of DA78 pending the enquiry."

All submissions received during the consultation process will be included in the report that

will go into evidence for the committee's inquiry, including a number of private submissions Mr Rake labelled as intolerant. Concerns focused on the ethnicity and predominant religion of particular countries that might seek positions in new diplomatic estates.

"I've had concerns raised about economic status, the predominate religion in some countries, and the nature of their politics or democracy," Mr Rake said.

"It's a very small number of people, but they are expressing very sinister views."

One submission said the status of the countries that might need diplomatic sites did not warrant the development of such prime land.

However Mr Rake said the list of countries that might potentially need sites in the near future had not been publicly disclosed and the complainants were simply guessing.

"We have a list of possibilities but it's a much longer list than the five or six or seven sites (proposed for Stirling Park)," he said.

Mr Rake said some submissions were also highly critical of the economic status of countries potentially needing diplomatic sites.

"I don't think we should allocate sites based purely on their economic performances," Mr Rake said. "Most intelligent and tolerant Canberra share that view."

While the authors of the submissions requested their names be withheld, Mr Rake said they would disclose the nature of the comments in report to the inquiry.

The Commonwealth government, the ACT government, the diplomatic corps and ACT residents will be invited to be involved in the inquiry into the allocation of land to diplomatic missions.

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Ms Brodtmann said the inquiry's focus would be on the roles of the National Capital Authority, the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the ACT government and relevant agencies. The forecast levels of demand and supply will also be investigated as well as additional options for locations of future diplomatic missions.

Mr Rake said he would like to see the importance of embassies to Australia, the impact embassies had on residents and the potential options for different property types for future embassies considered in the inquiry.

"I think it is important if we're going to look at the issues that we bring together all of those topics," he said.

The inquiry is expected to investigate the possibility of new locations for diplomatic enclaves outside the traditional areas of Canberra's inner south, as well as allowing subdivision of existing estates.

Mr Rake said moving diplomatic enclaves outside of the current zone could raise a number of issues with regard to the cost of securing the sites, and the potential impact of threat levels on nearby residences.

"I think that's likely to raise concerns with both foreign affairs considerations and security," he said.

"If they were sprinkled throughout suburbs what that might mean in one of those elevated risk periods the house across the road might end up with a police car parked in front of it for days."

Submissions to the inquiry can be emailed to jscncet@aph.gov.au until Friday, February 1. The committee will report the inquiry findings by March 30.

For information on the inquiry, visit www.aph.gov.au/ncet