



QUESTION TIME
OF THE
LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY
FOR THE
AUSTRALIAN CAPITAL TERRITORY

HANSARD

Edited proof transcript

Thursday, 2 November 2023

This is an **EDITED PROOF TRANSCRIPT** of question time proceedings that is subject to further checking. Members' suggested corrections for the official *Weekly Hansard* should be lodged with the Hansard office as soon as possible.

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Ministerial arrangements

MR BARR (Kurrajong—Chief Minister, Treasurer, Minister for Climate Action, Minister for Economic Development and Minister for Tourism) (2.00): Minister Cheyne is absent from question time today on ministerial business, so I will endeavour to assist members on Minister Cheyne’s portfolios.

Questions without notice

Taxation—general practice clinics

MS LEE: My question is to the Treasurer. Treasurer, I refer to reporting in the *Canberra Times* where the ACT AMA said:

... GPs were optimistic they would be able to bulk bill concession card holders but that that optimism quickly eroded with the announcement of payroll tax.

Treasurer, why do you insist on only providing GPs with a payroll tax amnesty when they achieve a 65 per cent bulk-billing rate, when ACT’s GPs and peak bodies have repeatedly said that it is not viable?

MR BARR: It has been viable. It has been achieved in the ACT in the last few years, over the COVID period, and there is now, as of yesterday, a tripling of the incentive to do so, particularly for children and pensioners. But the government is not expecting GPs to bulk-bill every patient. That is very clear. What the government is saying is: “We will provide you with a tax waiver if you can get back to where you were a few years ago.”

MS LEE: Treasurer, how many GPs have told you that it is not possible to achieve the 65 per cent bulk-billing rate?

MR BARR: About four have advised. I guess it depends on how many you would presume peak bodies purport to speak on behalf of. Most GP practices bulk-bill some patients. Some endeavour to bulk-bill nearly all. What we are asking for is that the 56 per cent bulk-billing rate lift back up to 65 per cent, where it was a little while ago. I would have thought, Ms Lee, that you might have supported an increase in bulk-billing.

MS CASTLEY: Treasurer, do you maintain that GPs are only voicing these concerns in the pursuit of profit?

MR BARR: That is what has been put to me—that it is not profitable. That is what has been said, even in the question and in the line of questioning from the opposition. So, yes, profit is clearly a motive here.

Municipal services—customer satisfaction survey

MS LEE: My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services. Minister, I refer to the better suburbs statement, which was commenced by the previous minister, Meegan Fitzharris. In 2017 the former minister was asked what measures would be in

place to hold the government to account if it fails to implement elements of the better suburbs statement. Ms Fitzharris advised that the annual customer satisfaction survey should reflect improvements in the delivery of city services.

The 2022-23 TCCS annual report showed that customer satisfaction has reduced each year in this term of government. Minister, why are Canberrans not satisfied with your plan for better suburbs?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for her question. It is a plan that has been based on community consultation and the better suburbs forum, so we have looked at the recommendations that have been provided by the community, and every budget will consider proposals to address those priorities. We have been providing regular reporting on that. I refer Ms Lee to the better suburbs progress statement that I have tabled in the Assembly now several times, which provides evidence that we are addressing those recommendations.

In relation to customer satisfaction surveys, we do undertake those on a regular basis to understand where we could be doing better. We know that has been impacted recently by significant wet weather that we have been experiencing over several years now, which has impacted on things like mowing. It is one of the reasons why we are investing more in mowing services through the extension of the rapid response mowing team so we can be more responsive to the community, and we will see the benefit of that in the years ahead.

It is why we are investing more in things like strategic road maintenance with a new road maintenance program that we have developed based on evidence. That will be rolled out over the coming years: a 52 per cent increase in funding, up to \$153 million over the next four years. We will start to see the benefit of that funding going forward that we have been providing in the budget.

We will continue to invest in things like tree maintenance following an extensive consultation process that we undertook on an urban forest plan, and the development of the Urban Forest Act, which is now in place and will start to be implemented from 1 January next year. It has been supported with a significant investment of well over \$20 million in new tree maintenance staff, which will get on top of some of the issues that are being raised in relation to tree maintenance.

MADAM SPEAKER: Are you tabling that, Mr Steel or are you keeping it for the time being?

Mr Steel: I have tabled it twice already, so I will not.

MS LEE: Minister, what consultation has been done since the commencement of the better suburbs statement to ensure you are taking into consideration Canberrans' changing priorities from the last five years?

MR STEEL: On each of the plans that I just mentioned we have undertaken separate consultation. We have done so with the input of evidence and by engaging with the broader community as well. In the development of the living infrastructure plan and the development of an urban forest strategy—we have undertaken consultation on

those. Then we have backed that up with funding in the budget.

For the strategic road maintenance program we have taken feedback from a range of different sources and worked with stakeholders like the National Transport Research Organisation to develop a plan that will see more of our roads in better condition over time, with investment that we have also made in the budget to backup that strategic maintenance plan.

Of course, we have been undertaking consultation on our draft Active Travel Plan. This includes a priority to have a better connected and maintained path network, which, again, has been backed up in the budget with an over 40 per cent increase in funding that has taken our funding levels annually up to \$8.5 million, which is in stark contrast to what the opposition were saying yesterday.

MS LAWDER: Minister, why do you no longer publish the entire customer satisfaction survey on the TCCS website?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for the question. I will take that on notice.

Light rail—stage 2B

MR PARTON: Madam Speaker, my question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services. Minister, in the Belconnen busway motion debate yesterday, you said: “What has not been acknowledged by Mr Parton is that an updated feasibility is required in order to understand what the scope of those upgrades could be, what the costs and benefits of those upgrades could be, and indeed to relook at some of the discounted measures which were considered in the original feasibility and indeed looking at new solutions. we need to undertake that first before we can actually deliver the project.”

Minister, how could your government then possibly have committed to stage 2B of the tram project when you do not even know what route it will take, the scope of the work, or the benefits of the upgrades?

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members, members.

MR STEEL: That is precisely what we are doing through the development of the business case for the project, which we have committed to do and to deliver.

Opposition members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members!

MR PARTON: Minister why did your government not reconsider some of the previously discounted measures and indeed look at possible new solutions for stage 2B of the tram, as per your statement in the chamber yesterday?

MR STEEL: We have done that. We did that in relation to stage 1 before we

embarked on that project, and we determined that light rail was the most appropriate mass transport solution for our city. Buses are not a form of mass transport. The government is getting on with delivering our extension to an existing successful mass transit solution; building on stage 1. We have seen the household travel survey from 2022, that compares the patronage on public transport in that corridor from the previous survey that was undertaken in 2017, and what it shows is there has been over a 50 per cent increase in the number of people taking public transport in Gungahlin directly, we think as a result of light rail stage 1. It is a proven solution and we are going to get on and deliver it, and we are going to work through government processes to get that done, to ensure it is implemented so that we can maximise the benefits for the community as we deliver that project.

MR HANSON: Minister, is there a threshold cost figure for stage 2B of the tram at which point the project would be considered unviable?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. We are going to go through the development of a business case to understand the benefits and costs of the project and the various options in terms of the delivery of that project to maximise the benefits for the community. That is the purpose of going through the business case development process and now that we are getting to the stage where stage 2A—

Mr Parton: On a point of order, Madam Speaker. It is a yes/no question in terms of is there a threshold cost, and I would ask the Minister to be relevant to whether there is a threshold cost to this project.

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Hanson—sorry Mr Parton—you may want a yes or no, but the Minister is answering the question.

MR STEEL: Thank you Madam Speaker, I have answered the question.

Health—elective surgery waiting times

MS CASTLEY: My question is to the Minister for Health. Minister, I refer to the case of an individual who wrote to you in August about being on the outpatient waitlist for 997 days, since December 2020, for category 2 bilateral carpal tunnel surgery, affecting her ability to work and being on the waitlist for 533 days since February 2022 for category 3 oral surgery, affecting her ability to eat, and who in April was placed on the waitlist as a category 1 patient for cardiology surgery—all one person. I have also contacted your office twice about this matter. Minister why, 2½ months after this person contacted your office has she still not received anything other than a generic holding response?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I will check my tray. It is possible that there is a response with me. As Ms Castley would be aware, I was on leave for some weeks, and I am still catching up on some of that correspondence. It is also possible that that response has not arrived back with me yet, because, as Ms Castley's question has indicated, this individual clearly has a range of matters that would need to be considered.

For the benefit of Ms Castley and the Assembly, what generally happens in relation to these matters where it is an individual—particularly if they have a complex set of

needs—is that either my office or, more likely, Canberra Health Services would get directly in touch with that person. That is a more helpful response than me writing something formally in words and sending it off to them by email. What they actually want is action. Unfortunately, we are not always able to—

Mr Parton interjecting—

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: People are on a waitlist and people are treated in order of urgency on that waitlist. So we are not always able to ensure that people are pushed up a waitlist, for example. But Canberra Health Services is able to provide them with advice about what they should do next about their circumstances. That is actually more useful to them than a formal response from me. But I will check my files and see if I have a response.

MS CASTLEY: Minister, this individual has now been waiting three years for an outpatient appointment to see a specialist. How long will she have to wait to get her operations?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: I am advised by my office that I do have a draft response to that individual. So I will make sure that I get that off as quickly as I can. Obviously, I cannot in this place comment on individual matters. I am not the person who does the triage and manages the waiting lists. That is done by a range of people in our system with clinical expertise.

Mr Parton: You're the minister. You're overseeing this!

Ms Lee: People are waiting a thousand days!

Mr Parton: Is this acceptable?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: It would actually be really inappropriate for people to be pushed up a waiting list at the behest of a minister or a shadow minister rather than in relation to their clinical urgency and the comparative needs of other people on that list.

However, to respond to the interjections from the opposition, no, it is not acceptable. That is why there is so much work that is being done to ensure that our outpatient appointments are being more directed to new appointments—and I talked about this last week. Each of the individual specialties has managed their outpatient lists in different ways. Canberra Health Services is trying to deliver a bit more uniformity around that and to require those specialties to shift their focus away from ongoing appointments for people who could be safely cared for in primary care and towards a higher proportion of new patient appointments, precisely for these reasons.

MRS KIKKERT: Minister, can you understand this person's frustration when she says, "It is very disappointing, to say the least, especially when I see images of Rachel Stephen-Smith come up on my Facebook page on holidays in Paris. It makes me really annoyed"?

MS STEPHEN-SMITH: Yes, I can absolutely understand that individual's

frustration. I can also understand that people might have those sorts of responses. But I am not entirely convinced that it is helpful for the opposition to comment on the holiday and travel arrangements of members of this place.

Mrs Kikkert: It was not us commenting; it was a quote from her.

Mr Hanson: Your lot never did that with ScoMo, did you? You never did that with ScoMo, did you, Shane? No? I remember that one!

MADAM SPEAKER: Well, I remember asking you to be quiet a number of times, Mr Hanson.

Environment—kangaroo management

MS LAWDER: My question is to the Minister for the Environment. Minister, this year alone, 1,041 adult kangaroos and 362 joeys were killed in the kangaroo cull. A report by Micromex Research, commissioned by your government, about the attitudes and opinions of ACT residents regarding the management of kangaroos includes questions about the reasons for killing kangaroos, including “to prevent starvation of kangaroos during drought”. Minister, data from the Bureau of Meteorology shows that over the last 12 months the ACT has had above average rainfall. Minister, why do you continue to use drought to justify the killing of kangaroos and joeys when we have had above average rainfall?

MR GENTLEMAN: Madam Speaker, if I could take take that question. I am responsible for kangaroo management.

Members interjecting—

MADAM SPEAKER: Members! Mr Gentleman, you are taking the call.

MR GENTLEMAN: The kangaroo management plan is a scientifically based plan. It is designed to ensure that we can keep the most vulnerable plants and animals in the ACT from extinction, as well as taking into account the considerations Ms Lawder has raised. It is a difficult but important task that we need to do to ensure that—

Ms Lawder: Point of order, Madam Speaker. The question was about using drought to justify the killing of kangaroos and joeys when we have had above average rainfall.

MADAM SPEAKER: I think the minister is within the scope. It was an early interjection. Continue, Mr Gentleman.

MR GENTLEMAN: Thank you, Madam Speaker. I was going to mention that there are a number of considerations, including those mentioned by Ms Lawder, that we take into account when drafting the management plan. It is a very difficult thing to do for all Canberrans, but it is an important task that we need to take on board to ensure that we can keep from extinction those plants and animals that are near extinction. I stand by that. It is very important—

Ms Lawder: Point of order, Madam Speaker.

MADAM SPEAKER: Ms Lawder.

Ms Lawder: We are not debating the topic. We are asking about the use of drought to justify the killings. The minister has not touched on it.

MADAM SPEAKER: Without paraphrasing the minister, he went through some criteria about what guides the advice and the plan. Minister, you have a few seconds left.

MR GENTLEMAN: Thank you, Madam Speaker. It is taken into account. This is a humane way of dealing with a terrible problem that we have in the ACT. I thank those people who are involved for doing that particular difficult task.

MS LAWDER: Minister, did the survey detail at any point that management of kangaroos includes clubbing joeys to death?

MR GENTLEMAN: Not as far as I am aware.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, how many kangaroos were not killed by the initial bullet?

MR GENTLEMAN: I would have to take that on notice.

Building—Master Builders Fidelity Fund

DR PATERSON: My question is to the Minister for Sustainable Building and Construction. Minister, constituents in my community regularly raise with me the issue of building quality. As you are aware, the Master Builders Fidelity Fund was established by the government to provide support for residents affected by poor building quality in home construction, with surplus funds going to better training for construction workers in the ACT. You have previously advised the community that the government is reviewing the fidelity fund and that this review would be completed by mid-2023. Can you please update the Assembly on when this review will be complete and made available to the community?

MS VASSAROTTI: I thank Dr Paterson for the question. That is correct; we are undertaking a review of the fidelity fund. In fact, we put out an interim report in March 2023. I was talking with the directorate today, understanding that the final review will be forwarded to my office in the next few weeks.

In terms of what has happened between when the interim report was provided and now, there has been additional consultation on draft recommendations. That has been undertaken with stakeholders, including community stakeholders. In addition we have been working with actuaries who have finalised a report modelling the financial implications for premiums and claim payouts of a range of potential changes to the insurance settings, given we are looking at that as a particular issue.

Certainly, in the interim report, we have outlined recommendations that look at the key issues around the current application and approval processes for home warranty

schemes, including fidelity funds, the insurance settings, including looking at a potential increase in the minimum prescribed amount—which is what the actuary report has looked at—the scope of building matters covered, and the settings in other jurisdictions. It is probably useful to know that this scheme was set up at a time when the insurance industry was under great stress. It means that we have two residential building work schemes in place, and an authorised insurer, QBE, as well as the approved fidelity fund scheme that we are referring to now.

DR PATERSON: Minister, what steps are you taking to address the community's criticism of the fund as lacking in transparency and accountability?

MS VASSAROTTI: I thank Dr Paterson for the question. In relation to the review, it was really useful to engage with the community on issues around transparency. Certainly, some of the draft recommendations look to those. There are some draft recommendations, including proposals to appoint a consumer representative to the fidelity fund. The recommendations also contain issues such as making sure that there is information that is clearly available to the community on things such as complaints and conflict of interest.

MS ORR: Minister, what transparency measures are currently in place about Master Builders' management of the training component of the fund, and is that included in the review?

MS VASSAROTTI: Thank you very much for the question. There is an opportunity for the fidelity fund to be able to transfer funds that are surplus to the operational needs of the fund to the training scheme. As part of the review, there has been investigation of the governance systems that are in place in relation to this process. There have not been any issues identified as part of that review. There is a discussion about whether or not this arrangement that is in place continues to be fit for purpose, when we look at a range of other training skills funds and the like. That is something that I have been discussing with the skills minister. It is not in the scope of this review, but it is something that we are open to having a look at and discussing with the Minister for Skills over the next few months, after we finish this review.

Arts—Funding

MS CLAY: My question is to the Minister for the Arts, who is not here. Based on yesterday's answer, it may be for the Treasurer, so I am going to ask the question and we will see where we land. Treasurer, in November 2022 you announced that you had secured an approximate 10 per cent funding increase for ACT arts organisations. Arts organisations have now been informed that this amount includes indexation for both the 2022-23 and 2023-24 financial years. Given that inflation over that time is approximately 10 per cent, does that mean arts organisation funding did not increase in real terms?

MR BARR: No; I would not believe so, because inflation in the ACT is lower, so it was not 10 per cent over two years.

MS CLAY: How does this funding level match up with your ambition for Canberra to be recognised as Australia's arts capital?

MR BARR: It is a significant boost and it builds on other work that the minister has undertaken.

MR BRADDOCK: Treasurer, will artsACT consider reviewing its decision on indexation?

MR BARR: That is a matter the minister will consider. I presume, if it were the case, it would come as an additional request from the budget. That would need to go through a budget process. It would then be an announcement of government policy, were I to make it either as Treasurer or as representing the minister in this question time. I will not do that. What I will say is that any increase in funding would need to come through the budget process.

Environment—kangaroo management

MS LAWDER: My question is to the Minister for the Environment. Minister, I quote a CSIRO report analysing data from 2009, 2012 and 2013:

This study could not identify any upper limit of kangaroo density beyond which vegetation richness, diversity and overall condition declines.

In addition, a retired CSIRO plant biologist said of the report, “Nothing in the document provides compelling evidence that lethal management of a native animal is required for protection of biodiversity.” The report also found that three eastern grey kangaroos per hectare had no material effect on ground vegetation.

Minister, why do you continue to ignore the CSIRO report which recommends three kangaroos per hectare rather than one kangaroo per hectare?

MS VASSAROTTI: Thank you, Ms Lawder, for the question. The Kangaroo Management Program, as Minister Gentleman spoke about, is based on rigorous scientific evidence. The kangaroo management plan sits in place and supports the action plans and the work that happens on an annual basis. This plan is, in fact, in the process of being reviewed by an independent scientific reviewer at the moment—

Ms Lee: You don't trust the CSIRO?

MS VASSAROTTI: Sorry?

MADAM SPEAKER: Try and stay focused and don't worry about the interjections.

MS VASSAROTTI: In terms of the management plan, it takes into account a wide range of information—all peer reviewed scientific information—about kangaroo management. As I noted, we have just commenced the process of reviewing the five-year plan. We will be engaging with stakeholders—in terms of engaging with that independent scientific reviewer—to ensure we do have the settings in place that are right. Certainly, things such as the density that we require have been thoroughly investigated. If things have changed and if scientific evidence provides additional information, we will review the plan and change it. We make our decisions on

scientific evidence. We are in a situation of an extinction crisis, where, unfortunately, we have to make some really difficult decisions that are confronting in terms of conservation efforts. It is difficult work, but I would hope that people who have the responsibility for the environment actually take into account scientific information and evidence.

MS LAWDER: Minister, why has the earless dragon been added to the critically endangered list if 15 years of killing kangaroos has been so necessary and effective?

MS VASSAROTTI: I am not sure if the member has been paying attention to the fact that we are in the middle of a climate crisis, we are in the middle of an extinction crisis and we are in the middle of a biodiversity crisis. There are a whole range of activities that we have to do to fight to ensure we are able to pull threatened species back from the brink of extinction. This means we have to make the effort to do a range of activities, and it means we are actually making calls. For some of these species, because of where we are at and because of the decisions we have made previously, we are facing a very difficult challenge. But I think it is beholden on us to be making decisions and doing everything we can to protect our species from extinction and not preferencing one species over another just because of their size or impact on the environment.

MR MILLIGAN: Minister, has killing kangaroos had a negative impact on our reserves, woodlands and grasslands? For example, are they more infested with weeds than ever before?

MS VASSAROTTI: Thank you for the supplementary question. We are managing a range of impacts on our reserves. Certainly, different weather conditions mean that we see different challenges happening in our reserves. I would absolutely recognise the issue around the management of weeds, coming off the back of three years of La Niña, has been very difficult. This is a complementary issue we are facing in our reserves, as well as the issue of ensuring that we have an appropriate density of kangaroos.

I want to be really clear that we want kangaroos on our reserves. They provide a really important ecological function and really do support a healthy ecosystem. The work we are doing around our kangaroo management plan is ensuring that the density of kangaroos in the environment is able to be managed and ensuring the overall health of our ecosystem. This is around taking a whole-of-ecosystems approach rather than preferencing one species over another.

Housing—housing choices

MR CAIN: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Land Management. Minister, from June 2016 through to June 2022, the number of apartment dwellings in the ACT rose by 52 per cent, while the stock of houses grew only four per cent in the same period. I note the most recent community survey on housing preferences found that only two per cent of ACT residents want to live in high-density apartments. Minister, why is your planning strategy inconsistent with the housing preferences of ACT residents?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Mr Cain for the question. It is a question posed quite regularly by Mr Cain in regard to housing choice across the territory. We have had many a discussion in this place about providing for the future Canberra population. We have made a decision in the planning strategy that Mr Cain has just quoted, from 2018, to not increase the footprint as much as we have been into greenfield estates. So we are looking at the 70/30 option: most new dwellings occurring within the current footprint and only 30 per cent in greenfields. That brings some planning challenges to make sure we can provide the dwellings that are necessary for population growth within that current footprint. We have seen the take up of higher density dwellings, such as apartments, but we also want to provide that missing middle we have talked about as well, so townhouses and those sorts of opportunities. The recent changes announced to the Territory Plan give us that opportunity within the RZ1 zone. So, I am very pleased to see we now have that opportunity for blocks of 800 square metres or bigger to have a second dwelling, and that dwelling can be unit titled as well, to provide better opportunities for living into the future.

MR CAIN: Minister, why have you constrained the supply of single blocks for houses when Canberra is in a housing crisis?

MR GENTLEMAN: That is not the case. We put out an indicative land release program each budget, which advises the number of dwellings that are required for the population growth. That is just the government's land release. The private sector plays a very important role in providing dwellings for the future population growth as well. So we take that onboard in our future planning.

MR PARTON: Minister, what do you have to say to the young families in the community who will never be able to afford a house because your government is constraining supply?

MR GENTLEMAN: It is not the case. As I mentioned, if you look at the ILRP, we are not constraining supply; we are providing the dwellings that are required for the future population growth. The Canberra Liberals want to see urban sprawl well into the future. They have told us they will bulldoze Kowen Forest and build out there. It would be incredibly expensive for young couples to build in Kowen Forest, let me tell you. We want to make sure we can provide affordable housing in a way that is sustainable into the future and not put the burden of debt onto future Canberrans.

Planning—land release program

MR CAIN: My question is to the Minister for Planning and Land Management—aka the minister for urban sprawl.

MADAM SPEAKER: Mr Cain, just ask the question. Be straight.

MR CAIN: I withdraw that.

MADAM SPEAKER: Thank you.

MR CAIN: Minister, the ACT budget forecasts population growth of 2.25 per cent in 2023-24 and two per cent across the remainder of the forward estimates, which

equates to over 9,000 people per year. The Indicative Land Release Program for 2023-24 commits to releasing 1,883 total residential dwellings this financial year. Even by conservative modelling, this housing growth will only accommodate, based on the government's own occupancy rate, about 4,500 of the 9,000 new residents. Minister, again, why do you refuse to release more land to the market?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Mr Cain for the question again. Of course, there is a lot of work that goes behind ensuring that we can provide an Indicative Land Release Program that meets the needs for future population growth. But we do not do it just by ourselves. As I mentioned, the private sector has a lot to do with it as well.

As Mr Cain indicated, the ILRP is 1,883 new homes. Of this, 60 per cent or 1,126 dwellings are programmed to be released in existing urban footprint, as I mentioned from the Planning Strategy—about 40 per cent are programmed to be released in greenfield developments. While the Planning Strategy 2018 aims to deliver that 70 per cent that I talked about, that target includes all residential development, not just ACT government releases, which the ILRP indicates.

As available government-owned land reduces, the government plays an increasing and important role in facilitating development through other mechanisms, such as land facilitation and investment and planning, providing and supporting infrastructure for the work that the private sector does as well.

More broadly, over the next five years, the Indicative Land Release Program will target 114,902 square metres of mixed-use land, 201,778 square metres of commercial land, 880,000 square metres of industrial land and 262,379 square metres of community and non-urban land. So it is not just the dwellings that we have to look at; it is also the community land and industrial land around that forward program that gives us the opportunity to service the future growth for Canberra.

MR CAIN: Minister, will you commit to releasing more affordable land to the ACT market?

MR GENTLEMAN: We do have an affordable housing strategy that is well in play, and we will continue to work through that strategy. We know that it is far less expensive to build within our urban footprint than to provide urban sprawl. Of course, Canberrans are staying here and the population is growing. We heard the Canberra Liberals say a number of years ago that everyone is travelling to Googong. That is not the case. The ACT is growing, and I am very pleased to be able to do my best to provide the land for them.

MR PARTON: Minister, do you agree with your federal Labor colleague, Dr Michelle Ananda-Rajah, who responded in no uncertain terms when questioned on the housing crisis, “We need more dwellings; the issue really is supply”?

MR GENTLEMAN: We do need more dwellings. That is why the government has announced some changes to the Territory Plan and worked alongside the federal government in funding for more opportunities for dwellings in the ACT. I am pleased with the announcements that we have made so far, and we will continue that work.

Libraries ACT—Civic Library

MR BRADDOCK: My question is to the Minister for Transport and City Services. I have heard that Civic Library may need to move as a result of Canberra theatre precinct having its works done. Can you please outline what the future is for Civic Library?

MR STEEL: I thank the member for his question. I am not planning on making any announcements today, Mr Braddock, in relation to the future of Civic Library. What I can say is that the ACT government has been considering the future of Civic Library for some time. There was an inquiry into libraries in the last term of the Assembly. It would be no surprise to anyone that, as a result of that, Civic Library is unfortunately known as our least patronised library. There are great opportunities, I think, to encourage more people to use the library. That means potentially looking at a change of location in the future.

We also know that significant planning work has been undertaken in relation to the future development of a new theatre and precinct. Transport Canberra and City Services and Libraries ACT have been working closely with Major Projects Canberra as they have gone through that planning process.

The current site that it occupies is leased from the Cultural Facilities Corporation. We will be working closely with them as well on the future of the library. There are opportunities, we think, to look at improvements to accessibility and the proximity to public transport and parking. Alignment with other visitor activities, such as retail, we know drives patronage into libraries. There are opportunities to see more residents in the Civic precinct using our libraries as well, to support the renewal of the city and the enlivenment of our public spaces around the city.

They are considerations that we are currently thinking about before we make decisions on the future of the library. Once those decisions are made, I look forward to updating the community on where we are at.

MR BRADDOCK: Minister, is the government committed to having a library somewhere in the Civic area in the future?

MR STEEL: Just because Civic Library is our least patronised library in Canberra does not mean that there should not be a presence. There are many successful libraries in cities around Australia and the world which are located in the heart of the CBD. There are opportunities, I think, through looking at a better location, a better fit-out and better programming within the library, to encourage more people to use it.

The current location does suffer from some challenges. It is not directly in the centre of the CBD. It is further away from where people are parking and going to shop and do other activities. It can be inconvenient to get to and actually hard to find. For members in this place we are literally just a few metres away from the library, and I often get asked when I am walking out the door, “Where’s the library?” and they are literally right next to it. There are opportunities, I think, to better connect people with our library in terms of its physical location, to make sure that all Canberrans can enjoy

the fantastic services that Libraries ACT provides.

MS CLAY: Minister, what is it about Civic Library, when compared to, say, Belconnen Library, that means the Civic Library has much lower usage?

MR STEEL: It is a good question. I think that there are a range of different factors. The physical location is one of those. Despite being one of the newer libraries in terms of the building, that does not necessarily mean that it has been designed in the best way. It was part of that link with the theatre. There are opportunities, I think, through the improved design of the building to attract more people in.

The demographics certainly play a role. Woden is our best patronised library, down my way. I think that is largely to do with, quite frankly, having the oldest population in Canberra in that area. The library provides great children's programs as well. Belconnen also benefits from that, but Belconnen also has its challenges of not being directly in the centre of the retail precinct. We are looking at all of our libraries and what opportunities there are to try to attract more people in.

Civic is where there is the biggest opportunity, because of the challenges that are presented here. We will be considering all of those issues before we make a decision about its future.

Planning—Territory Plan

MS ORR: My question is to the minister for planning. Minister, can you please provide an update on the interim Territory Plan?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Ms Orr for her interest in planning across the territory for future population growth. As members will recall, a major component of our old planning system was the Territory Plan. In undertaking the planning system review and reform project, we have carefully considered the needs of our growing city in formulating a new territory plan and the new planning system more broadly.

When I presented the Territory Plan to the Assembly, I tabled an executive motion seeking the Assembly's approval of the draft territory plan as an interim territory plan under section 609 of the Planning Act 2023. As members will recall, the Legislative Assembly passed the interim Territory Plan last week.

By agreeing to the interim Territory Plan, the focus on improved development outcomes during the development proposal and assessment process can commence as soon as possible. If we do not have a new interim territory plan, we run the risk of delaying the delivery of improved development outcomes for the city. This could impact our ability to facilitate more houses and greater housing choice for our growing population. It would mean that developments that occur between now and the commencement of the final Territory Plan would not be assessed under the new assessment outcomes that clearly articulate the improved and more holistic outcomes that we want to achieve.

MS ORR: Minister, what are the next steps for the planning system review?

MR GENTLEMAN: As members will be aware, when I presented the Territory Plan to the Assembly, I referred the new Territory Plan to the Standing Committee on Planning, Transport and City Services on 11 September 2023. The committee agreed to undertake the inquiry, and I am pleased to say that the committee commenced its work a few days later, on 14 September. The terms of reference for the inquiry can be found on the ACT parliament website. I understand that the committee called for expressions of interest from interested members of the community, with expressions of interest closing recently, on Friday, 27 October 2023.

This process will provide further opportunities for consultation with the community and industry, building on the extensive consultations already undertaken, which led to over 1,700 pieces of feedback that we received during the initial consultation process earlier this year. The reporting date for the inquiry is 11 March 2024. I look forward to receiving the report and considering its findings in the future.

DR PATERSON: Minister, what can the community do to make sure they are across the new planning system?

MR GENTLEMAN: I thank Dr Paterson for the question. Once again I would like to acknowledge the significant contributions that the community provided during the consultation process earlier this year. As members have heard, this was one of the most extensive consultation periods we have had during this term of government.

There are a range of ways in which the community can become more informed about the new planning system. The new Territory Plan has been available to the community for six weeks. During this time there has been the opportunity to attend a series of training sessions and access to information resources on the government's planning website. This has provided the opportunity for industry and community members to familiarise themselves with the new planning requirements—in particular, the Territory Plan, before it takes effect.

The training will be ongoing and includes a range of seminars and online sessions. There is also a dedicated hotline where planners are available to answer specific questions about the new planning system. The phone number is 62050580, or individuals can email NewPlanningSystem@act.gov.au. Having an interim territory plan while the standing committee undertake their inquiry will enable stakeholders to provide more specific feedback on the new Territory Plan.

Mr Parton: What is that number again?

MR GENTLEMAN: Community consultation remains an important aspect of the new planning system going forward. I look forward to progressing work on the new planning system. For Mr Parton, the number is 6205 0580.

Mr Barr: I ask that all further questions be placed on the notice paper.