

ADDRESS to the KINGSTON AND BARTON RESIDENTS GROUP
Annual General Meeting, November 10th 2016

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ACT Government Threats to the Manuka Oval Precinct Planning and Development Issues

Reality Check

1. With the introduction of Territory Self-Government by the Hawke Government in 1988, the Commonwealth effectively abandoned its constitutional obligations to “*plan, develop and maintain*” Canberra as the National Capital, by the following means:
 - (a) Year by year relentlessly reducing the National Capital Authority’s annual budget appropriations and consequently its professional staff numbers, thereby transferring the Authority’s metropolitan planning responsibilities down to the ACT Government to an extent that has turned out to be well beyond the capacity of the Legislative Assembly and Territory public service to cope with.
 - (b) Denying special ‘national capital’ funding to the ACT over and above budget appropriations to the States and Territories for major infrastructure development and services, nominating instead income from Territory land sales as though that would be an equivalent ongoing source of revenue, basically because the Commonwealth Government and the Federal Parliament don’t care if Canberra is, or is not, a planned city. The people of Australia don’t care either, nor do most Canberra residents unless there are obvious benefits. As I have stated publicly on numerous occasions, the planned national capital and the ‘garden city’ capital are both just an idea, a philosophy, a methodology, a way of designing and building cities, as distinct from ‘ad hoc’, meaning that without a planning, design and urban development organisation of some kind, be it legislative, governmental or developmental, then city building inevitably becomes normative, uncoordinated and exposed to the vagaries of a multitude of self-seeking individuals, developers, politicians and operators, with not a design or spatial excellence or environmental protection intention, in sight.
 - (c) Deliberately starving the National Capital Authority of funding so as to force reduction in its professional staff numbers to such an extent that for some years now the Authority has ceased to function as an over-arching metropolitan planning and infrastructure development authority.
2. Under the re-elected Barr Government this is the reality of what we are facing in relation to the protection and enhancement of the Manuka Oval precinct. However, on the bright side, it might be that with a new and enlarged Legislative Assembly our prospects for better treatment of Manuka Oval planning and development issues might improve. To this end I am accordingly going to deal, firstly with the planning and development issues as I see them and, secondly, how I think the various decision-makers, the Government, the Assembly and the bureaucracy ought to be approached. Also how I think Community Associations such as yours need to behave.

3. The advent of self-government in 1988 was the death knell for planning in general in the ACT. Although that was not recognised by most people at the time, however, it was to me, for the following reasons. The stature of national capitals in federal systems of government are always precarious due to a constant struggle for attention, prestige and financial support between state capitals and the national capital. If, as is the case in Australia, the states are fewer and larger, then the national capital situation is even more precarious, compared say with the United States and its 50 smaller states. In Canberra's case successive Territory governments, from the outset, have done two things. Firstly, they have evaded their legal obligation to establish a statutory town planning authority simply by nominating a single person, bereft of funding or staff, who is accordingly forced to rely on a ministerial department to supply the necessary human resources and operational funding. Secondly, the planning departments have been progressively de-skilled under different Chief Ministers who didn't like the way in which the land planning system reduces their scope to assign development projects as they see fit, which has accordingly given rise to a sustained program of 'normalisation' so as to cast Canberra's development in the same mould as other Australian cities and to look and feel like other cities, which is ongoing.

4. What is needed is a multi-disciplinary Master Plan for Manuka Oval and the associated heritage and open space land, which I am collectively dealing with as the Manuka Oval Precinct. By multi-disciplinary I mean, in addition to land use planning, architecture, urban design, landscape design, transport, sociological needs, connectivity to Manuka business area and the Telopea Park open space corridor, all of which involves several agencies of the ACT administration. Unfortunately, it isn't clear who would be the lead authority in this respect as the Environment and Planning Directorate website is quite tentative on the subject of who is responsible for master plan preparation and associated Territory Plan Variations. TAMS is the management agency for the Oval while the Land Development Agency that the Chief Minister has relied upon to manipulate the acquisition of the Canberra Services Club site and related land swaps, is now to be replaced by a new development agency for the City-to-the-Lake (West Basin) project, which might possibly be made responsible for the preparation of a Manuka Oval Precinct Master Plan.

Ethos

1. Manuka Oval holds an important place in the early history of Canberra. It is situated in the suburb of Griffith and was the site nominated by Griffin to be "The Initial City" and the centrepiece of his 1913 Plan that accompanied his *Report Explanatory*, being the place where subdivision development should commence until such time as there was an adequate bridge crossing over the Molonglo River flood plain. By the time the Federal Capital Commission was established in 1925 to carry out the development of the National Capital, Manuka Circle Park, as it was then called, existed as a sports ground at the southern end of Telopea Park but was not identified as such in the 1925 Gazetted Plan. Subsequently its existence was formalised and Manuka Oval was fenced in, primarily but not exclusively, as a cricket ground in 1929, which continues to this day.

2. Although the cultural significance of the Oval is exemplified today by a large sign on the R.J.Hawke grandstand stating that “HISTORIC MANUKA OVAL IS SMOKE FREE”, this historic character has not been accorded due regard by successive Territory governments leading to the poor design of additional seating capacity, disorganised parking areas, failure to resolve ownership of the Canberra Services Club land, using sea containers as a seemingly permanent facility to store gardening equipment on Manuka Pool land, garish advertising banners facing Telopea Park Road, a chaotic main front entrance and an overall impression of a ‘dog’s breakfast’ administration. For some strange reason the horizontal alignment of the seating is not matched by the height of the roof canopies on the three most recent grandstands, all of which are different to one another, the implication being that there is no overall architectural concept of what the building aspects of the Oval are meant to be like. The same messy attitude on the part of the ACT Government applies to the Oval Precinct as a whole, including both buildings and public open space and heritage protection obligations, all of which cries out for a Master Plan that encompasses all of these components so as to properly honour the historical significance of this place.

3. The appropriate ethos of Manuka Oval should be that of a ‘boutique oval’ along similar lines to the character of the Hobart cricket ground on its riverside site, the Bradman Memorial Oval at Bowral and what the Adelaide Oval in the city’s central parklands used to be like before its total envelopment by the new grandstands complex. In other words, a playing field in a parklands setting, visually encompassed by trees and sky and showing its historic character blended with, but not obliterated by, modern facilities and equipment.

Manuka Oval Precinct Master Plan

1. The link between the Manuka Oval Precinct and Telopea Park should be strengthened by constructing a ‘zebra’ crossing at the intersection of NSW Crescent and Telopea Park Road East along the line of Telopea Park. This pathway should be extended along the edge of the Park all the way to Wentworth Avenue and Bowen Park and the Lake foreshore.

2. The growth of traffic on Canberra Avenue through its intersection with Captain Cook Crescent as a consequence of housing development at Tralee and in NSW generally is testing the capacity limits of this key intersection. At some stage there will be a need to construct a pedestrian bridge or tunnel across Canberra Avenue connecting the Oval Precinct to the Manuka shopping and expanding commercial area (Cathedral precinct), plus the redevelopment of the Stuart flats site. The latter will increase the number of residents by 1,200 and cars by 600 moving through the intersection respectively.

3. Following the acquisition of the Canberra Services Club land the existing car park will need to be rearranged and constructed so as to enhance its importance and visual presence as the main walk-in entry to the Oval.
4. The general land use pattern of the Precinct – car parking, streets, paths, building entry points, practice nets, trees and grassed areas - is haphazard and needs to be reviewed in order to improve, not only its functionality but to generally smarten it up. The group of heritage buildings and their associated parking areas and landscape should be consolidated as a specific entity and enhanced, as befits their importance.
5. Likewise, for the Manuka Pool grounds that, in addition, need to be investigated in terms of the feasibility of additional recreation activities that could increase its overall level of activity and justify the considerable cost of its yearly upkeep.
6. The footpath network keeps being added to sporadically and is not always well connected to the origins and destinations of pedestrians both inside and outside the Oval. The legibility in terms of primary and secondary paths should be upgraded and enhanced and more closely related to the intended entry points of buildings and facilities.
7. Building height limits need to be established, not only in relation to the Oval grandstands but also in relation to apartment buildings in the surrounding area that could obliterate the views of trees and sky from a spectator viewpoint.
8. There needs to be a fundamental reassessment of current architectural and urban design practices, which I expect are non-existent. All of the three recent extensions to the grandstands are different in height and architectural details. The seating colour schemes are variable and, in the case of the R.J.Hawke stand, a virtual riot of colour for some weird reason. The eastern entrance is plastered with naming signs to give portion but not all of the stands a commercial title as distinct, say, from another Prime Minister. The west-side public toilet block is 1930's raked brickwork and the nearby bar at the back of the Hawke stand is painted a dirty cream colour so that patrons won't miss it. And so on. The list is endless.
9. It is not known why, at no stage has there been any attempt to build associated car parking facilities for the Oval during the 50 years or so prior to self-government. The Government needs to address this issue seriously, even if it is only to tidy up the random arrangement for staff, maintenance workers and visitors on site, and public parking in Telopea Park and surrounding residential streets. There is already pressure for the Government to relax the current environmental protection measures to facilitate additional non-sporting, night time, entertainment events. In this regard KBRG ought to form an association with the Griffith/Narrabundah Community Association which has a common cause.

Submissions to Government

1. According to the Environment and Planning Directorate website, a Master Plan is a document that sets out how a particular area can, as opposed to will, develop and redevelop into the future. It is not necessarily a detailed design in all or any respect. EPD is the principal but not the only government agency that prepares Master Plans. However, for the purpose of this exercise EPD should be regarded as the likely agency that has to be dealt with. The website defines how a master plan can be prepared, including:
 - a. Extensive community engagement
 - b. Consultation with other government agencies
 - c. Seeking advice from specialist consultants (e.g. traffic)
 - d. Draft plan back to the community
 - e. Presented to government for endorsement
 - f. Master Plan released to the public.

2. Territory Plan variations are usually required, which includes a precinct code that typically defines land uses, building heights and guidelines for other government agencies to implement. These master planning activities are basically the action that KBRG should be asking the Government to undertake.

3. Future planning and improvement of the Oval is bedevilled by the presence of GWS football club and the outrageous arrangement whereby ratepayers provide \$2.8 million to GWS in order to supply 6 hours of play per year to around 12,000 spectators. The insult to our collective intelligence is the insinuation that 'Greater Western' means the inclusion of Canberra 300kms away down the highway. It seems to me the apprehension that this arrangement would not be renewed at the end of its present term was the reason why the Unsolicited Bid procedure was utilised by GWS-Grocon to lodge a development proposal that would encompass two-thirds of the Oval's outside perimeter by means of an 11-storey bank of apartments for sale, plus an underground commercial car park and a supermarket, all of which would have a tunnel connection across to Manuka Village as it were. In return the Consortium would upgrade and extend the roofing of remaining grandstands. The Consortium continues to make it known that it wants to be involved in a possible revised version of its scheme at some stage, which the Government seems to have not yet explicitly shut down.

4. The preparation of a Master Plan cannot proceed very far without the Government securing ownership of the Canberra Services Club land, nor can any rearrangement of the untidy current car parking setup.

5. KBGR needs to develop close planning and submission-to-government relationships with the Griffith/Narrabundah Community Association, the LBG Guardians (West Basin) and other Southside community groups, not just in relation to the Barr Government but also with regard to the enlarged Assembly and the Green's management of the Assembly Planning Committee (Le Couteur).

Tony Powell (10.11.16)

