

Griffith/Narrabundah Community Association Inc.

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Mr Andrew Barr MLA
Chief Minister
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Dear Chief Minister

PROTECTION OF CANBERRA'S URBAN FOREST

I am writing to you to seek the assistance of your Government in a cooperative enterprise with the residents of the Griffith/Narrabundah area to protect street trees.

Increased construction activity in recent years has seen some builders using verges to park vehicles and store building materials, and smaller structures.

Verges, and particularly trees, often lack adequate protection. Although not immediately obvious, misuse of verges results in compaction of soil that impedes tree growth and can make vegetation more susceptible to disease. On occasion, actual damage has been caused to tree branches and trunks by vehicles or builders leaning equipment and building materials against trees.

Damage to trees and verges constitutes a loss of public assets. Replacement of street trees is both costly and a largely avoidable expense in a period of tight government budgetary circumstances. It imposes an inordinate and inequitable financial burden on ACT ratepayers through a form of regressive cost shifting from non-compliant private firms to the public. Moreover, the loss of urban forest can only increase the urban heat island effect at a time of changing climatic conditions. Putting it another way the planting and maintenance of trees is a very cost effective way of ameliorating global warming, and it is more efficient to keep what we have than to be constantly replanting trees.

For some years, the GNCA has cooperated with TAMS (now Transport Canberra and City Services, TC&CS) by conducting twice yearly surveys of all building activity in the Griffith-Narrabundah area, and providing the government with information on non-compliant behaviour by builders. The advantage to the ACT Government was a reduced need for monitoring by Rangers, and hence more efficient use of existing resources. At one stage TAMS officers gave serious consideration to using our surveys as a model for an internet-based reporting system across the whole of Canberra, but that seems to have fallen by the wayside with recent changes in agencies.

We understand that there are two key obstacles to ensuring greater compliance with regulations concerning the misuse of verges by builders. The main impediment appears to be the low level of penalties imposed on non-compliant builders, who may well find that it is cheaper to pay the penalties rather than comply with the regulations. We therefore recommend that effective and enforceable verge protection be a condition of building approvals as well as increasing the monetary penalties for non-compliance.

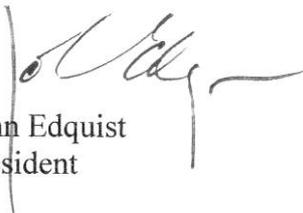
The other problem appears to be lack of an integrated, approach between the EPD and TC&CS Directorates. In particular there has been a lack of information exchange in the past about Exempt Developments. Ms Katy Gallagher MLA, the then Chief Minister, wrote to the GNCA on 31 August 2012 informing us that senior personnel of relevant directorates would meet to evaluate the situation and propose a way forward. We have not been informed of any results since then, and the problem still exists.

I am therefore writing to ask you to implement mechanisms that will ensure improved coordination between EPD and TC&CS. In particular we ask that you require EPD inform TC&CS of ALL building approvals (including exempt approvals). If necessary the regulations should also be changed to require the Certifier to provide TC&CS with any information that TC&CS may seek.

At present compliant builders are being disadvantaged because of the extra costs involved. Failure to act can only result in residents losing confidence in government functions because they see regulations not being enforced.

We would, of course, be more than happy to work in partnership with the government through continued voluntary monitoring in cooperation with relevant agencies.

Yours sincerely



John Edquist
President

8 December 2016