

Submission to the ACT Government on the Review and Reform of the ACT Planning System

Regional Development Australia (ACT)

The Canberra Region Food Collaborative

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Regional Development Australia (RDA) ACT is an independent NFP with a Board/Committee of nine local leaders, focused on economic development. We are part of a national network of 52 Regional Development Australia organisations, largely funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities. Our charter is to secure more investment and jobs for our region aligning our work with the ACT Government priorities. Our industry focus is on the agrifood industry.

We have launched a new initiative called the Canberra Region Food Collaborative (CRFC) <https://www.agrifood-hub.com/>. The CRFC will be an independent information broker and coordinating body responsible for helping establish an integrated, sustainable, inclusive local food system. We also have developed the highly successful Food in the Capital Event Program – now Australia’s only national event focusing City-Region food systems. The CRFC is mentioned in the current Government Agreement for action this parliamentary term subject to funding.

RDA (ACT) welcomes the ACT Government’s decision to reform and improve the ACT Planning System.

Taking advantage of its natural and built advantages, we have an unprecedented opportunity to be Australia’s leading Urban Food City and to ride a social movement and a technological/design-based wave sweeping the world.

Moreover, our Food Security is threatened by a combination of factors likely to continue decades into the future including climate change, strategic disputation and technical supply chain factors.

The ACT Government has been taking some important steps in the urban food sector in recent years – from facilitation of community gardens and support for farmers markets through to the more recent focus on food waste. While individually important, evidence from other jurisdictions, both in Australia and overseas, shows that a systematic approach is needed to maximise benefits. There are complex feedback loops within the food system and the broader community. These include everything from water and energy, business competitiveness, sustainability, investment, social disadvantage, health, nutrition and liveability.

The strong potential of this sector is supported by the presence of a highly motivated, socially conscious, well-educated, and relatively high-income population.

The economic, health and environmental arguments are strong for well-conceived government and private investment in local sustainable food systems. In reviewing the world ‘food’ cities it is evident that building up of local and accessible local food buffers with a shorter supply chain is strategically essential. We need much more local food to support our traditional supply chains to prevent food shortages and to smooth out further periods of disruption.

There is very strong investment interest in sustainable food production – from micro-local enterprises and concepts through to large projects. To realise the opportunity will require policy certainty, active investment attraction and a low-cost, predictable, facilitative regulatory environment.

Planning needs to allow for the inevitable need for dedicated locations be identified and set aside as food precincts be they for the purposes of production, agrifood tourism, innovation, social enterprise, or training. These would become centres of gravity and scale for urban food. In addition, allowing collateralisation of all types and locations of small plots for food production will also be important.

The Planning process also needs to help create a vision for the leaders in the built environment targeting developers, architects, and landscape architects to integrate urban sustainable food opportunities inside new developments. Encourage innovation in the latest urban food technologies and approaches. We understand that while existing legislation and regulations are helpful, the interpretation by ACT Government program managers can be narrow and disincentivising for innovation in the food space e.g. providing for garden commons or small urban farms.

Farmers markets and similar operations especially will need to increase in size and scope which will include the need for more permanent infrastructure and parking

It will be important to provide more policy certainty and direct support for ACT-based food enterprises and decide on where long-term farming can be guaranteed.

Our core premise is that in urban food, sustainability, good business, and social impact can operate in a productive harmony. The timing is right for a concerted approach to building a local and regional food production system.

Food is the forgotten part of the Water, Renewable Energy Soil nexus necessary for creating a truly sustainable City. Done well, sustainable food will not only good for business, tourism, exports and jobs but will directly address the ACTs liveability, human health and inclusion policy objectives.

The ecological and sustainable elements of the proposed legislation and explanatory documentation need to provide specific reference to food as a vital part of a city sustainability nexus - in water, clean energy, battery storage and soil remediation. Indeed, the need for food production and sales disaggregation in the physical environment mirrors that we are seeing in the energy sector with decentralisation and creation of microgrids.

Across the world, City, Urban and Rural food strategies are being developed to accommodate community-based farming, food business incubation through to striking vertical farms, high-tech green houses, roof top farms, aquaculture, food waste capture/reduction and clean energy integration. The planning system must be flexible enough to make this possible. Currently zoning restrictions include arcane definitions limiting food production and which take no account of huge technology and design progress in the areas of intensive food production and agricultural innovation.

Food production and consumption is ubiquitous in all human society. It feeds, connects, and employs. The national and local food system is impressive in its ability deliver enough food to feed Canberra and those who rely on our supermarkets, farmers markets and grocers and the food service sector. Tens of thousands of people are employed around Australia and within the Canberra region to provide the food and meals we need to keep the city functioning. This an extremely complex task and challenging particularly when our very long supply chains are disrupted. Of the 40,000 people involved in that task across Australia we believe we can bring 3000 jobs here by shortening the supply chain.

RDA developed the *Proposal for Sustainable Urban Food in the ACT (2019)* with the assistance of a wide range of organisations in Canberra who had been involved in urban sustainable food space for many

years. This report and our subsequent submission *Proposal for Establishing a City-Region Food System*¹ (February 2021) have highlighted several issues and concepts that need to be factored into developing and implementation of a sustainable city-region food system. We refer the ACT Government to this document.

While the economic arguments are strong in terms of ROI for well-conceived government and private investment – the need to position food in public policy considerations as an essential service, alongside water and energy, is the most decisive argument in its favour. In reviewing what leading ‘food’ cities are already doing in this sphere – it is evident that building up of local and easily accessible regional high quality food buffers with a short supply chain is now becoming strategically essential.

There is very strong investment interest with more than \$100 m in project opportunities for the ACT. Much of this is driven by mobile capital for which we are competing with other destinations, including NSW. These projects vary from large agritourism through to green-house style projects – all of which will need to be located close too or within the city – in a similar way to the creation of boutique breweries and distilleries within the urban fabric.

Huge differences in scale, approaches and technology means that policy needs to open enough to encourage all manner of food projects. The harsh climate in Canberra, its market characteristics and geography all mean that the strategy needs to be flexible and allow a process of discovery over time about what suits Canberra best in terms of what is needed here. The Planning system must be able to accommodate such changes and demands over time.

¹ That submission includes a detailed policy alignment analysis.