

**Canberra Spatial Plan: Engaging Community in a Planned City —  
A City from Nowhere to 'A City Like No Other'**

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**Abstract**

In March 2004, the ACT (Australian Capital Territory) Government released its strategic plan for the next 30 years, The *Canberra Spatial Plan*. The development of the *Canberra Spatial Plan* commenced in April 2002, following a commitment from the government to develop a new strategic plan for Canberra, as recommended by the OECD as a part of its Urban Renaissance review of the city.

The government had also made a strong commitment to participative approaches in planning. The implementation of this commitment was the responsibility of the ACT Planning and Land Authority. The result was the most comprehensive community engagement process for planning ever undertaken in the ACT's history.

The methodology developed aimed to work closely with the community to ensure that the Plan reflected their aspirations whilst also achieving the overall goal of sustainable development for the future of the ACT. Our aims were to produce a plan that:

- enabled all Canberrans to participate in shaping the future of the city
- ensured that policies were coherent and integrated, across issues and between places
- provided a clear framework within which all stakeholders in Canberra's future could plan their own activities to best effect.

The *Draft Canberra Spatial Plan* was released on 3 November 2003 and was open for public comment until December 2003. The public consultation program for this six-week period provided an opportunity for members of the public and key stakeholders to provide input on the draft plan.

ACT Government representatives gave briefings and presentations to key groups and peak representative bodies and held public forums to enable people to learn more about the key elements of the *Canberra Spatial Plan* and the Preferred Direction. They also provided an opportunity for members of the public to provide verbal input and make suggestions on the draft plan.

A display centre was also set up in City Walk for a period of three days to provide people with the opportunity to discuss issues in the draft plan with the Authority staff. The *Canberra*

*Spatial Plan* is the result of more than 19 months community consultation. In response to the careful consideration of the numerous issues raised through public consultation, a number of modifications have been made throughout the process and ideas and concerns addressed.

## **Introduction**

Canberra, the national capital of Australia, was designed in the early 1900s. Starting from identification of the location to the naming of the capital were all done from scratch. Ninety years later the city has moved forward towards 'A City Like No Other', the expression used by the city designer, architect-planner Walter Burley Griffin in 1913.

Canberra's special garden qualities and landscape settings are assets enjoyed by everyone who lives, works and visits this beautiful city. The city was carefully planned to reflect the bush backdrop, to be easy to move around in and to provide citizens and visitors with a high quality environment. The development of Canberra as a Garden City has seen rolling grass plains, previously used to graze sheep, transformed into a magnificent city with strong urban symbols of its role as a national capital.

The builders of Canberra faced many challenges to create a lush, green and graceful city in a harsh and isolated part of Australia so that all Australians would be proud of Canberra as their national capital. The continued management of the city's growth, maturation and maintenance also presents numerous but different challenges.

Today we have a substantial legacy of infrastructure that must be maintained, including substantial areas of open space and landscaping that are an essential element of the garden character. Roads and stormwater systems are now reaching an age where the city must make a significant resource allocation to maintenance as well as building new infrastructure.

Protecting the Garden City from unsympathetic change in the urban form is also a challenge for the city architects and planners. The bushfires of 18 January, that saw 500 homes fully destroyed, have raised questions about the viability of maintaining the bush character of Canberra. The fires have touched deep into the heart of many residents who now question some of the fundamentals of Canberra's planning. Fingers of open space brought fire deep into the suburbs of the Garden City. High fire danger days more often coincide with summer drought conditions and water restrictions, thus exacerbating pre-existing dry garden conditions and flammability of plants as well as fences and mulch materials.

Questions are now being asked about how we can afford to keep our wonderful garden city character whilst providing for population increases, demographic change and demand for different housing forms, the pressures for water conservation in an arid land, and living with a fire-prone landscape.

In 2001, the newly elected government for the ACT came up with the idea to develop a long-term spatial plan to provide a visionary strategic planning framework for Canberra to guide over the next 30 years and beyond. The *Canberra Spatial Plan* captures the vision Canberrans hold for our city.

The development of the *Canberra Spatial Plan* commenced in April 2002, following the commitment from the government to develop a new strategic plan for Canberra, as recommended by the OECD as a part of its Urban Renaissance review of the city. In March 2004, after two years of comprehensive research, consultations, policy developments, meetings and political debates, the ACT Government released the *Canberra Spatial Plan*.

The government had also made a strong commitment to participative approaches in planning. The implementation of this commitment was the responsibility of the ACT Planning and Land Authority. The result was the most comprehensive community engagement process for planning ever undertaken in the ACT's history.

The methodology developed aimed to work closely with the community to ensure that the plan reflected their aspirations whilst also achieving the overall goal of sustainable development for the future of the ACT. The aims were to produce a plan that:

- enabled all Canberrans to participate in shaping the future of the city
- ensured that policies were coherent and integrated, across issues and between places
- provided a clear framework within which all stakeholders in Canberra's future could plan their own activities to best effect.

The development of the *Canberra Spatial Plan* with the Canberra community has shown that it is possible to produce a long-term strategic plan that balances all the community aspirations and concerns and achieves an outcome that is broadly accepted by the whole community.

The preparation of the *Canberra Spatial Plan* has involved a five-stage process. At each stage, consultation with key stakeholders and the wider community has been undertaken.

The first stage included the release of a discussion paper *Your Canberra Your Future: Changes and Challenges* for community consultation on 2 July 2002. Building on the community and industry input to the consultations, *Your Canberra Your Future* provided a summary of the issues raised during this consultation process, articulated the underpinning core values and outlined some draft ideas. The consultations included:

- awareness advertisements on ACTION buses — July to September 2002.
- a brochure distributed to all Canberra and Queanbeyan houses — July 2002

- a telephone survey of 1800 households — August 2002
- industry and community information sessions — 5 August 2002
- 15 focus group meetings in each district — August 2002
- six community workshops in each district — August 2002
- *The Canberra Plan: Issues and Ideas Forum* — 4 September 2002
- three Community Congresses — September 2002.

Subsequently, further consultations were undertaken in 2003 to clarify the preferred direction. These included:

- more than 2000 surveys on community views about the future of the Stromlo area specifically — March to April 2003
- a public summit 'A City Like No Other' — June 2003
- a telephone survey of 2400 households in ACT, Queanbeyan and Yass — June to July 2003
- an information display for community at various shopping centres — July to August 2003
- industry and community roundtables — August to September 2003
- a public round table — September 2003
- ACT Government Interagency workshops — August to September 2003
- Canberra Plan team round tables — September 2003
- community peak groups roundtable — September 2003
- business peak groups submission — September 2003
- New South Wales local authority and New South Wales Government roundtable — September 2003.

In June 2003, *Towards the Canberra Spatial Plan* was released for extensive community consultations with a series of options and scenarios with a triple bottom line impact assessment. This document revealed the trade-offs towards achieving a sustainable Canberra.

The *Draft Canberra Spatial Plan* was released on 3 November 2003 and was open for public comment until December 2003. The public consultation program for this six-week period provided an opportunity for members of the public and key stakeholders to provide input on the draft plan.

ACT Government representatives gave briefings and presentations to key groups and peak representative bodies and held public forums to enable people to learn more about the key elements of the *Canberra Spatial Plan* and the preferred direction. They also provided an opportunity for members of the public to provide verbal input and make suggestions on the draft plan.

A display centre was also set up in City Walk for a period of three days to provide people with the opportunity to discuss issues in the draft plan with ACTPLA staff.

The *Canberra Spatial Plan* is the result of more than 19 months community consultation. In response to the careful consideration of the numerous issues raised through public consultation, a number of modifications have been made throughout the process and ideas and concerns addressed.

In developing the future direction of the plan, the community and industry have worked together with government to identify the strengths and challenges Canberra is facing and to determine how our city can, and should, respond to them. The consultation undertaken to develop the *Canberra Spatial Plan* has been invaluable and has ensured that the vision and direction for the Canberra of our future is one which is widely shared. It is this vision that will guide the development of Canberra to achieve a sustainable future for our city, its people its environment and its economy.

Canberra will continue to be a great place to live, work and enjoy. It will continue to be a great planned city with a unique sense of place. This city will be one where the natural environment is respected and water is a valued resource, communities are healthy and vibrant and the economy is strong and prosperous. The improved transport system will enable Canberrans to continue to enjoy a high standard of accessibility across the city. This Canberra of the future will be achieved through implementation of the *Canberra Spatial Plan*.

One of the key elements of the *Canberra Spatial Plan* is the integration of the sustainable transport planning principles and actions into the plan. This allows the *Canberra Spatial Plan* to shape the pattern of development to establish an efficient transport system. Bringing the Sustainable Transport Plan into the *Canberra Spatial Plan* also reflects the commitment of the ACT Government to implement the principles of the National Charter of Integrated Land Use and Transport Planning.

The *Canberra Spatial Plan* provides Canberra with a new planning paradigm. The *Canberra Spatial Plan* is a departure from planning systems that predict changes and provide specific measures to respond to these. Rather, the *Canberra Spatial Plan* will enable changes to occur, by providing an innovative and flexible framework for making decisions that affect the long-term development of this city and territory.

Finally, community engagement in planning has accelerated and enhanced Canberra's opportunity to become a true sustainable and prosperous planned city. It has been acknowledged that together, the government and community can make a difference for

themselves and for generations to come. By engaging the whole community, Canberrans will continue to make their city unique — ‘a city like no other’.

#### **Paper presenter’s portfolio**

- *International Conference on Engaging Communities*, Brisbane, QLD (August 2005)
- *Annual Australian Population Association’s (APA) Conference*, Canberra, ACT (September 2004)
- *Australian New Zealand Regional Science Conference*, Wollongong, NSW (October 2004)
- Overseas seminars in Malaysia and Bangladesh (May 2003 and January 2004)
- *International Conference on GIS*, Canberra, ACT (September 2003)
- Various community consultations and information sessions, Canberra, ACT and Melbourne, Victoria (between 1996 and 2004).

#### **Contact**

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