

Green spaces policy discussion paper

Wellbeing Warriors – Govhack 2022

Introduction

The ACT Planning Strategy provides a strategic vision for planning in the ACT, taking a long-term view as part of an ongoing continuum in planning. The development strategy relies on the premise that communities are a constantly evolving and ‘living’ construct, with successful planning achieving the outcome of providing a ‘liveable region’ for Canberrans to live and work. Key to achieving these outcomes are the planning, development, and management of infrastructure to support growth projections.

In this paper, we propose that future revisions of the ACT Planning Strategy should adopt new principles, to ensure the Australian Capital Territory’s available green space supports the liveability objectives set out since the 2012 ACT Planning Strategy. We will examine the district of Belconnen as a case study to support our proposals.

The relationship between green spaces and population health

The relationship between nature and recreational spaces to population health has been explored by a variety of studies. One such study shows a strong correlation between overall population health and the availability of green spaces, with a variation of green space across communities equal to or beyond 1 standard deviation above or below the mean corresponding with up to 35% increase or decrease respectively in measured population health.¹

Since 2012, the ACT planning strategy has followed the principle of urban intensification to support population growth within the territory. The current planning strategy prescribes targets of 70% of new developments in existing urban centres such as the Belconnen region.²

The relationship between green space and population health also varies depending on the community demographic individuals belong to. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people’s connection between identity and the natural environment weights the importance of green spaces to their community wellness, as demonstrated by the studies leading to the development of a culturally-specific depression diagnostic tool for Aboriginal peoples.³ The growth of ACT’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population (21.4%) is expected to outpace the growth of ACT’s overall population (20.8%) between 2020 and 2031, demonstrating a need to focus on maintaining green spaces at a level that can service increasing populations.

The 1968 Belconnen Town Centre Master Plan indicates Belconnen was designed to support a population upper-limit of 120,000 people, with projected population to grow to 114,000 by 2031.

Recommendation #1: Population growth control measures are implemented to ensure that populations within any region does not exceed planned capacity.

The Australian Public service is heavily centralised in the Australian Capital Territory, with 38.3% of the total APS workforce located within the territory as of December 2021.⁴ With radically shifting skills profiles due to automation and other technological and social changes⁵, it is difficult to project APS personnel growth within the territory in the long term.

We recommend this uncertainty be considered into future planning revisions by working with the Federal Government to create and implement a Federal Government decentralisation strategy.

Recommendation #2: A government decentralisation strategy is established to decouple growth of Australian Public Service from the growth of the Australian Capital Territory

With every new greenfields development that is approved, the amount of total green space coverage remaining in the ACT will continue to decrease. Maximum capacity determinations must be adhered to within all existing regions, and analysis of new greenfields developments must be conducted to quantify the maximum capacity the existing infrastructure, including green space, is able to support. The 70% 30% development targets must shift to 100% urban intensification for future development strategies to prevent further diminishing of total green space within the territory.

As can be seen in the Planning Study for Lawson South, a suburb on the outskirts of the Belconnen region, an aggregated target of non-residential infrastructure has been set at 20% of the total land area, including green space⁶. No targets have been set that ensures a minimum land area allocated specifically to green space.

With the current urban intensification strategy, when existing urban centres hit capacity, focus will turn to previous greenfields development sites such as Lawson South for intensification activities. More rigour needs to be applied to the allocation of green space per total land area to ensure that future urban intensification activities do not exceed green space serviceability when urban intensification activities move these greenfields developments towards their population capacity limits.

Recommendation #3: All new developments are designed with green space to support a maximum capacity that will not be exceeded by urban intensification efforts.

Conclusion

Accessible green space is a significant determinant of wellness of all ACT citizens. As urban intensification activities see regional populations reach planned capacities of current urban centres, we recommend the 70% urban intensification / 30% greenfields development targets shift towards 100% urban intensification for future development strategies to prevent ongoing diminishing of green space. We recommend the ACT Government work with the Federal Government to create a decentralisation strategy, ensuring there isn't a perpetual population growth trajectory within the territory. We also recommend that future planning strategies prioritise green space allocation to ensure sufficient green space is within serviceable proximity to residential areas, and sized based on the population the green space is intended to service, rather than sized based on the total land area percentage targets.

References:

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6 – Lawson South Planning Study -

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