



**LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY FOR THE AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL
TERRITORY**

**STANDING COMMITTEE ON PLANNING AND
ENVIRONMENT**

**(Reference: Draft variation to the territory plan No 281:
Molonglo and North Weston)**

Members:

**MR M GENTLEMAN (The Chair)
MS M PORTER (The Deputy Chair)
MRS V DUNNE**

TRANSCRIPT OF EVIDENCE

CANBERRA

TUESDAY, 8 JULY 2008

**Secretary to the committee:
Ms N Derigo (Ph: 6205 0435)**

By authority of the Legislative Assembly for the Australian Capital Territory

Submissions, answers to questions on notice and other documents relevant to this inquiry that have been authorised for publication by the committee may be obtained from the committee office of the Legislative Assembly (Ph: 6205 0127).

WITNESSES

BOUNDS, MS JENNY , President, Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra.....	1
FALCONER, EMERITUS PROFESSOR IAN , Vice President, Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra.....	1
MULVANEY, DR MICHAEL JAMES , member, Red Hill Regenerators Park Care Group.....	14
ROBERTSON, MR GEOFF , board member, Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra.....	1

The committee met at 2.31pm.

BOUNDS, MS JENNY, President, Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra

FALCONER, EMERITUS PROFESSOR IAN, Vice President, Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra

ROBERTSON, MR GEOFF, board member, Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra

THE CHAIR: I declare open the planning and environment committee's public hearing into Molonglo and North Weston. This afternoon we have the conservation council, represented by Ian Falconer, Jenny Bounds and Geoff Robertson. Thanks for coming in this afternoon. Have you had an opportunity yet to read the privilege statement, the yellow card?

Ms Bounds: No.

THE CHAIR: I will give you a couple of minutes to have a look at that. Could you say, for the *Hansard*, that you are aware of the implications of the privilege card?

Ms Bounds: Yes, I am aware of the implications of the privilege card.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your submission. The committee have that in front of them. We have just had a briefing from ACTPLA officials on the proposed variation, which has been informative. Would you like to begin with any opening comments to the committee?

Ms Bounds: I would like to make a few opening remarks and I will then hand over to Professor Falconer and to Geoff but we will keep it within the four or five minutes that you allow, if that is okay.

THE CHAIR: Yes, that is fine. We have 45 minutes for you this afternoon.

Ms Bounds: I am aware you will ask us questions but I am speaking in terms of our making an opening statement, which I understand we can do.

The conservation council does appreciate the opportunity to appear before the committee to give its vision for the Molonglo Valley development. We believe this area is quite a sensitive one, with high biodiversity values that need to be protected. We have got 12 recommendations in our submission—and I am not going to go into all of them—but we believe they probably reflect the principles of environmental conservation and ecologically sustainable development, which is an outcome we all desire with this kind of development.

Unfortunately, we do not believe the current plans, as reflected in the draft variation before the committee, do provide truly sustainable outcomes. The planning documents talk a great deal about sustainability and ecologically sustainable development. However, we say that those plans are based on a fundamental position that all vacant land is a land bank which can be developed and that house blocks and revenue have to be maximised.

There have been a number of commissioned studies in the process of this development—many submissions from scientists and other experts during the public consultation phase—yet it is our view that very little of that expert advice, certainly relating to biodiversity impacts, has been taken up and in fact not very much has changed in the various forms of the DV and the structure plans before that which we believe have very significant impacts on grassy woodlands.

Our own raw vision for the Molonglo Valley is a large conservation area in the Central Molonglo which will be maintained and enhanced. We are very pleased that the ACT government recently announced a 20-year moratorium on development in the Central Molonglo. We look forward to that area being excluded from the final DV. We want to see a healthy, free-flowing river with wide buffers to protect the river corridor from urban-related influences, for biodiversity protection as well as for recreation.

We are strongly opposed to a lake or dam on the river. We think a natural river system is the best way to deliver good water-quality outcomes and to assist the natural environment and its wildlife to manage and adapt, especially in the face of climate change.

The council has supported development of most of the East Molonglo area, certainly in degraded lands. However, we also want to see good-quality remnant woodland patches within East Molonglo retained as they have high conservation values.

We are also recommending cat containment for all the Molonglo Valley suburbs. It has worked very well in Forde. It has been widely accepted by residents and the developers and we believe that should now apply to any new greenfield development.

We think the population targets for East Molonglo can still be achieved with good urban design and infrastructure and some focus on medium and high-density housing, whilst still allowing for the native woodland areas and a wide buffer around the river to be excluded from clearing.

So the overall outcome the council is seeking is for a revised draft variation that reflects those 12 recommendations that truly reflect the principles that we talked about earlier. I pass to Ian Falconer, who will talk briefly about water and urban design issues.

Prof Falconer: I would like to reinforce one or two aspects of what Jenny has introduced. We are particularly interested in the sustainability of the new suburb's development, and elements of this have significance in terms of water management. We would like to see a clear adoption of water sensitive urban design principles which are part of the government's policies anyway but with, essentially, the development of swales and unofficial wetlands, small pondage and so on within the suburb so that the overall quality of run-off coming from the suburb is much mitigated by the urban design and, therefore, would not cause pollution in the river corridor itself. We do not see much emphasis on that in the current draft variation. We would like to see considerable emphasis on water sensitive design in the actual planning.

One of the issues which we would take up quite strongly with respect to the draft variation is the possibility of putting a dam below Coppins Crossing. We have some really detailed objections to that in terms of the overall outcomes if one did so. Because it is a relatively high-nutrient area now because it has either run-off coming from Weston Creek and adjacent areas or it gets aerobic high-nutrient water coming from the bottom of Scrivener Dam, we feel that what would happen with a deep dam in the Molonglo River Valley would be, essentially, a largely stagnant lake which would generate significant blooms of toxic bacteria.

A good parallel that you could check yourselves is the Torrens Lake in Adelaide, which is essentially the same sort of thing—putting a dam on an urban lake where the rainfall is very intermittent, like the rainfall here; and, as a consequence, they have enormous water problems all the time with toxic and malodorous blooms prohibiting people using it for recreational purposes. What you cannot afford to do is put in a residential suburb with a lake where you have to put warning signs all round it “keep off the water”, “do not bathe”, “do not paddle”, “do not fish”. We see that this is a distinct possibility if you put a dam in as designed.

What we would like to see is a quality riparian corridor, with a series of, as far as possible, natural stream flows and natural pools and some constructed wetlands where significant flows are coming off the urban area so that you generate a really favourable environment. Again, Adelaide is a good example of that. If you go upstream of the urban lake, you find that the Torrens Valley itself is very attractive. It is partially recreational facilities and significant walking tracks, bike tracks, and partially treed and a very good urban riparian environment which I think could be achieved quite straightforwardly in the Molonglo if we set about it right.

One or two points about urban planning: the conservation council prefers density to extensiveness in urban planning. You get considerable gains in energy efficiency. You get considerable gains in terms of population per hectare. This is an opportunity where quality urban planning, using a mixture of densities but including high density, could be significantly beneficial. And one of the things that we feel would be highly beneficial is, for example, to plan in the light rail corridor through from Molonglo into Civic so that, in due course, when the suburb is developed, there is a light rail corridor that can be easily utilised. I think, in terms of the topography, it would be relatively straightforward to do.

The other detailed point is with respect to the reuse of waste water. It is an ideal site for a third pipe where one could run relatively purified or not so purified but, at any rate, safe, recycled water from the lower Molonglo treatment works into the suburb. Indeed in Mawson Lakes in the Adelaide suburbs, this third pipe is connected to the toilets in the houses, which is an extremely efficient use of waste water. It can also be used for irrigating recreation areas and so on. So we feel that it is an open opportunity for a really good development in recycled water use.

Mr Robertson: I also signed the Friends of Grasslands submission, which I commend to you. That is very consistent with the conservation council’s submission. We have got a lot in there about the protection of the woodlands. Michael Mulvaney will be talking to you later this afternoon, so we will not go into that.

There are three issues that I want to draw to your attention. The first one is about the habitat for the pink-tailed worm lizard, which has recently been declared vulnerable in the ACT. This is a fantastic map which shows its habitat. This is really, as far as I am aware, the key habitat for this species.

THE CHAIR: For the *Hansard*, we are indicating that we have maps on the wall.

MRS DUNNE: I would suggest that we stand and talk to it over there, but that would completely beggar up *Hansard* because they would not be able to pick it up.

Mr Robertson: Okay.

THE CHAIR: Members, we have copies of the maps.

Mr Robertson: It was just to make the point that, when you look at eastern Molonglo, the habitat is right in the centre along the corridor; so it is very much contained within that and then right along. You see how the urban areas impact on that. One of the concerns within east Molonglo is that we need to take some very strong steps to protect that habitat, and maybe things like fencing it off.

The second point I want to make is about the riparian vegetation which has not got a great deal of emphasis and was said to be somewhat degraded in the ACTPLA information. However, that is very important vegetation from a corridor point of view but also there is a community running there which would be greatly affected by the dam; for example, the casuarina cunninghamii community which, from information that has been prepared by the ACT government, is less than 30 per cent of its original habitat. I will say a little bit more about that in a minute.

The other issue I want to draw to your attention is this concept of clearance of native vegetation and when native vegetation is cleared there is now a concept that we have no net loss consistent with carbon trading, for example. For example, under New South Wales legislation which is largely administered by the catchment management authorities, there is a prohibition on clearing any vegetation where it falls for less than 30 per cent. That is why that 30 per cent is important. And where you clear native vegetation above that 30 per cent area, then there has to be this compensation; so they have to find offsets against that.

We do not have anything in the ACT about that at the moment. We have been lobbying for that. I think this would be an opportunity for this committee to pick up this concept and to argue, where we are losing biodiversity, that we look for these offsets. That is all I want to say.

THE CHAIR: Thanks very much. I might kick off with some questions. My first interest is in Ian's discussion on water sensitive urban design and your opposition to a dam. I go back to the map in relation to the riparian zones around the river system. You have indicated that you wanted to keep those in place. The early indications, from our information so far, are that they stay in place. Are you concerned that they are going to change?

Prof Falconer: They will certainly change if they get drowned by a dam. If the policy

is to retain them, that is great and we would strongly support that because we appreciate that some of the riparian zone, particularly as you get close to Scrivener Dam, is a collection of half-dead willow trees. But it can be turned into really attractive recreation land. What we would like to see is the development of the riparian zone so that it is a really attractive conservation and recreational area rather than drown it. But we do accept that there will have to be work done on it. It is not going to come free because of the extent of the degradation of it, certainly in the Scrivener Dam end. Further downstream it is good.

THE CHAIR: Also we have heard that there has been little treatment of stormwater run-off from previous development in suburbs like Woden and Weston that eventually flows down into the Molonglo. Do you have any comments in that regard?

Prof Falconer: Yes. They are not good at all. The very worst thing you can do with stormwater run-off is put it into an open concrete drain and hurtle it down into the river. You can see the erosion that you are getting at the end of it if you go and look below Scrivener Dam at the minute where there are those horse places. Yes, it has got to be quite a different concept. The concepts are all set out, and they are part of the policy. It is a concept of swales, constructed wetlands, small ponds, slowing the water right down, running the roads along the contours rather than down the hill so that you cut off the rapid run-off from the road system. All the concepts are already in place; it is just that we would really like to see them written in as development.

MRS DUNNE: Ian, you say that the concepts are written in; they are in the policy documents. Do you want to see them implemented?

Prof Falconer: Exactly, yes. I would like to see the proposal following the policy.

MRS DUNNE: The policy, as it currently stands, is quite different from what it was when, say, Woden in particular was developed.

Prof Falconer: A marked change.

MRS DUNNE: We have got the open drain and the water comes to the end of the open drain and scours out. It is not very long ago that urban services people were telling us their job was to get stormwater off the land and into creeks as quickly as possible, for safety issues essentially. But now there is at least theoretical application of a different approach. How much work would you envisage would have to be done to retrofit those areas like the Curtin drain—we cannot call it anything else but a drain—so that it would fit into the new system further down, if the new system were implemented as you would like to see it?

Prof Falconer: I think it is one of the things that are going to have to be done in the long term to retrofit the suburbs. I gather that there are already funds associated with the current budget to put in a pond at the bottom of Weston Creek, is it?

THE CHAIR: My understanding was that there was some federal money that was made available to treat stormwater run-off.

Prof Falconer: I think it has got to be retrofitted in the long run. There is also work

being done in Sullivans Creek. It is much more difficult to do retrofitting and more expensive, even though, often, the developers will participate in the cost, as they did in Sullivans Creek, because it improves the amenity value and, therefore, improves the property values.

MRS DUNNE: You referred to the Mawson Lakes as an example.

Prof Falconer: In South Australia.

MRS DUNNE: Part of that, from my recollection, is dependent upon some of the geology for storing water underground, or is that all surface storage?

Prof Falconer: Mawson Lakes is surface and it is part of a more extensive wetlands development that has been put in. Part of the philosophy behind that was to reduce the nutrient load coming into the area behind Port Adelaide, which was turning into a real mess. There are a series of constructed wetlands which have been quite successful, and the Mawson Lakes project is part of that. It is well worth a visit. It is only 20 minutes out of the city in Adelaide.

MRS DUNNE: But that is not part of the aquifer recharge and reuse process?

Prof Falconer: No, but they are doing that and they are also using a lot of recharge water for horticultural purposes. Our hydrology is quite different here. We could not do that.

MRS DUNNE: I suppose that is where I was getting to. The conservation council, both here and in other forums, have spoken very strongly against the notion of a lake or damming—you could hardly call it a lake but the damming—of the Molonglo River. You have touched on the issues about tree quality and maintaining a good riparian zone. The map that has been provided to us indicates a fair amount of habitat for the pink-tailed worm lizard. Are there other species that would be affected by the creation of that lake?

Ms Bounds: Yes, certainly it would drown at least one wedge-tailed eagle nesting site and probably the nesting sites of a number of other raptors. Effectively, it would take out those breeding territories.

MRS DUNNE: According to the other map that we have been provided with, moving on to the raptors, there is a whole swag of East Molonglo which would overlap with a substantial wedge-tailed eagle area. Is that a known nesting site?

Ms Bounds: Yes. It is documented in some reports that the planning authority commissioned by Dr Stephen Debus. I believe you will have reference to those. He documented a number of impacts, particularly on the wedge-tailed eagle and brown goshawk, as well as the little eagle in the Central Molonglo, although that is less of an issue now with the Central Molonglo being protected.

Stephen Debus made a number of recommendations about mitigating the impacts on birds of prey, particularly in the East Molonglo, and there are at least a dozen of those recommendations. I think those recommendations are fairly reasonable, given he only

had a week to wander around the area and look for nest sites. But I think he has made some very useful recommendations.

I think the point about the dam is that if the dam goes in and there is a sterile lake there, with an urban area down to the edge of the lake, effectively it wipes out all the wildlife that might otherwise be able to coexist with that urban area in East Molonglo.

If you look at Jerry Olsen's report that he wrote for the planning authority, he has also alluded to the fact that, if you can have a really good buffer around a wedge-tailed eagle nest site, plus a good riparian zone, hopefully the eagles will go further afield for their foraging and will not be as disadvantaged by the fact that they have lost some of their foraging territory, because they need foraging territory as well as a protected, undisturbed nest site. In Stephen Debus's report, he has got a paragraph on that.

I am not a birds of prey expert so I cannot make an expert's judgement on that, but it seems to me to be a solution that might provide a home for the eagles to remain in that part of the valley as well as provide for urban development away from the river corridor.

Apart from that, all the river corridors around Canberra are used by wildlife, and birds in particular. A lot of our small birds migrate in and out of Canberra and use corridors like that; so a big lake, with an urban edge abutting it, effectively will destroy that corridor value. I am not here with my ornithologist's hat on today. I think we have got a slot next week when Chris Davey, who is the president of COG, will be the primary witness. I am happy to give you that broad view of it. But I would commend that you have a look at Stephen Debus's report. As I said, it was only a week here, walking across the landscape, but he is a well-respected expert and I think he has got some useful recommendations in there.

THE CHAIR: I wonder whether we could go to some of your comments regarding density. You said that the cons council would like to see high-density development and a light rail corridor. When you say high density, what level of high density and do you have any ideas where you would like to see the rail corridor go through?

Prof Falconer: I cannot claim any specific expertise in urban planning, but the conservation council's policies in general are for energy efficiency and for the minimisation of the development of greenfield sites. If you are looking at both of those concepts together, you inevitably end up with relatively high density because you can get much more gains in energy efficiency with increased density and you can also minimise your development of greenfield sites.

We appreciate that there is population pressure and there is pressure for development, but what we do not wish to see is extensive areas of relatively high-quality woodlands and adjoining grasslands turned in housing sites because we omitted to put adequate density in the developments we are doing. But I have no expertise in this.

The other thing is that we are very anxious to develop efficient urban transport. One of the things which obviously should be on everybody's horizon is a light rail system, and the ideal thing to do, when you are putting 50,000 people on a new site, is to have effective transport links to the central business district, and the obvious thing to do is

to put in a light rail corridor.

Ms Bounds: We have advocated for that with many other developments, including Gungahlin, unsuccessfully.

MRS DUNNE: Do you have a view about where the light rail corridor should go? You said before that you did not think that the topography was a problem but getting out of some of those valleys could be a bit of a haul.

THE CHAIR: A bit of a climb.

Prof Falconer: The only comment that I would have is that tunnelling under the international arboretum is not a very clever idea. Perhaps it could go up the valley. After all, the O-Bahn in Adelaide, which is a light rail corridor, goes up the Torrens Valley. I admit the topography in our case is more difficult.

Ms Bounds: We have not done any particular studies on that as yet. We have been focusing on other things.

THE CHAIR: But the overarching view is that we should plan for that sort of transport corridor whilst we are planning for the suburbs?

Ms Bounds: Yes, absolutely.

Prof Falconer: Yes. We must have an effective transport corridor if you are putting in a population of that size.

THE CHAIR: With that, do I gather that, again, an overarching view from the council would be to look at urban infill before you move into other areas?

Ms Bounds: That is certainly true. Our vision has been that we should fill in around the high-movement corridors in Canberra, the high-transit corridors, the main arterial roadways and those areas—certainly down Northbourne Avenue and some of the other major routes. We have certainly supported high-density housing in those areas, combined with things like light rail.

Mr Robertson: If I can make a comment: being a resident of Gungahlin, the bus services there take a long time to get anywhere. In the consultation, when I asked about bus services, it seemed to me a very slow, winding bus service would be provided, which is totally in contrast with trying to get people onto public transport. I guess it is more a statement of “let us get something much better here to deal with this and get people onto public transport, particularly with all the greenhouse issues that we face”.

Ms Bounds: Yes, it is a rapid transit system that you need. I would certainly echo Geoff’s thoughts. I live in Weston Creek and, using the buses to get from Civic, it might take me an hour and a half to get home sometimes because of the irregularity of the bus service. So that pushes me more and more back into the car.

MRS DUNNE: Let me refresh my memory. What are the issues that are considered

important in regard to the woodland west of Strathnairn? It is a long way down the track before they are going to be developing that end of it but it is where the essential planning will be.

Ms Bounds: Could we ask you to talk to Michael Mulvaney about that when he comes on after us because Michael has done the detail of that report.

MRS DUNNE: And does that also apply to the areas of Central Molonglo which are outside Karma that relate to the woodlands? What would you like to say about that or should we ask Michael as well?

Ms Bounds: We can certainly talk to you about that but Michael is more across the mapping that was done in areas like Strathnairn. What question do you want to ask about Central Molonglo?

MRS DUNNE: You have made comments about enlarging Central Molonglo and the conservation council here and elsewhere having been very strong in relation to the importance of an area like Karma and that it not be too constrained. But also in relation to the red box-yellow gum grassy woodlands further up William Hovell Drive, closer to Drake Brockman Drive—is that it?

Ms Bounds: That is the one.

MRS DUNNE: Would you like to elucidate for the committee why you see that piece of land as important?

Ms Bounds: The Central Molonglo has quite a large area of grassy woodland that is still in good condition. It varies but it is still in good condition. The Karma woodland is by far the best quality in that it has got the least disturbance to the understorey. One of the special things about the Karma woodland is that it provides habitat for one of the few groups of the threatened brown-tree creeper that we still have near the urban fringe. And Karma woodland is really critical for that species.

One of the issues we have had with the current plans is that they are only planning to conserve 820 metres with Karma reserve, which would simply not be enough to be viable as a habitat for a bird like the brown-tree creeper. There are other birds and animals there. So what we have argued is that, given the extent of the woodlands in that area plus the various threatened species that are associated with Karma woodland and beyond, we would like to see the Central Molonglo as a much bigger conservation area that would effectively complement what the government has already reserved at Mulligans Flat and Gorooyarroo and give another field site for experimental research, to apply some of the lessons that have been learned and are going to be learned at Mulligans Flat and Gorooyarroo. I think there is a great opportunity to rehabilitate some of those woodlands, to restore some of that ecological function, and I certainly know the ANU is interested in that and has been making representations on that issue.

The other critical reason why the Central Molonglo is important is that it has the last two breeding territories for the little eagle in the ACT. They are both based in that northern part of the valley. If those territories came out of the system, then we might well lose that species as a breeder in the ACT. And the little eagle has recently been

listed.

MRS DUNNE: If we built houses where the little eagle currently nests, is there scope for it to move elsewhere and nest in the region or what?

Ms Bounds: We have basically lost little eagle breeding territories from a lot of the reserves around Canberra. I am not an expert on birds of prey or little eagles so I could not answer that definitively, but the advice we have had from people like Stephen Debus is that is very likely.

MRS DUNNE: That they would just disappear from the region?

Ms Bounds: Yes, they would just disappear, and it is not just a habitat issue; it is quite complex. They are also in competition with wedge-tailed eagles; they have a limited prey base; they need young rabbits for bringing up their young, and rabbits have declined; we do not have any small mammals running around anymore because we have killed all them off. So there are a whole range of pressures, apart from the loss of habitat, on little eagles. We still have little eagles roaming around town but they are not breeding.

Mr Robertson: If I could add something to what Jenny has said, this is a very large area of yellow box-red gum grassy woodland and in the ACT this has been a threatened ecological community. It has certainly nationally and in New South Wales been declared a threatened ecological community. In declaring this a threatened ecological community in the ACT, there was a lot of emphasis on the importance of this vegetative community from a regional and from a whole of eastern New South Wales going up to Queensland down into Victoria perspective.

This community across the landscape is less than five per cent of what it was; whereas in the ACT, when you draw the boundary around the ACT, it is still over 30 per cent—it is about 33 per cent—and on some definitions it would even go higher. But areas like this and areas like Mulligans Flat and Gorooyarroo, when we say there is five per cent left elsewhere in Australia, there is nothing of this quality that you would find here. When we are talking about these areas elsewhere, they are often very fragmented; they are small sites; the understorey is not of the same quality. So when you look at this and when you look at it from a national perspective, it certainly adds a lot of value. So in some ways, while I agree with everything Jenny says, it is the importance to the community itself that is very fundamental.

Some of the things that Jenny is talking about are examples of why that is the case in terms of habitat for a particular species; so we do not want to lose sight of that because I think in the ACT we say, “We have got a lot of this stuff around.” It is true, but as soon as you start to remove it away it rapidly disappears. I am sure Michael will address those issues as well.

MRS DUNNE: Could not officials from the government mount an argument that we have already reserved Mulligans Flat and Gorooyarroo and that is enough?

Mr Robertson: They could mount that argument. If that was the totality of what we had left of this, then certainly the amount we have left would fall well below 30 per

cent. I am not sure what the percentage is. It is probably a lot less than 10 per cent. They have got action plan 27, which talks about woodlands. In that action plan, this was identified as a very important woodland corridor.

In a lot of our conservation effort these days, it is important what land we have in public reserve and the way we manage that but, much more importantly for our grassy ecosystems, our grasslands and our woodlands, a lot of that is on private land or, in this case, outside the official reserve systems. We spend a lot of money trying to get people to manage this for conservation.

One point that is continually made is that—we talked about no net loss before—if you take this out and then try to put it back, the money runs into the many, many millions of dollars. In fact, when you look at our whole natural resource budget, both from the commonwealth and the ACT, that is what we are spending money on; we are spending money on trying to keep what remnant vegetation we have got, trying to get it back, trying to get rid of the weeds. Here we have a very good example of something that is in very good condition and we are simply arguing that we should keep it.

We are also arguing that this is part of the ACT government's environmental policy through the action plans and things that are already done and there is this sort of disjunct, if you like, in the ACT government where the planning people—and Jenny referred to this before—seem to pay no regard to these matters.

THE CHAIR: If I could come back to the areas that you were discussing there, the first part of the proposed change to these areas are the north-western and the southern parts of the Molonglo proposal. They were previously pine plantations, were they not, that were burnt out? You are not referring specifically to those areas?

Mr Robertson: We do have a bit of an issue, and Michael will address this. But some areas of pine plantation—and we found this in other parts of the ACT—when they start to regenerate, in fact do go back to what they naturally were before. That is a question, I know, that Michael is in a much better position to answer.

But generally our position has been, as Jenny said, no. We have accepted the areas that do not have biodiversity value and we have accepted the pine forest as areas that are a fair go, yes. We are not arguing that we try to keep every part of this community either, but certainly large areas that are going to add to our national estate are very important.

Ms Bounds: Can I add one more point about the Central Molonglo: the Molonglo Valley itself is regarded as a very special place for birds of prey. I did not want to get too much into the bird issues today, but it is regarded as a special place for birds of prey. I think 13 species utilise the valley. It is fairly unique, the experts say, close to an urban city.

If you develop within largely the degraded lands of the East Molonglo and leave the open western lands and the Central Molonglo alone, it at least gives those birds of prey some opportunity to be able to have a presence in that valley, ongoing but not the same as before. There will be a loss of some species. We might lose some of the

smaller raptors, we might lose the wedge-tailed eagle breeding site, but it would at least give some of that community a chance to continue to survive. That is another reason for leaving part alone and just developing in the degraded lands.

MRS DUNNE: I know that we have had discussions over the years about cat containment, and you said before, Ms Bounds, that it was successful at Forde. It has not been evaluated. I presume what we are finding at Forde is that people who own cats are not going there.

Ms Bounds: I cannot say that but what I can say, from talking to some of the residents—I have led a couple of walks for residents—and from talking to the Forde development people, is that they have found the people moving into Forde are very accepting of the idea of cat containment. I do not know how many of those people will have cats or will set up their cat parks in their garden, but I think certainly, if you ask the Forde developers, they would say it has been quite a good selling point for them. It is something you might want to ask but that is what I have certainly heard.

So far it has been very well received as a value-add in the area. A lot of people thought maybe there would be a public outcry over issues like that, but it certainly has not been. Even though it has not been formally evaluated, I think it is far enough down the track now to know that it is being accepted.

It is yet to be fully implemented because not all the houses are built in Forde, and it is going to require some effort, I think, to keep wild cats out. I think it will be helped by the fact that there is going to be now a predator-proof fence built within the Mulligans Flat Nature Reserve. There will be rangers who will be trapping and there has been a lot of public education in Forde on the value of the reserves, how important cat containment is and all those things.

Our view is that the Molonglo Valley has really high biodiversity value. The fact that you have got 13 species of birds of prey there means that there is a huge prey base of all kinds of other small lizards and birds and animals, so we think cat containment would sit very nicely with protecting those values.

MRS DUNNE: What I am leading to is: has the conservation council had further thoughts about whether there should be areas where you go beyond cat containment to cat bans?

Ms Bounds: As you are aware, when the conservation council and various other interest groups put proposals to the government some years ago, our desired outcome for Forde and Bonner was outright cat bans but the government decided to take the second level of that. We have reasonably accepted that. We have written to the government to ask them to now develop a cat containment policy for the ACT. We have had no reply to that letter. It has been about nine months and we are about to follow it up. So we are not advocating cat bans at this particular point in time and we would be quite happy with cat containment for Molonglo.

In some respects, even though it is probably a little harder to administer on the ground than an outright ban, I think it sends a good message to people that you can have your pets and your animals but you have got to be responsible. You can still enjoy your

lovely, natural areas; you just do not have your cats and your dogs going into it. I think it sends a good message to the community.

THE CHAIR: Thanks very much for coming in this afternoon.

Hearing adjourned from 3.17 to 3.31 pm.

MULVANEY, DR MICHAEL JAMES, committee member, Red Hill Regenerators Park Care Group

THE CHAIR: Welcome to the planning and environment committee's inquiry into Molonglo and North Weston. Are you aware of the yellow card in front of you, the privilege statement?

Dr Mulvaney: Yes, I am.

THE CHAIR: I will let *Hansard* note that. You have not provided a submission to the committee so I guess you will be doing that this afternoon orally?

MRS DUNNE: There is this attachment to the cons council's.

Dr Mulvaney: Yes. I am a member of Red Hill Regenerators Park Care Group, which is one of the members of the conservation council, and I am here in that capacity. I am not here as a representative of the Department of Environment and Climate Change.

THE CHAIR: Would you like to make some opening comments for the committee?

Dr Mulvaney: Yes, thank you, and thanks for having me. There are two things that I hope will stay in your memory after you have listened to me. The first one is that the lower Molonglo Valley is an area of national significance in terms of the woodland it contains. The second issue is: whenever an ACT bureaucrat mentions the word "sustainable", I would like you to think do they know what they are saying, because there does not seem to be anything sustainable within the planning for Molonglo, even though that is the big word.

To go back to the first issue: why is the lower Molonglo an area of national significance for woodland? Geoff Robertson touched on it but really, if you went around the whole of Australia and looked at remnants of yellow box-Blakely's red gum woodland which, prior to European arrival, used to go from Toowoomba to Melbourne, in a belt that stretched basically from Canberra to Young—a 150-kilometre wide belt; 25,000 square kilometres of it used to exist—the names of the trees give it away. They do not look red or yellow when you look at them, until you chop them down. That is what has happened to that community; it has been cleared extensively, except in the ACT, where all the big remnants are. The Central Molonglo area would be in the top 20 left in the whole of Australia.

If you are talking about maintaining ecological sensitivity in terms of climate change, talking about processes, then it is these big remnants, particularly ones that are connected, that are important. Central Molonglo is connected to a riparian corridor and those riparian corridors are areas of refuge in times of drought, in times of fire; they are areas of high productivity. Being connected to a riparian corridor adds to the value of Central Molonglo.

In terms of sustainability, there is no definition that I can see in that plan of what they are talking about when they mention sustainability. You guys recently passed the Planning and Development Act which does have a meaning of sustainable development in it and that is basically the ESD principles that have been developed

over time and are widely accepted across the world.

I would like to draw your attention to the intergenerational equity principle, where it is mentioned that, to retain the present value for future generations, basically we should ensure the health, diversity and productivity of the environment are maintained or enhanced for the benefit of future generations. If we are talking about maintaining and enhancing, we should plant pine plantations, native pasture or the woodland that it is planned to put houses on. Molonglo is not a desert; it has biological value. You need to work out what is the loss if we cover those areas with houses and how we then make up for that loss if we are trying to maintain and enhance the present level of biodiversity that we have in Canberra.

That is what the submission tried to do. Basically, if you work out the losses and benefits and if you totally developed everywhere in East Molonglo, North Weston and West Molonglo, you would need, according to Victoria and New South Wales which have ways of measuring sustainability, areas that were, I think, 10 times or 28 times the size of Karma woodland, which is what is proposed by the ACT government, without any rationale about why that meets sustainability. That is what I would like to leave you with. If you are serious about sustainability, then you need to have a serious offset for the development that is occurring.

THE CHAIR: Thank you. If you were looking at the big-picture residential development for the ACT and if we were not to develop in that area, do you have any ideas about where we should go, which would have less impact on biodiversity?

Dr Mulvaney: I suppose what I was saying was that if you look at that development area and you calculate the loss, then that loss needs to be enhanced elsewhere. So I am not saying that the whole of Molonglo, West Molonglo, East Molonglo or Weston Creek should not be developed. Rather, I am saying that if you are serious about sustainability, you need to do that calculation about what we need elsewhere. I would be saying that you should be doing that for any development in the ACT. If you are serious about sustainability, you should be saying, "What is the loss and what is the gain?" rather than pulling things out of the air and saying that Karma woodland is sufficient to match what we are losing if we develop the former pine plantations and pasture and some of the woodland areas there.

MRS DUNNE: On the subject of West Molonglo, the conservation council made particular reference to the importance of the woodland around Strathnairn. Could you elaborate on its importance or what you see as its importance?

Dr Mulvaney: Yes. Just to the south-west of the homestead, there is a large patch of woodland that is in very good condition. It has very high, diverse understorey; it has a structure of native grasses, shrubs, saplings and big trees with hollows. If you look at woodland remaining, it is easily within the top one per cent of what is left. It is in very good condition; it is likely to have significant species associated with it.

There also is a creek that flows, basically, from Strathnairn towards the Murrumbidgee River, and it is quite deeply incised and the vegetation along that creek is also of very high quality, both in terms of diversity and the structure.

MRS DUNNE: It is a steep gully, is it?

Dr Mulvaney: It is a very steep gully, yes.

MRS DUNNE: On this map, that is this creek that runs almost north-west and then straight west?

Dr Mulvaney: That is right, running that way. If you look at some of the areas of development, there are some very good areas, not just that Strathnairn area but part of the woodland that adjoins Weston, that are good quality and have good structure, have high species diversity.

MRS DUNNE: Which woodland is that?

Dr Mulvaney: The Tuggeranong Parkway basically marks the eastern boundary. If you look at that and you come in about 200 metres—that is the map from the submission, is it?

MRS DUNNE: No, this is an ACTPLA one.

MS PORTER: This is their map. They have the woodlands all mapped out.

THE CHAIR: For the *Hansard*, we are looking at the ACTPLA map at the moment.

MS PORTER: Which has woodlands marked on it.

Dr Mulvaney: The ACTPLA map does not have all the woodlands marked on it. It does not have the woodlands that I am talking about now marked on it. It has a smaller proportion. It is much larger than what they have mapped. I could get up and show you on the map, if you like.

MRS DUNNE: Yes, that would be helpful.

Dr Mulvaney: Basically, it is not showing any woodland at all. But if you look at this bottom corner here—

MRS DUNNE: Where the pink line is.

Dr Mulvaney:—there is very good woodland in that area, very big yellow box trees and an understorey, I recorded, of probably about 40 different species in the middle of autumn. It does not compare to Strathnairn but, compared to what is left, it is of relatively high diversity.

MRS DUNNE: How big an area is that?

Dr Mulvaney: In total, it was about 20 hectares but included in that 20 hectares would be areas where it basically goes into native pasture.

THE CHAIR: You were indicating the north-western area.

Dr Mulvaney: That is right. So there is a little bit of woodland there. There is also some woodland on the other side, deep down in this area down in here.

THE CHAIR: On the other side of the river.

Dr Mulvaney: On the other side of the river and within the old pine plantation. Not all of that pine plantation area is planted out. They did not plant along creeks and they did not plant on really rocky sites; so you do get areas of five hectares or 10 hectares within the pine plantation of very high-quality box gum woodland. Bear in mind that, in the whole of the Murray catchment on the New South Wales side, only one per cent of the woodland exists in patches bigger than 10 hectares. What I am saying is five or 10-hectare patches in these pine plantations, in other contexts, would be very significant.

Probably one-third of the pine plantation area south of the Molonglo River is high-quality woodland as well. It was probably high-quality woodland when the pines were put in. There was a ploughed line; they planted the pines; they might have given it a bit of fertiliser; and then they left the pines to grow. The pines got burnt down and it is regenerating and there are species that are really quite rare in Canberra that you find in that area. Roughly, 420 hectares of the pine plantation meets the commonwealth criteria for being a box gum woodland.

MRS DUNNE: Could you say that again?

Dr Mulvaney: Within that burnt pine plantation area, there are about 420 hectares of regenerating box gum woodland which would meet the commonwealth criteria as endangered ecological community because it is dominated by native species and it has the particular mix of significant species that are required by the commonwealth.

MRS DUNNE: The map of the woodland-grassland in the Molonglo Valley that was provided by ACTPLA has substantial amounts of woodland and grasslands overarched with yellow box-red gum, grassy woodland communities. Most of that is substantially outside the proposed urban area until you get to Central Molonglo but then there is the eastern—

Dr Mulvaney: That is right. If you look at Central Molonglo, it is certainly the biggest patch of box gum woodland within the proposal area. What I am arguing is that if you look at the woodland cleared of regenerating pine, including the native pasture connected to good quality, including the good quality within East Molonglo and West Molonglo and if you were looking for an offset for the loss that was going to be caused by that clearing, you would need something that was 2½ times as large as this whole Central Molonglo area, according to the Victorian classification which weights very heavily for land that is placed into conservation reserve. If you did not place it in a conservation reserve, then the Victorian and the New South Wales methods coincide and you would need something that was seven times as large as this. As I understand it, the conservation council is not saying that you need to find seven central Molonglos but it is saying that you need to find one.

MRS DUNNE: And that one is there already?

Dr Mulvaney: This one is already there. It is one of the most significant woodland remnants remaining in Australia and, with enhancement and conservation management, it could become a key area for the conservation of woodland biodiversity, not only in the ACT but in Australia.

MRS DUNNE: Also that list, on those criteria, shows that a lot of the West Molonglo area is constrained by woodlands as well.

Dr Mulvaney: Yes. The mapping that I provided for this submission had a slight reduction in that woodland area. This mapping was done, I believe, in 2003. Since that time there have been changes. One, the fires caused regeneration in some areas. In other areas, weed invasion and probably fairly heavy grazing in that West Molonglo area have caused a reduction in the extent of the woodland.

MRS DUNNE: Is there some way that we can get the map that is in Dr Mulvaney's submission, which is in black and white, in colour so that we can read it? That will make it a lot easier to read. If we can get ourselves a coloured map, that will make it better.

Dr Mulvaney: I think that is one of the issues about Central Molonglo. Just putting a moratorium on it does not guarantee that the values will remain there because it needs to be actively managed. There is weed invasion; there is already Chile needle grass and African love grass within that section of the Central Molonglo area which could spread out.

Also there is good grazing management there at the moment but it could be better. Probably the grazing that is currently there is at least maintaining the native vegetation cover but it is probably reducing the diversity and structure within that woodland. If you did put conservation requirements on the lease, I think you would get an improvement, an enhancement in the values, in the size of the populations, in the diversities in that area which would go the way of making up for some of the loss that is going to occur elsewhere.

The other way you can reduce the loss is to reserve some of those woodland areas in Weston or the one on the other side of the river. You leave a 10-hectare patch or whatever so that you do not have to do that seven-to-one or whatever offset you are doing elsewhere.

MRS DUNNE: I wanted to point out to members that, if you look at those maps, the one on the far right, as we are looking at it, which is more the concept one, looks at first glance to be very like the others except it has got a whole lot of green stuff on it that is not there when you look at some of the others. The other ones, which are more aerial photographs, seem to have been enhanced to some extent so that you have the impression there are a whole lot of trees on Mount Stromlo and there are a whole lot of trees outside the area. It gives the impression that it is heavily wooded; whereas, in fact, it is not.

It is probably worth noting that the raptor map, for some reason, seems to have enhanced greenery. I do not know why but it is probably worth keeping in mind that that may not be a very good reference point if we are looking at the trees on it. If you

compare it to the worm-tail map, there are significantly fewer trees. It might be useful at some stage to get what is the goal standard, what is the baseline, because this one seems to be substantially enhanced.

Dr Mulvaney: I suppose, from my viewpoint, a significant central point is that it has got big trees, it has got hollows, but also it has got the understorey. When you go around New South Wales, that is what has been lost, particularly on the south-west slopes. There is that ability in Central Molonglo to make it better. Trees can regenerate there. Things like the diamond fire-tail will respond to eucalypts coming up in that area that is currently native pasture within that Central Molonglo area so that, overall, we might not have a decline in the diamond fire-tail numbers within the Molonglo Valley.

THE CHAIR: Do we have any more questions for Dr Mulvaney?

MRS DUNNE: I am pretty good at the moment, thank you.

THE CHAIR: Thank you very much for your time this afternoon. You have provided a good insight for the committee. If we have any further questions that we think of, we will get them to you as soon as we can. We will also provide a copy of the transcript to you as soon as possible. Thank you for your time.

Dr Mulvaney: Thank you.

The committee adjourned at 3.51 pm.