

Submission by the Gungahlin Community Council to the Inquiry on the Size of ACT Legislative Assembly.

➤ **GUNGAHLIN COMMUNITY COUNCIL (GCC) VISION**

- *GCC seeks adherence to the original concept of self-contained satellite centres serviced by all necessary amenities minimising the need for residents to travel to other centres for work, shopping, services & entertainment.*
- *Gungahlin still lacks services & amenities necessary to cater effectively for the current, and growing, population.*
- *Gungahlin needs representation from candidates who live in the area or in nearby suburbs within the two current relevant electorates to have a better affinity in understanding the issues facing local residents & businesses.*

Involvement with the Combined Community Councils and exposure to the issues affecting all seven Community Councils in the ACT has reinforced the fact that Gungahlin faces significantly different issues to those that are generally common to 'older' areas of Canberra. Weston Creek, with the emerging large-scale development in Molongolo, will undoubtedly follow a similar path in years to come.

At present Gungahlin, as part of the largest electorate (Molongolo), shares its electoral representation with a significant number of well-developed areas of which some parts are now undergoing change and re-development. Most, if not all, of these 'developed' areas have access to or are in close proximity to a full range of entertainment, employment, recreation and service amenities and facilities. Gungahlin does not!

Gungahlin is still very much in growth phase.

- It has a broad and growing range of residents from different ethnic backgrounds.
- It is the new 'nappy valley' of Canberra!
- It has significant numbers of youth and younger children – there are 18 separate school entities in the district.
- It has a growing proportion of older people.
- Four suburbs are still under development.
- Another three are at or nearing commencement stage.
- There is little employment in the Town Centre.
- The Leisure Centre construction has only been recently started.
- A Health Centre has been a recent addition.
- There are no cinemas or entertainment facilities for youth in the district.
- Critical roads are in the process of or scheduled for duplication to handle the expected growth of the local population.

Development in the Gungahlin Town Centre has for many years seemed to progress slowly. GCC advocates for progress, gets tempted with opportunities, receives notification of development interest, waits for confirmation, observes announcements, awaits commencement of project work & finally sees project completion. Typical periods of waiting can extend to 5-10 years.

Yet we have seen developments in the airport precinct & now in Tuggeranong and Belconnen taking literally months to go through a similar process.

The Leisure Centre took at least 5 years & several iterations before a satisfactory solution was reached. We now have a hole lined with concrete & expect to wait until mid to late 2014 before making the 1st splash!

A cinema complex has been on the wishlist for even longer yet the whispers are that a possible announcement will not be made until June/July. As for completion date – who knows?

Light Rail is promised for 2016 & the need to dig up Hibberson Street may defer the development work to create a 'shared zone' pedestrian-friendly precinct that will add much needed life to the main street.

GCC has identified local employment opportunities as a key requirement to stimulate additional commercial development in the Town Centre. At last we have a commitment to build an office block to house 500-600 ACT public servants but at least one more office block of a similar or larger size is essential to foster broader commercial development.

At present focus seems to be placed on improving roads to channel Gungahlin residents outside the district to service the bulk of their employment, entertainment, shopping & lifestyle needs.

Yet more residential sites are being developed resulting in a significantly increased population base without the full range of services & facilities needed by a satellite region (that should be largely self-sustaining).

GCC believes that:

- Electoral boundaries need to be reconfigured to reflect needs of Gungahlin residents and the continuing rapid growth. The current Electorate footprint, being a combination of Gungahlin with areas of the Inner South and Weston Creek, is not considered to reflect the interests of Gungahlin residents.
- An option is for an expanded Legislative Assembly comprising five electorates – one of which specifically represents the Gungahlin region as it has a discrete critical mass of population with a common set of needs and interests.

GCC made a number of suggestions in 2011 regarding the redistribution of electoral boundaries for the ACT. However, we were disappointed with the outcome, believing that the committee defaulted to the "least change" approach - as it did with the previous review. The problem with that approach is that it does not fix the problem, from our perspective, of specific representation in a lasting manner, as evident from the fact that we still required changes less than a year later to recognise the specific needs of Gungahlin residents. The incremental approach does not account for the ongoing rapid population growth in the northern suburbs of Canberra.

GCC believes that the core problem remains: the seven-member Molonglo electorate will remain geographically sprawling from almost Tuggeranong, through Weston, Woden, central Canberra and circling around Belconnen through most (but not all) of Gungahlin. There will remain some MLAs

representing parts of Gungahlin who know little of the Gungahlin community's issues or, to our knowledge, even seldom set foot in Gungahlin.

Our preferred approach is for the ACT to have additional MLAs, some of which should specifically represent Gungahlin residents. GCC notes that not one 'true local' candidate was elected in the 2012 round. Residents can therefore feel somewhat disenfranchised with that result!

It is evident to the GCC that the workloads involved with a 17-member Assembly are unacceptable, leading to an increased probability of inadequate decision-making. That situation may have been avoided with better issue knowledge by ministers with less demanding portfolios. We note that Government and other MLAs have not been prominent in their attendance at GCC meetings since the election before last. The frequency of conversations our representatives have with them at functions has shown improvement in recent months but overall the attendance of MLAs from all parties has been considered to be poor, leading to feelings that some are falling 'out of touch' with the community they purport to represent or that 'Gungahlin' does not matter!. Some of the problem may stem from lack of depth within the Government "back bench" but the most likely contributing feature is the small Assembly depth – lack of appropriate size to deal with the extensive burden of issues faced.

In past years GCC has sought to stimulate public debate on the issue of Assembly size, but has been disappointed by the lack of support or even interest from many incumbent MLAs. We note that there has been a significant change to this attitude and hope that this issue may now be addressed since the Federal Government has given support to the ACT Government having the power to find a better solution for the people of the ACT.

Output from our electorate modelling software indicated that five electorates of five MLAs each (with quotas of approximately 10,000 electors) can be easily achieved. These electorates can align closely to established communities of interest: Belconnen, North Canberra/Gungahlin, Central Canberra, Weston/Woden, and Tuggeranong. An added advantage is that each possible new electorate would be geographically constrained, thus giving elected members far better opportunity to closely engage with the community they represent.

A 7-5-5 Assembly, with a quota of about 15,000 electors per MLA results in an increase of 1000 per MLA from the current term. Given that impediment, we sought a solution that aligned communities of interest as closely as possible, while preserving a small negative variance where the growth will be greatest over the next eight years – Gungahlin.

GCC supports the earlier objections to the last redistribution inquiry which argued that, in making its proposal, the Redistribution Committee had given too much weight to the criterion regarding existing electoral boundaries and too little weight to the other criteria related to community of interests, including economic, social and regional interests, means of communication and travel, and physical features and area.

Gungahlin, as a rapidly growing new area, is currently split between two electorates with a range of community interests represented by both older & new communities at critical points in their respective development.

The 'older' areas of Gungahlin suffered for many years from lack of essential amenities, including lack of adequate telecommunications (broadband), adequate road access, commercial facilities & employment opportunities. The rapidly expanding newer areas of Gungahlin are also experiencing the ramifications of 'catch-up' planning & provision of facilities & amenities commensurate with the needs of the growing population. Most of Gungahlin is faced with 'growth pains' – some residential, some amenities/services and most transport related.

The residents of established Canberra Central suburbs of Lyneham, O'Connor & Turner do not experience similar issues & their interests are better aligned with the residents of North Canberra. Similarly it is difficult to find synergies between the Gungahlin and South Canberra constituents of the Molongolo electorate.

GCC notes that the growth in Gungahlin has been accompanied by increasing connections between Gungahlin and Belconnen as:

- many Gungahlin residents have made use of schools, medical facilities, employment opportunities, shopping and commercial areas in the adjacent district of Belconnen.
- the development of the Gungahlin Drive Extension and the heavy usage of other roads linking Gungahlin and Belconnen have facilitated these connections.
- the location of the new Northside Hospital in Bruce will extend those links.
- students at the University of Canberra are locating in Gungahlin.

Naturally Gungahlin would prefer to have its own complete suite of services and amenities commensurate with the current and growing population.

Elements of the Recent Inquiry into Electoral Boundaries

As a compromise, it was argued that most Gungahlin residents would support the move from one electorate to another (to combine Gungahlin and Belconnen together in the one electorate) under the Augmented Commission's proposal as it would create an area with vastly more similarities between affected Gungahlin & Belconnen residents rather than maintaining an electorate comprising some residents of South Canberra – far removed from most synergies with Gungahlin residents.

A current problem is that these two districts (Gungahlin & Belconnen) by themselves are not seen to be large enough to create a 7-Member electorate, thus 'making it necessary' to include other adjacent areas to make up the numbers to bring the electorate to within +/- 5% of the quota at the time of next election.

The Augmented Commission concluded that its preferred option would be to include the suburbs of Lyneham, O'Connor and Turner as the other suburbs which could be combined with Belconnen and Gungahlin to constitute a 7-Member electorate.

The Committee noted that the option to make Ginninderra the 7-Member electorate, comprising all of Belconnen, Gungahlin and the suburbs of Lyneham, O'Connor and Turner would result in the electorate of Ginninderra being 1.08% above the quota at the time of the next election. This result would be comfortably within the required +/-5% variation from the quota. This option was considered by the Committee to be the best mix of suburbs that could constitute a 7-Member electorate including Belconnen and Gungahlin.

(The alternative of a progressive incremental shift of Gungahlin suburbs to the Ginninderra electorate in future redistributions would entrench the existing lack of commonality of interests perceived by affected Gungahlin residents & result in continuing dissatisfaction from those residents remaining in a less appropriate electorate (Molongolo)).

The Committee noted that a negative impact of this option would be the separation of the community of interests that Lyneham, O'Connor and Turner share with neighbouring (north) Canberra Central suburbs as it could be argued that Lyneham, Turner and O'Connor have much closer connections to the university precinct of Acton, the adjacent City area and the neighbouring suburbs of Braddon, Dickson, Downer and Watson than they do with Belconnen or Gungahlin. (GCC endorses this view.)

The Turner Residents Association stated "that the suburbs of Turner, O'Connor and Lyneham should NOT be part of a larger Ginninderra electorate as Turner, O'Connor and Lyneham have much stronger links with central Canberra than with the newer suburbs to the north and should remain within the electorate of Molongolo."

The Committee's recommendations were constrained by the 'requirement' to comply (too rigidly from our perspective) with variance limits to electorate quotas. As at 31 March 2011 the electorate of Molongolo was 2.7% over quota & Ginninderra was 0.6% below quota.

The Gungahlin area continues to grow at a significant rate. The suburbs of Bonner, Casey, Crace, Forde, Franklin, Gungahlin & Harrison had projected growth rates of enrolled persons in excess of 10% up to October 2012. In Belconnen the suburbs of Belconnen Town Centre, Bruce, Dunlop & Macgregor had growth projections over 10%. Only Braddon, City & Phillip in the Molongolo electorate had growth rates (from a reasonable base) over 10%.

Residents of Gungahlin feel that they have, and continue to, suffered from 'catch-up' remedial action in relation to many services facilities, services & amenities that they require. More growth is inevitable in Gungahlin as the new suburbs of Kenny, Moncrief & Kinleyside are developed & populated.

There is a need to apply pro-active policies in addressing the needs of residents in growing areas in the ACT.

On 'paper' the proposed new electorate of Ginninderra would see a shortfall of 8.33% under quota at October 2012 if the suburbs of Lyneham, O'Connor & Turner were excluded. This variation from quota is based on population projections to October 2012 but the Gungahlin

suburbs will continue to grow well after that date & a significant surplus situation could well occur within a short time afterwards, again placing the residents of that electorate at a representational disadvantage (under current terminology). Net growth in Gungahlin & Belconnen should significantly surpass that in Central & South Canberra so there is a need to anticipate this process.

Gungahlin residents in particular would prefer to see evidence of forward planning in relation to many of the issues they currently face. An electorate model that recognises the ramifications of rapid growth and an appropriate level of representation (both in terms of numbers of politicians & regional focus) should meet with a high degree of satisfaction.

Accordingly GCC submits that there is merit in adopting a unified approach to resolving the current dissatisfaction with the size of the ACT Legislative Assembly. A larger number of MLAs would allow better representation of local constituents, spread the workload of elected representatives for the population of a growing city with an increasing range of issues and responsibilities and facilitate the handling of a growing burden of complex issues relevant to an independent city-state.

However GCC's prime interest is in gaining specific and appropriate representation for the Gungahlin community and that translates into a discrete electorate (maybe named Gungahlin). Furthermore we would like to see the establishment of local electorate offices or a shared office for the Gungahlin electorate.

All elected MLAs make a commitment to the betterment of the ACT therefore more responsibilities could be shared throughout the Legislative Assembly regardless of political party. All could make a greater contribution to "government" on behalf of the people of the ACT.

Consideration could be given to electorates (preferably a larger number than the current three) being split in 'ridings' of specific and adjoining suburbs so that residents could develop a closer relationship with their respective elected members of the Legislative Assembly.

The concept of appointing 'expert' or qualified ministers for certain matters has merit.

Consideration could also be given to creating co-operative mechanisms (multi – party) for dealing with 'matters of state' (those issues of a whole-of-Canberra nature or of a social policy context that do not directly impact on the majority of Canberra citizens) thus freeing up the ministerial process to deal more thoroughly with issues that arouse the interests of the majority of residents.

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