
Submission on the Active Travel Plan

Greater Canberra, 16 August 2022



Submission on Draft ACT Active Travel Plan

Greater Canberra welcomes the opportunity to make a submission on the public release of the draft Active Travel Plan.

Greater Canberra is an organisation that advocates for changes to ACT planning and housing policy to make Canberra more affordable, liveable, and sustainable. We are encouraged to see the ACT Government's draft plan for active travel reflect what we see as many of the key issues affecting Canberrans' ability to walk or ride to work. In particular, we support the Plan's vision for how improved land use can improve uptake of transit other than by motor vehicle.

Academic research on urban environments shows that land use policy is critical to reducing reliance on cars and facilitating active travel. Canberra, as Australia's most car-dependent city, must improve its land use if we want to see greater mode share for active transport.

As noted in the Plan, better land use through increased density leads to less energy use and fewer greenhouse gas emissions per capita. In fact denser development is more effective at reducing greenhouse gas emissions than weather-proofing or other efficiency-oriented infrastructure upgrades. To quote one study: 'Dense urban development leads to less urban energy use overall.'¹ Urban density, along with other determinants of urban form, strongly shapes local environmental conditions such as air quality, walkability, and access to green space, all of which have a bearing on the wellbeing of urban residents.

We also welcome the Plan's focus on enabling denser and more walkable neighbourhoods to improve the ability of Canberrans to make use of existing and upgraded active travel infrastructure to access services closer to their homes. We note that many of our existing urban environments still favour car travel and moving away from this model will enable more of our city's residents to leave their cars behind. High priority investments in this regard include:

- Upgrades to footpaths,
- Traffic calming measures, such as narrower streets and raised crossings,
- Improving urban tree coverage, and
- Further enhancing green spaces.

Examples of density that maintains good tree cover and walkability can already be seen in Canberra - for example, Moore St and Forbes St in Turner, or the Kingston Foreshore in the Inner South. These existing areas provide models that can be replicated and improved upon in other parts of Canberra.

We make the following recommendations that we believe will help the Plan to better achieve its outcomes.

¹ Güneralp B, Zhou Y, Ürge-Vorsatz D et al. Global scenarios of urban density and its impacts on building energy use through 2050. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. 2017;114(34):8945-8950. doi:10.1073/pnas.1606035114

Recommendation 1: Continuous engagement with EPSDD to improve land use policy in line with active travel principles

We recommend that the Active Travel Office actively consult with the Environment, Planning and Sustainable Development Directorate to ensure that planning requirements reflect the principles outlined in the Active Travel Plan.

As the Plan acknowledges (p. 14), increased density in inner suburbs, near major services and employment hubs, will create a far greater incentive for Canberrans to ride and walk to get around our city, as places they need to travel to will be closer and easier to access. Increasing density and promoting mixed-use developments in town centres will create greater incentive for commercial activity to occur nearer to where Canberrans live, enabling them to access shops without the need to use a vehicle.

Such improved land use also allows for more efficient spending of public money as the economies of scale for active travel infrastructure improve with increased citizens per square kilometre. The amount of infrastructure required to create well maintained facilities such as bike paths, walking tracks and pedestrian-focused streets decreases as cities become more dense and compact. Reducing mandatory parking requirements for residential and commercial buildings will also enable more of this active travel infrastructure to be incorporated into new developments.

Any attempt to improve active travel in Canberra must come hand in hand with more efficient land use that encourages the kinds of journeys that are best suited to active travel. Without doing so, investments in active travel infrastructure will have only limited impact, with the benefits being unequally distributed in favour of the existing residents of a few inner-city suburbs.

Recommendation 2: Improve traffic calming and walkability in town centres

In line with Priority 1 of the Active Travel Plan, we urge a focus on improvements to traffic calming measures and walkability around town centres, which are Canberra's primary commercial hubs. While considerable progress has been made on making town centres more pedestrian-friendly, there is still a long way to go.

In Civic, the six-lane Northbourne Avenue effectively divides the city centre in two. During peak travel periods, as thousands of people are commuting to work or study, the road is packed with traffic, either going into or through Civic, making traversing the road slower and more dangerous for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users. While the introduction of the Bunda St shared zone and the lowering of the speed limit to 40 km/h has gone a long way to create a more pedestrian friendly city centre, further traffic calming measures such as raised pedestrian crossings and reducing the number of lanes on Northbourne Avenue should be considered to improve the walkability of the city centre.

Other town centres, such as Belconnen and Woden, have similar issues with motor traffic being prioritised over pedestrians and cyclists. In Belconnen, active travel infrastructure such as the Emu Bank bike lane has to cross multiple car parks and drive-through entrances along Emu Bank and this discourages its use.

We also note and share the Braddon Collective's longstanding call for pedestrian crossings and other forms of active travel infrastructure within Braddon, where traffic policy has lagged far behind the neighbourhood's current status as a dense, mixed use suburb.

Recommendation 3: Deprioritise car-centric infrastructure

Canberra must move away from prioritising infrastructure for cars over infrastructure for pedestrians, cyclists and public transport users. While we are encouraged by the Plan's focus on multimodal strategic transport corridors, the Plan suggests that alternatives to driving infrastructure are being built *with* roads rather than *instead of* roads.

The long term aspiration of the Plan should be to ensure that active travel is the *most practical* way for residents to get to and from an increasing number of places in their life - home, work, school, recreation, grocery stores, and their favourite cafe. The aim is not just to ensure that a resident *could* get to where they need to go via bike, if they were willing to double their trip time it's to ensure that those places are available to the person via active transport at *comparable* or *superior* convenience. This means more compact cities, and it means deprioritising car infrastructure.

Additional road infrastructure then does not need to be built if stronger alternatives in the form of public transport and active travel infrastructure is built in its place. There is no need for such infrastructure in places that are better served by active transport than by private car. The current funds allocated to new road construction or upgrades to existing roads which favour cars far outweigh the money spent on active travel and this focus must shift if Canberrans are to be encouraged to pursue more active travel.