

Planning that Works



Unclogging the ACT Planning System

Canberra**liberals**

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Vision

The Canberra Liberals believe that Canberra has become the city that it is today due to its unique planning regime. We recognise Canberra's status as a leading example of a planned city and the quality of life that sound planning has helped us achieve.

A Canberra Liberal Government will unclog the planning system by delivering the resources that are needed to process the unacceptable backlog of planning decisions that has been left behind by the Stanhope Government. We will facilitate the orderly growth and development of Canberra while maintaining its unique garden city qualities.

Plans to unclog the system:

Businesses large and small and even mums and dads have struggled to cope with a planning system that seems simply unworkable. The Canberra Liberals have real solutions that will help unblock the system and allow ACTPLA to do its job.

- **We will establish a taskforce of staff to assist with clearing the bottleneck of development applications** that has built up since the Planning Act was changed in March 2008. ACTPLA's customer services branch is congested with a backlog of work. Staff will focus on applications that have been waiting the longest time for processing and on applications where jobs are at direct risk from delays in approvals. We will minimise the cost to the tax payer through reallocation of staffing from existing areas where staff are doubling up on functions or working in units that are now redundant.
- **We will establish a Small Business Response Team in ACTPLA to provide specialised advice to small builders**, associated construction professionals and contractors, owner builders and home renovators. This team will operate a field operation as well as an advice line and over-the-counter help. The team will help small players to navigate the planning system and trouble-shoot misunderstandings over the application process.
- **We will appoint a CEO of ACTPLA to implement necessary cultural and structural change within ACTPLA.** This position will operate separately from the Chief Planning Officer. By taking the management burden off the senior planner, we will allow the planners to focus on planning.
- **We will support the planning courses at the University of Canberra by encouraging existing ACTPLA staff to undertake professional development** and working with UC to expand and promote their planning course offerings in order to attract new people to the region interested in planning as a career.

These commitments are additional to our pledges to:

- **Exempt first home buyers from stamp duty on sales of homes up to \$500,000 and on the purchase of vacant land up to \$300,000**, to bring confidence and demand back into an uncertain market.
- **Review property taxes, as part of a broader re-think of taxes and charges in the territory.** We will consider the inefficiency, the behavioural effects and the disincentives that some taxes can create. This review will involve consultation with community councils, the housing industry and with community housing and supported accommodation providers. This review will provide an opportunity to repeal nuisance taxes. For instance we see insufficient justification for Labor's new \$1,000 tax on charities, community organisations and clubs, which they must now pay whenever they inquire into whether their leases are concessional.
- **Create and manage a genuine "land bank"** to ensure that we have enough land ready to quickly respond to surges in demand. This will ensure that the dream of home ownership is made a reality for more Canberrans;
- **Increase competition in the market by ensuring there are no public or private monopolies over land development.** We will remove bottlenecks by making the land developers compete and by removing red tape. By diversifying the mechanisms for land delivery, it will be possible to speed up the supply of land to market and use competitive forces to push prices within reach of young families.
- **Reduce the timeframe between the announcement of a sub-division being released and when it is available on the market.** This will be done through better forward planning within ACTPLA and acceleration of Estate Development Plans by both the public and private sector.

These policies provide the right combination of vision and practical application that has been missing in the ACT for too long.

We will ensure that the best characteristics of the bush city are not lost in our suburbs and developments. Planning and development parameters will include reservation of accessible public open spaces and safe minimum road widths. We will restore choice to the market place and allow Canberra families to choose the lifestyle they want rather than have it forced on them by government.

The Canberra Liberals recognise that capital and labour are mobile and many jobs are being driven across the border into New South Wales because of problems with land release and delays in development approvals in the ACT. Workers across many areas of the public service are finding it difficult to rent or buy in Canberra and this is leading to shortages in particular professions and areas of service delivery.

An overhaul of Labor's rationed land supply arrangements will help address the housing affordability crisis and assist in attracting more skilled professionals to Canberra to meet the pressing needs of many employers. The Canberra Liberals understand the difficulties faced by both small business and government alike in attracting workers from interstate.

Planning Dysfunction Under Stanhope Labor

Planning is fundamental to the future of Canberra. It is about shaping the kind of city we want to live in.

Over the course of the last 8 years, we have planning failures at every turn from the Stanhope Government:

- the Epicentre fiasco;
- the QE2 debacle;
- the deliberate under-supply of residential land release;
- failure to plan for commercial land release;
- the collapse of an intergovernmental agreement for the Constitution Avenue upgrade;
- the phantom Civic to Belconnen busway project;
- approval of a commercial building on Kingston Foreshore in breach of the Territory Plan;
- the AAT's rejection of a Salvation Army supported accommodation unit on the basis that ACTPLA's approval had fundamental errors; and
- a proposal for a large powerstation with 18 chimney stacks within a kilometre of residential areas.

These failures are mostly traced back to poor decision-making by Stanhope Government Ministers, rather than administrative errors by officials. There is a real need to restore faith in the planning systems of the ACT.

Labor has tried to shift Ministerial responsibility for land release from Simon Corbell, to Andrew Barr, then on to Jon Stanhope. This passing of the hot potato has failed to help resolve the dysfunction in Labor's management of planning or development.

The Land Development Agency which is responsible for land release has grown significantly in size in recent years, without delivering improved land supply. Land supply under the Stanhope Government has remained well below demand and property prices have spiralled as a result.

- Data from the Housing Institute of Australia shows that there has been a massive decline of affordability over the last 7 years, with a drop of 59% under the watch of Stanhope Labor.
- Affordability in the ACT slipped another 16% in the March quarter 2008, more than the drop in any other Australian capital city according to HIA data. In March this year Canberra became less affordable than Perth and Sydney, a position it has not been in for years.
- Housing affordability for first home buyers is significantly worse than when Mr Stanhope's Labor Party came to office in the ACT. Canberra's September Quarter index figure in 2001 was 208.3. The current index figure of 84.9

indicates that first home owner affordability has dropped by 59 per cent under Mr Stanhope. An index figure of 100 means that on average only half the population can afford minimum repayments on a median priced house.

Stanhope Labor's priority has been to waste money on glossy marketing campaigns – something unnecessary in a market where the ACT Government is the monopoly supplier of land and where there is no shortage of demand.

Transport planning also been neglected by the Stanhope Government. The Canberra Liberals see this as a priority that must be run in conjunction with commercial and residential planning models.

Fixing the Logjam of Development Applications

A Canberra Liberal Government will establish a taskforce of staff to assist with clearing the bottleneck of development applications that has built up since the Planning Act was changed in March 2008. Staff will focus on applications that have been waiting the longest time for processing and on applications where jobs are at direct risk from delays in approvals.

When Labor changed the planning laws, there was a flood of applications. Around 400 applications arrived the day before the new system was due to come into effect and there has been a large increase in the number of development applications and preliminary assessments lodged compared to the previous year. Labor has failed to put the resources or systems in place to tackle what was a foreseeable surge in workload.

Labor has removed the six month deadline for decisions on development applications. Since the new Act came in, decisions are slower and more cumbersome than they have ever been. There are no incentives for prompt resolution or good documentation.

- Some of the new paper forms have been around 30 pages long and sections are ambiguous about how they should be filled in.
- Planning Minister Andrew Barr admitted to the Estimates Committee that there has been “overzealous interpretation” of completed forms, leading to many forms being rejected out of hand.
- The online version of the forms has been delayed at least five months after the introduction of the new system.
- The Stanhope Government failed to consult groups such as the HIA and MBA on streamlining the new forms until after they had been introduced and after there was an industry backlash. Mr Stanhope's failure to consult up front has led to a new system that is dysfunctional, unfair to applicants and is causing a loss of income and investment for a home of businesses.

At the time of Budget Estimates hearings ACTPLA admitted that it had between 15 to 29 vacant jobs. This is of concern at a time when the agency is not keeping pace

with the deluge of development applications.

The Canberra Liberals are determined to help the planning agency become more customer focussed, working to assist builders, mums and dads, and community groups. Better resourcing will support a more timely and consistent decision making process.

Planning decisions should be premised on their positive contributions to social and economic benefits, they must give proper regard to amenity, quality of life, heritage aspects, energy efficiency and broader sustainability. It is difficult for planning officials to make assessments of proposals against all relevant criteria in an environment where they are under the pressure of an over-bearing backlog of work. The situation is not only unfair to builders and home buyers, it is also detrimental to the interests of the broader community who want assurance that applications are being assessed carefully against the relevant building standards and limitations.

The bottleneck of work may explain for instance why a five storey building was approved at Kingston Foreshore, when the Territory Plan required a limit of four storeys. These development applications were lodged on 19 and 20 July 2007 and the erroneous planning approvals were agreed on 14 November 2007, but the mistakes did not come to light until late February 2008.

The Word on the Ground:

“Prior to this new system, 70% of our Development Applications were looked at by a technician and then stamped within a 24 hour period. ... The problems we are experiencing with this new system is that ACTPLA are delaying the planning process, due we are told, by lack of experienced of the new system and also an overload of Development Applications. ... Next week our company ..., will have no option but to start laying off fitters and the like within our companies, this is not due to lack of work but because none of our companies have yet received any approvals from ACTPLA since the new system was introduced.”

(Letter to the Minister for Planning from a building company, 1 July 2008).

Small Business Response Team

A Canberra Liberal Government will establish a Small Business Response Team within ACTPLA and establish a field operation. The small business response team would be tasked with creating a new level of communication with the building industry.

One of the main complaints about ACTPLA's activities is its failure to be sufficiently responsive to the community. The Small Business Response Team will focus on ensuring that smaller industry operators are given the appropriate advice and assistance to facilitate the establishment of new developments. The Field Operation will focus on the development of greater understanding of changing market pressures and conditions. It will improve industry understanding of planning laws, so that applications have relevant information and there is greater compliance

with statutory obligations.

The team will also work towards providing pre-emptive policy advice to the Department and the Minister on issue within the industry. The team will also assist in providing advice to home owner-builders who are managing their own extensions, renovations and tree removals.

New CEO to let the Planners Plan

A Canberra Liberal Government will re-deploy resources within ACTPLA to better gear the organisation towards responding to community and industry needs. We will establish a CEO to run ACTPLA who is separate from the Chief Planning Executive.

The creation of a CEO position recognises the fact that the principal planning expert in the agency does not have the time for making management decisions about the logistics of a large organisation. ACTPLA has some significant structural problems that need to be addressed by a capable and effective manager who has experience in running large and complex organisations.

The CEO position will operate separately from the Chief Planning Officer. The Chief Planning officer is an important role and we need that person to concentrate solely on planning, not the daily grind of business administration.

The new CEO will be responsible for re-deploying resources within ACTPLA, improving the business systems and to support the core responsibilities of the organisation. Resources will be re-deployed to help clear the backlog of development applications and to help staff the new Small Business Response Team.

This restructure recognises that ACTPLA is currently doubling up on certain functions, which has inhibited its capacity to effectively respond to community and industry needs. For instance the Estate Plans developed by ACTPLA staff are sometimes super-ceded when ACTPLA releases land via an “englobo” partnership with a private developer and ACTPLA often winds up approving separate Estate Plans which have been prepared by the developer. Rather than have this duplicated effort, ACTPLA would be better limiting some of its planning work to preparation of requirements for minimum street widths, plot ratios, block sizes and other general estate design requirements.

The new CEO would also be tasked with a review which examined the middle management functions of ACTPLA with a view to flattening the structure and focussing on multi skilling.

Overall these re-deployments are expected to shift approximately 12 full time equivalent staff to coal-face services in early 2009. This policy is aimed at clearing backlogs, streamlining the system, getting rid of obstructions and letting ACTPLA get on with their job – which is to plan strategically and efficiently for the whole territory

Support Town Planning Degrees at the University of Canberra

A Canberra Liberal Government will support the planning courses at the University of Canberra by encouraging ACTPLA staff to undertake professional self development opportunities and by working closely with the University on ways to meet the broader training needs of industry in Canberra.

Canberra is Australia's most planned city yet for years we have not offered Town Planning qualifications. Undergraduate planning courses have only recently commenced at the University of Canberra, with a view to expanding into post graduate courses when there is sufficient demand.

We will ensure that ACTPLA provides internships and other professional development for planners-in-training and will encourage the organisation to establish some professional exchanges.

We will work with UC to expand and to promote their courses in order to attract new people to the region interested in planning as a career.

Our vision is to see the UC become an internationally recognised centre of excellence in the field of planning.

Resources

A Canberra Liberal Government will commit \$2.3 million over eighteen months towards the task of clearing the bottleneck of development applications and a further \$600,000 over the subsequent two years to improve the ability of ACTPLA to process development applications. This will be offset by the transfer of resources from other areas within ACTPLA.

A Chief Executive Officer position will be established with around half of the costs offset by restructuring some of the 18 management positions. A Small Business Response Team will be funded at a cost of \$1.3 million over four years. The total net funding required for this staffing restructure is \$1.1 million over four years.

	2008-09 \$000	2009-10 \$000	2010-11 \$000	2011-12 \$000
Taskforce to clear the Development Application Bottleneck	800	1500	300	300
Transfer of Staff and Resources to support DA Taskforce	-600	-1200	-900	-900
Chief Executive for ACTPLA	153	314	324	333
Restructure of management positions	-50	-200	-206	-212
ACTPLA Small Business Response Team	100	300	400	500