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Yarralumla Residents' Association Submission to the National Capital Authority on DA 53: Proposed Changes to the Albert Hall Precinct

Introduction

Members of the Yarralumla Residents' Association first became aware of DA53 from an article in the Canberra Times. We attended the first consultation session and became very aware of the strength of feeling of those present about the proposed changes. This groundswell of feeling did not diminish in the second consultation session nor has it faded in the intervening four weeks. During that time we have been out in the community collecting signatures, recording opinions, talking to journalists, contacting politicians, talking to heritage experts, writing to the Canberra Times and communicating on the internet in conjunction with the Friends of the Albert Hall.

We have been forced by the response to widen and maintain the campaign; we were involved at the beginning because it was in our suburb but it is now an issue for all Canberra residents. The reason we think that there has been such a strong reaction is that it is **one of the few significant and beautiful public places in Canberra which is important to Canberra as a city rather than to Canberra as the National Capital.**

Who is represented in this submission?

This submission has been drawn up after consultation with YRA members (100 households) and the YRA mailing list (52 more households) out of a total of 1200 households in the suburb. Responses were also collected at two information sessions at the Yarralumla shops. Later we canvassed residents' opinions while collecting signatures for petitions. Whilst there was a difference of emphasis between respondents there was very little variation in content so we are confident that this document reflects the views of our community. **This is a short submission focusing on what people want rather than on what they do not want and it represents the views of many hundreds of people.**

The Albert Hall as a community facility

Canberra residents consider the Albert Hall to be the central meeting place—their town hall. It is currently used regularly by some hundreds of groups for meetings and functions. They hold seminars, small concerts, presentations, training sessions, private social gatherings. The groups include choral, opera, symphony, art, embroidery, organ, dance, folk, fire brigade, sporting, school, church, overseas aid, welfare, cancer support, community counseling, community service, baby care, children's support, heritage, wildlife, environment and local residents' groups. A number of Federal and ACT government departments and agencies, small businesses and many embassies also use the Albert Hall for functions.

We have a long and fascinating list of what people remember happening at the Albert Hall—older residents remember celebrating the end of the war and countless balls and performances, and people in their twenties and thirties remember school performances and eisteddfods.

We note that on the virtual photographs for DA 53 there is a roofed structure joining the Albert Hall to a building behind it. Whilst we understand that the pictures are indicative only, it seems clear that the plan incorporates a building which could be a hotel permanently joined to the Albert Hall. If planning permission for such a building were given it would mean that a commercial entity would have an investment in leasing the Albert Hall on an ongoing basis. **We are completely opposed to any development which permanently decides the fate of the Albert Hall.**

Some respondents would like to see the Albert Hall have a civic function for ceremonies, weddings, concerts etc. To have this available as an ACT facility would require expenditure. While we know that the present ACT government has financial constraints, financial imperatives can change, and therefore we would not like any use to be “set in concrete”.

We also note that the support for the Albert Hall as a community facility has come from all age groups and it was the most important issue about DA53 for the majority of people.

Heritage and tourism

Many of our respondents have pointed out that the reason that tourists visit Canberra is precisely because it is not like Sydney and Melbourne. Tourists visit Vienna, Prague and Paris because their unique buildings and quarters are preserved. There is a resurgence of interest in our recent history (Curtin, Chifley, Lang, Deakin) and Canberra itself is featured in these histories. The Albert Hall precinct with the Canberra Hotel is part of this and we would like the whole area to be preserved and enhanced. We believe that it is not necessary to have any new buildings in the precinct. The other four DAs which have been passed allow for tens of thousands of squares of new buildings and many of us support this in the interests of revitalising the centre of Canberra and the consequent possible reduction in greenhouse gases.

The lake is the heart of Canberra and the NCA has already planned areas for people to be able to access it in an urban setting on the north shore of the lake and at Kingston. Whilst we hear the argument about taking the city to the lake we believe that the lake foreshore is currently extensively used and valued by visitors and residents, and having an area with cafes and restaurants on one side of the lake (as planned) with a less built up area on the other side with picnic spots and barbecues would provide something for all.

Foreshores and views

Respondents want the views from Commonwealth Avenue Bridge to be kept open as the entrance to the parliamentary triangle. Contrast between the open space and buildings is important. To build on the south shore would be to enclose the lake and cut off the views to the mountains and lake which give Canberra another of its unique characteristics envisaged by Walter Burley Griffin—that of a city couched in the hills.

Buildings

We understand that the NCA is outlining land uses and building envelopes for the precinct. We are not at all convinced that more building is necessary in the precinct but if it is essential to have more hotel accommodation in this area we think that more stringent requirements are necessary than appear in this document. There must be a requirement that any future buildings are in sympathy with the existing buildings rather than of the same dimensions. By this we do not necessarily mean that they look the same or are even evocative of the same era but that they have architectural merit, and complement what is already there. They should not be joined on to the Albert Hall nor relate to it in any permanent way other than aesthetically. They should not be as concentrated as indicated. In DA 53 an eight storey building is proposed and we consider that any building of that sort of height will detract from the attractiveness of the area.

Traffic

Many of our members are concerned about the traffic plans and some have sent in separate submissions. Many residents would like more consideration to be given to pedestrian and cyclist safety. In spite of assurances to the contrary we believe that the proposal will slow down traffic on Commonwealth Avenue and channel some traffic into a “rat run” through Yarralumla. However we would prefer to discuss the traffic issues separately since DA 53 will be either withdrawn or extensively changed if the NCA listens to Canberra residents’ concerns. This would then necessitate changes to the traffic plan.

Summary

The Yarralumla Residents’ Association believes that DA 53 should be withdrawn. An alternative proposal should be drawn up with input from the ACT Government which incorporates -

- continued affordable use of the Albert Hall by residents—not necessarily in the current form.
- heritage protection for Albert Hall and its curtilage, and for the croquet club and the original parts of the Hyatt Hotel.
- preservation of the existing landscape and replanting of trees that are unsafe and have to be removed.
- possible further hotel buildings but with guidelines to ensure they are in architectural sympathy with the existing buildings.
- no building joined to the Albert Hall unless it is part of a stand-alone plan for the Albert hall itself.
- reconsideration of the traffic plan including the removal of the Flynn drive clover leaf.

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