



Subject

National Capital Plan Draft Amendment 94 – National Arboretum Commercial Accommodation

Public information session

Details

Date: 13 February 2020

Time: 5.30pm

Location: National Capital Exhibition, Regatta Point, Barrine Drive, Commonwealth Park

Meetings attendees

Andrew Smith (Chief Planner, National Capital Authority)

Rebecca Sorensen (Director Strategic Planning, National Capital Authority)

Lily Black (Planning Officer, National Capital Authority)

Kate Still (Director National Engagement, National Capital Authority)

Scott Sadler (Executive Manager, National Arboretum Canberra)

Seven members of the public attended.

Discussion

Andrew Smith commenced the session by welcoming attendees and providing a brief presentation outlining:

- the role of the National Capital Authority (NCA), in particular its role in planning the National Capital
- the location of the National Arboretum Canberra (NAC) within the Inner Hills
- background information concerning the establishment and development of the arboretum
- what is proposed by DA94
- key planning provisions proposed to guide the design and siting of new accommodation and 'wellness' facilities.

Concept plans and perspectives prepared by the ACT Government's architectural consultant team were shown to illustrate the potential type and form of development that would be permitted under the proposed planning rules.

Below is a summary of questions asked, and comments made, by members of the public, together with the response provided by NCA and or NAC representatives. The questions and comments have been grouped by theme, rather than the order in which they were put forward at the public information session.



Precedent for 'eco-resort'

It was questioned whether the ACT Government, in examining the market and type of facility to be developed, examined any existing 'eco-resorts'. Scott Sadler, representing the ACT Government, advised that a number of precedents formed part of the analysis. These included comparable properties in New South Wales, Victoria and Tasmania.

Traffic, parking and access

One attendee sought advice as to whether appropriate provision would be made for disabled access and parking. It was confirmed that this would be the case.

It was questioned whether car parking would be provided undercover/in a structure. Andrew Smith advised that the draft amendment does allow for car parking to be outside, however the relationship between car parking and the landscape is critical, with provisions proposed that ensure parking will sit within the landscape and in particular not be prominent from vantage points such as Dairy Farmers Hill. A proponent may choose to located parking underground, however this may be difficult given the geology of the area.

Several matters were raised in regard to traffic and access:

1. the existing windy road access may be dangerous, particularly with increases in traffic volumes
2. signage needs to prominent when entering the arboretum to direct people to the left along Forest Drive
3. the proposed restaurant and wellness facilities may become popular (akin to other arboretum attractions), particularly for day visitors, thus also increasing traffic.

In response, Andrew Smith and Scott Sadler noted that detailed traffic analysis will be undertaken at the next phase of planning. At this time, details of the proposals, including the size of the wellness facility and restaurant, will be known. While new facilities will generate some traffic, it is unlikely to be significant in the context of overall visitor numbers to the NAC. Detailed traffic analysis at the next stage of planning will consider this issue.

It was noted that in the longer term, a 180-seat restaurant will operate under the existing Margaret Whitlam Pavilion. This is intended to be the main restaurant on site, with parking accommodated in that area.

The NCA does not have the capacity to mandate the location and content of signage, but can advise the ACT Government to investigate the matter.

Financial and operational matters

Concern was raised regarding the NCA's planning processes and the potential for political pressure to influence things in the future. Comment was made that a 40-unit accommodation facility is unlikely to be financially viable, resulting in risk that a facility may be developed but then fail. Alternatively, an operator may seek to increase the number of accommodation units permitted, and political channels could be used to achieve this.



Andrew Smith advised that there is a process to be undertaken for draft amendments, which includes internal decision-making processes, public consultation, and Parliamentary scrutiny. It would be difficult to change the planning rules concerning the proposal.

Scott Sadler referred to the feasibility work undertaken by the ACT Government, which demonstrates that there is a market within the ACT for the type of boutique accommodation and facilities proposed. Increasing visitor numbers to the NAC are expected to have a positive impact on the demand for such facilities. A world-wide Expression of Interest process will be conducted to find a suitable operator.

Other specific questions were asked regarding future operational matters. The following points highlight the questions raised and the responses provided by the NCA and/or ACT Government representatives:

1. Will the restaurant be a public facility, or available only to guests staying at the on-site accommodation?

It is too early in the planning process to determine this, it will be a decision for a future operator.

2. What type of functions are expected to be catered for by the restaurant?

While details are unknown at this stage, it is expected that functions such as weddings, birthdays and other celebrations will be catered for.

3. Are short or long stays in the accommodations facilities anticipated?

Modelling and feasibility investigations undertaken by the ACT Government were undertaken based on an average 1-3 night stay.

Other matters

One attendee questioned whether it was sensible to construct accommodation within forests (in particular a pine forest) given recent fire events.

NCA and ACT Government representatives responded by noting that future changes to land uses surrounding the arboretum and undertaking by the ACT Government will assist in reducing fire risk. For example, residential development in new Molonglo Valley suburbs will ultimately assist in creating a buffer along the south-western edge of the arboretum. The existing pine forest will also be thinned to both improve tree health and reduce fire risk.

Fire and other emergency services considerations must be addressed at the detailed planning stage.

Andrew Smith concluded the evening by thanking those in attendance.

Follow up action

Action

Publish on the NCA website the public information session presentation, a record of information session, and the NAC master plan.
