

## **A People's Planning System for the ACT?**

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Many readers of *Bogong* would be familiar with the “Yes Minister” episode involving a hospital, proudly presented to the Minister as a model of effective modern management. The one problem was that it had no patients. And its managers were very reluctant to acquire any patients clearly because they were concerned that patients would mean the hospital would not run nearly as smoothly.

And what a joy it would be for a town planner to have a city to run without the complications of citizenry. I think one of the most complex and difficult jobs is the management of growth and change in a modern city with a democratically minded populace. It is not at all the sort of straightforward task that Walter Burley Griffin had with several hundred hectares of largely people free grassland to muck about with or that the brilliant, but thoroughly undemocratic, Napoleon Bonaparte had when he ploughed through whatever and whoever was in the way to lay down the great avenues and build the great edifices of Paris.

I think we are lucky enough to have some of the best town planners and managers in this city, who understand that their job is much, much more to do with people processes than it is with lines and colours on maps and figures in computers. But I think that we have some way to go yet before we can say that we in Canberra have worked out effective people processes to regulate urban change with a satisfactory level of public confidence. Attendance at the Save Open Spaces rally last November and many other events organised by local residents groups and letters to the paper over recent months is clear evidence of this.

Many aspects of planning and regulation cause concern, but they seem to boil down to the basic question of security. The system we have just does not seem to provide people with sufficient security about what is going to happen to their surroundings. Two issues then rise to the top of the agenda.

First is the need for the planning system overall to be more removed from the vagaries of the politics of the day. It needs:

- to be put on a surer more strategic footing;
- to be much less open to the whims of politicians and the fickle winds of political pressure;
- to be thoroughly transparent; and
- to ensure effective community participation.

Secondly, the open spaces that our community so greatly values, and are universally acclaimed by other cities in the world, need specifically to be secured for future generations.

Essentially, a more politically independent planning system would involve a statutory body with statutory powers and responsibilities. It would be responsible to the Assembly, rather than the Executive, with appropriate provision for the relevant minister to direct it to investigate, consider and report to the Assembly on certain matters. Critical provisions of the statute would prescribe community participation processes. Our system of government is based on a combination of representative and participative democracy. The balance between participative and representative democracy varies amongst areas of public policy and administration. My view is that urban planning is an area where outcomes can only be efficient, equitable and acceptable if the balance in decision-making is toward participative processes. The current perception is that the community is consulted, often through inadequate communication mechanisms, but that decisions are made without adequate account of community views. Rather than consultation, *participation* is required.

The golden rule of community participation is: *Groups generated by the community itself (civil society organisations) should be intimately involved in decision-making processes from the earliest opportunity.* With development proposals, local community groups should be involved *from the outset*.

The city-wide organisation "Planning the ACT Together" (PACTT) comprises more than forty community groups interested in planning issues. As well as offering a co-ordinating role, PACTT can facilitate the generation of local groups where they are needed.

It is my conviction that participative democratic processes can only work really effectively if the community groups involved are entirely non-party political and do not, as organisations, engage in big "P" politics.

Practicality dictates that most matters cannot be decided by referendums and at the end of the day elected representatives need to take decisions. Effective community participation should go a long way to ensure that those decisions are in the widest public interest.

Turning to the question of securing open spaces for the future, recent discussion has raised the possibility of using "entrenched" legislation, which is legislation that can only be overturned by a two-thirds majority vote in the Assembly. Such legislation could be applied to all open spaces currently used for recreation and refreshment and which have other important quality of life values.

The categories of land would include:

- urban open space
- restricted access recreational

- broad-acre and forestry
- specified community facility land like playing fields and specified open space land currently zoned for particular purposes such as leisure

Importantly, some areas of land which have been previously zoned for residential purposes, but which have become significant open spaces, should also be included.

This ACT legislation would not apply to National Capital land, such as Canberra Nature Park.

I suspect that ecological sustainability was something that did not concern Napoleon and Burley-Griffin too much. Clearly it is something that must be part of town planning over and above the immediate and present impact of development on the quality of the human environment. Minimising resource usage, especially energy, will not be achieved in a low population density, sprawling city. Even though increasing “telecommuting” and other technological developments will assist, I think we must accept increasing population density in Canberra.

But there are ways of doing this which maximise transport efficiency and do not diminish quality of life of residents. For example, mixed residential/commercial developments could be considered for present car-parking areas around town centres. A particular possibility might be the transformation of Fyshwick to mixed commercial/residential use. Land between Fyshwick and the Kingston Foreshore area could also be appropriate for residential use. Potential transport efficiencies in this area are obvious.

*Robin Brown is a member of Yarralumla Residents Association and Convenor of a PACTT Working Group on Open Spaces. He has been a member of the Executive Committee of the Conservation Council and of the Council of the Australian Conservation Foundation. He was CEO of the Consumers' Federation of Australia for a number of years.*

*The views expressed in this article are entirely personal.*