

Time to Talk about Canberra 2030 as a Healthy City

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Abstract

The ACT Chief Minister's Department last year engaged the Canberra community in a conversation about how our national capital can gain through managing long term change, rather than struggling reactively to the impacts of climate change. The Time to Talk Canberra 2030 conversations gave an emerging picture of the Canberra the community wants for a healthy future.

Maintaining Canberra's air quality emerged along with lowering Canberra's carbon emissions, reducing consumption and generally being more environmentally responsible, as a universally shared goal. A majority supported limiting sprawl and the need to work out how to use scarce land more effectively.

A small cross agency government team worked with Elton Consulting and together designed and delivered a broad, deep and intensive process of consultation.

Time to Talk Canberra 2030 reached across various sectors of the community. Its focus was to identify what the community valued and provide a common understanding for strategic policy changes responding to population and climate change.

Canberra is the Australian city with the largest houses and the city where individuals have the biggest carbon footprint. Hotter summers, neighbourhoods designed around the car with urban centres and workplaces connected by freeways leads to high energy consumption. Reliance on cars, coupled with an older population and an increasing number of more vulnerable people, mean challenges for retaining good mobility, health and social inclusion.

Using a range of engagement techniques from Twitter, online forums, public meetings, surveys and web discussion to focus groups, and by inviting people to give their views, more than 20,000 people were reached. Deep connection and input on the issues and challenges that face Canberra was achieved.

Engagement is a critical factor in promoting change to more healthy cities. As change will happen if the community understands the choices it must make and potential benefits.

Jane Jose and Gay Williamson will present the project and how the community were engaged to consider the need for climate change adaptation to keep the healthy quality of life they value, and the importance of the process of talking and listening in bringing about change.

In discussing the project they will raise the importance of community engagement to the health of the city itself and to keeping the body and soul of the city together.

Key words: Canberra, engagement, healthy cities, Time to Talk, Australia.

Introduction

“If you think about it the best things in life are free – laughter, dancing, oxygen, orgasms and games.”

Kathy Lette London based Australian writer, Wish Magazine 2011

What she forgot to add to the list is health. But perhaps that’s because it isn’t always free.

Certainly illness has a cost, both personal and financial. Increasingly our lifestyle and where and how we live, is likely to link to good or bad health. As urban development continues to expand our cities are suffering from heat stress, congested ‘arteries’ and obesity and individuals, communities and governments are having to foot the bill.

So how can we put health and being healthy back on the ‘free’; list for people and our cities?

First let us consider what good health really means? The Macquarie Dictionary Federation Edition definition is ‘Health: Noun: the general condition of the body or mind with reference to soundness and vigour’; and ‘Healthy: Adjective (1 Possessing or enjoying health; *healthy body or mind* ;)’ The focus is on both body and mind.

When we talk about a health, particularly in relation to city life and climate change, we think about the potential impact of climate change on bodies and on our physical health, and particularly the impact on the frail, the very young and aged.

As city makers and policy shapers our premise must be to create healthy cities, places that nurture body and soul. To have healthy cities we need places where people have healthy minds as well as healthy bodies.

This is a big call at a time when the daily news is full of not just the threats, but the reality of the global challenges of climate change, population growth, and food and energy security. Just in the first half of 2011 we have witnessed devastation by flooding in Queensland and by bushfire in Victoria. There have been the earthquakes shattering life in Christchurch and the tsunamis destroying Japanese cities and communities. While these events are not unfamiliar to these areas what has changed is the number of people living in these places. When Brisbane flooded last century the city was a much smaller city. The other big change is the speed by which we learn about these disasters. We watched the Japanese Tsunami while it was still hitting the coastline.

The effects of these global challenges manifest themselves at a regional and local scale. Because we are now drawn into witnessing these effects, we are acutely aware of our vulnerability and the real potential for our health and wellbeing to be affected.

Communities are beginning to understand that they must take action to manage these effects. To build more resilient communities and cities, we must encourage people to exercise their citizenship and to understand the nature of the places where they live.

Concern over climate change is real and many in our communities hold deep fears about their future and that of future generations. Most of us have lived through decades where the quality of air, water and city life has been more monitored and more carefully calibrated to maintain and improve its quality than in other generations. But all cities and citizens are facing growth and change. Talking together about the changes happening in our society and cities is a critical way to maintaining healthy minds and without a healthy mind; it is unlikely we'll maintain healthy bodies for very long.

The Importance of Sharing the Problem

For Canberra or any city to be a healthy city by 2030, we need our communities to be involved in shaping the changes and adaptations that can lead to healthy places and healthy people. The very process of the community engaging with each other and with government enables a 'therapeutic' sharing of the problem. The development of greater understanding about the real issues and threats rather than those just perceived is a healthy process. The process of talking and listening and being listened to offers a road to more peaceful minds.

Dialogue and conversation, learning and information exchange to enable people to work things out is needed now more than ever, as individuals and families respond in their own ways to the rapid social and urban change in our cities. The kind of family therapy that many people seek from the family doctor or a friendly counsellor or psychotherapist is what's needed now for the 'community family' to work out how to get the cities we want. We need to talk together about the problems we face in urban life, how we feel, how we want to feel and how we hope the future can be shaped.

Governments don't have all the answers and need community leaders and ordinary citizens to guide them. Often ideas come from the community in a common sense way that has become elusive in the modern day maze of bureaucratic decision-making.

We live in challenging times for governments and their communities. Last year the ACT Government that governs Australia's national capital, Canberra, a city of just over 350,000 people and projected to grow by around 100,000 by 2030, was faced with the need for a broad set of policy changes to become a more sustainable city and community. Canberra, Australia's most planned of cities, has the largest houses of all Australian cities, and leads Australian cities as the city where individuals have the largest carbon footprint of all. Hot summers, cold winters, big houses, freeway connected suburbs and workplaces away from home, all add up to high energy consumption and production of greenhouse gases.

From the first public forums and online forums the value the community places on Canberra as a bush capital surrounded by greenery and blessed with clear and clean mountain air, came through as a value to be maintained.

Talking and understanding the need for change

The recent Australian Government Discussion Paper - *Our Cities the Challenge of Change* - on the shape of Australian cities is pretty direct about what we need if our cities are to be in healthy shape. "We need more compact cities, more choice in housing, more social housing, more affordable housing, higher rates of public transport use – so more access to good public transport and alternative transport such as walking and cycling; reduced water consumption; efficient use of energy by households and business and increased recycling of waste."

The challenge is how to get the development sector and the community to participate actively in engagement. It will only happen if the community understands the issues and the choices it

can make. The community can only understand if the government and media help in an open conversation about what we can all do together to shape a healthy future.

During the Time to Talk Canberra 2030 consultations we used a whole range of techniques of talking with the community, from twitter to focus groups and by inviting people to give their views, in ways they chose, we reached more than 20,000 people and captured their views about what kind of place they want their city to be by 2030. In designing the way to invite and enable people to join in the conversation we used social media, online forums, and a series of structured workshops, public meetings, surveys and web discussion supported by discussion papers. We invited people into the public conversation by using TV advertising using local people to talk about what concerned them and to invite others to join in. We even used the prize of an ipad to encourage people to send their ideas on line! The Canberra Times and ABC local Radio also supported Time to Talk with opinion led discussion.

Time to Talk Canberra 2030 proved to be effective in reaching a really broad cross section of the Canberra community to talk about becoming a more sustainable city and healthy community.

Many of the changes called for in the Australian Government discussion paper line up nicely with what the Canberra community told us they want. But that was only after sharing information about the challenges facing government. We explained the challenges facing government are really challenges facing them. We got deep connection and input on the issues- particularly in workshopping ways that Canberrans would need to adapt to climate change. It was clear from the beginning that the community understands Governments alone won't solve the problems of our cities. Rather it will be, to quote from a Canberra citizen "more partnerships- government letting go of some of the control and let business and community begin to innovate". Statements like this were typical: "We need change managers, a sustainable vision for Canberra and the region and more expenditure on big catalyst projects that aim for maximum liveability, maximum affordability, maximum ecological preservation and enhancement that are autonomous and self- sufficient."

Community support for a healthy 'body'

If the community is the soul of the city, the city form is the body. Both need to be healthy.

The problem for planners and for governments seeking to adapt to climate change is that it is the community who need to buy in to change. Rethinking and rebuilding in Brisbane and the post flood towns of Far North Queensland could shine a spotlight on a broader conversation about the need for less sprawl and more compact cities.

Adapting how we live in our cities and changing our neighbourhoods to be healthy places, is ultimately about making good decisions about change. Getting the thinking right and making good, and importantly, fair decisions about how everyone can live well in our cities, will be a key to our happiness and ability to thrive on and not just survive city life.

The Canberra conversation made it clear we aren't all going to opt for apartment living, but with an aging population and more people living in single households there is demand in Canberra for more housing choice, including more compact apartments in existing residential suburbs, where people have enjoyed living and want to remain living with the social connections in a place they know as home. Being able to talk about what is important to our local area is important to the health of the community and to shaping the form of our cities.

A representative random telephone survey of 1000 adult residents was undertaken and we gained 28% support for a more compact city and 59% support for a mix of development across Canberra and on the fringe. Only a small minority of 13% saw a more sprawling city as a desirable future for Canberra. Provided with a list of four urban planning challenges facing Canberra and asked to pick the single most important of these there, was an equal split at 33% for affordability and choice of housing with more public transport. The remaining two challenges, reducing urban sprawl and changing behaviour to reduce greenhouse gases, scored 17% and 16% respectively.

These findings were re-enforced in a voluntary online survey answered by more than 1400 people with 280 young people showing a strong preference for a more compact city.

Planning and developing the healthy ‘body’

The six key findings of this broad and deep conversation have now become the objectives in the renewed strategic plan for the ACT. A Case for Change - The Draft ACT Planning Strategy, is soon to be released for public discussion.

These objectives, from the community, are critical to this strategy and the key to adapting Canberra and its citizens to a more sustainable and healthy future.

1. Manage and plan for the needs of Canberra’s growing population and changing demographic structure.
2. Conserve our use of natural resources, energy, water and land and be more environmentally responsible.
3. Provide greater housing diversity in a variety of locations, making good quality, sustainable housing more affordable.
4. Improve the choice of convenient, sustainable transport for everyone and integrating decisions on transport with employment locations, residential renewal and new urban development.
5. Establish in key locations, urban developments that provide great public spaces and contribute to the amenity of Canberra.
6. Strengthen connections and collaboration with the region and enhance the prosperity of the city and the “country”.

This draft planning strategy is different. It accepts that the metropolitan structure of Canberra – that is its many town centres, linked by inter-town arterials and the separation of the urban districts by the landscape – is not really going to change. In fact this structure provides an excellent skeleton for reshaping the urban form and creating a well-honed, ‘fit’ city. The draft planning strategy sets out principles and strategies that provide a focus on the opportunities that change can bring to create more resilient communities and more options for sustainable lifestyles.

Canberra will grow and it must provide for the needs of all sections of a larger and more diverse society. In the next 10 years many of the older people in the community will retire and they will need younger people to step up, move in and take over. They will be the future.

Room has to be made in the existing suburbs so there is greater social equity – this allows more people to be close to services and share in the good places to live. More people staying and moving into existing suburbs can increase the viability of shopping centres and create a livelier lifestyle. Fostering a diverse demographic in each of the districts and neighbourhoods means that schools transport and services planning are relatively stable. These services can be dispersed rather than centralised: they can become the centre of community life – children can easily and safely walk to school.

Lowering Canberra's carbon emissions, reducing consumption and generally being more environmentally responsible is important to Canberrans. This is the biggest challenge for a city that is designed around the car, which covers an area equal in size to that of greater London (yet houses only 350,000), whose residents enjoy the largest average house size in Australia and have one of the world's largest ecological footprints. To be more environmentally responsible the city has to limit its sprawl and use land more effectively. It must do this to retain the quality of Canberra's environment and to respect what is important to Canberrans, the city's relationship to its landscape and bush setting. It must do this to reduce reliance on the car for commuting and make public transport more effective.

The draft strategy puts forward a series of principles intended to guide planning decisions at every scale and level. These principles respond to the challenges:

- Create a diverse urban environment to support a range of lifestyles and social needs. Diversity is critical to a more resilient city
- Design for community resilience and the lowering of consumption. The city must be designed for everyone. Our public spaces, streets, infrastructure and buildings must be designed to mitigate extreme weather conditions and ensure good accessibility so everyone has the chance to live more sustainably.
- Provide choice in safe and convenient modes of travel. Giving people choice in travel modes allows people to better manage not just their transport needs but their cost of living.

- Promote connections, continuity and resilience in the natural systems. Canberra enjoys a special social and cultural affinity with the natural environment, protecting the biodiversity and enhancing habitats will ensure future generations enjoy this affinity.
- Value the land for its best most sustainable use for now and the future

Of concern for Canberrans is the quality and local impact of change and new development. There is a general desire for green building and urban design that makes their town centres more like walkable urban villages but there is nervousness and scepticism about high rise and intensive development. People want to know how sustainable is this kind of development and when does it stop being good for mental and physical health?

Being able to talk about what's important to individuals as part of a community, to be heard and listened to, adds to collective community health and wellbeing.

The need to keep 'body' and 'soul' together

There is no doubt that urban planners and city makers know how our cities need to change. They talk to each other about it all the time. We talk about the need for more compact cities using fewer resources, doing more with the land we are already using and reserving land to grow food. The objectives and principles outlined in the draft ACT Planning strategy will help to shape a more healthy city, but are we talking enough about how change will keep the 'soul' of our city healthy?

In making change we must build in meaning. We must ensure our cities respond to the essence of the place – the environment - and to our deep social values and needs for shelter, wellbeing and a sense of belonging.

Canberra is actually a city well placed to throw off the criticism that it is a city with no 'soul'. If, in responding to the global challenges of climate change, population growth, energy and food security, it looks to its strengths and the region it can become a truly sustainable, democratic city - it will be a city and community healthy in body and soul.

Building on Griffin's Legacy

American architect Walter Burley Griffin urban designer of Canberra, understood the importance of making decisions and taking steps that had meaning. His layout for Canberra

was the embodiment of an ideal democratic city where people could easily understand and exercise their citizenship. His plan was based on those timeless social needs and values. They were not swayed by fashion or consumerism. There was in Griffin's plan the opportunity for successive generations to add layers to the city, making it richer but holding to the egalitarian values at its foundation.

If the effects of climate change are manifest in the region then we must look to the region for solutions. The physical form of our city must tell us about the local environment, the local resources, with the latest global technologies being used to enhance these and not to override them. This is the magic and spirit of older cities and towns. There is an inherent understanding of how they relate to the land.

It is important that as we make decisions and take actions on change for Canberra we act, as Griffin did, to ensure we do not close off opportunities for the future. We must set out a framework that allows people and generations to understand their place in time and space, to take discrete appropriation of the city and exercise their responsibility as citizens.

This means we must create a city that will enable continuing meaningful conversations and connections to happen.

Continuing to foster meaningful conversation

If the Federal Government really wants to create healthy and prosperous cities for our long term prosperity as a nation, they'll need to help pay for the change. It is beyond the purses of even the capital city local governments. But even more important than funding is willingness to change and that means cutting through the information overload and engaging in a conversation about change.

American writer Gertrude Stein said: "Everybody gets so much information all day long that they lose their common sense."

Engaging with communities means empowering communities to choose change that will allow healthy lifestyles in healthy cities. Writer and libertine, Gertrude Stein was ahead of her time in many ways. As we face change and uncertain, even threatening times, with more extreme weather events, more people living more closely together in cities, more mobility in

jobs and families, sifting through the information will be central to working out together how we are going to live well.

We need not just to survive, rather to thrive as healthy citizens, in an urban life very different to the suburban model of last century. We live in threatening times, but humans have an incredible capacity for problem solving. With our backs against the wall compassion, inventiveness, discovery, hope and courage – our best human traits are called on. History teaches us that our most difficult challenges are rarely solved alone. Solutions are rarely found in isolation.

Florey's discovery of penicillin happened with collaboration. Scientists define our humanness in many ways. But fundamentally it is language and reason that separates us from animals. Discourse about how we are going to live in cities and how we must change how we live and perhaps how our cities are shaped will be vital for the pursuit of human health and happiness for coming generations.

It's much easier to talk than it used to be. Now we don't even need to leave home. The internet blog has connected us and if it's not the blog, or online forum, it's the mobile ring or the SMS message whirling in where-ever we are, whatever we are doing.

A new kind of democracy is at work in many of our cities. Online social networks, frustrated with the political processes, are active and growing. They post their own views about urban development proposals that are not easy for developers and government to ignore.

The need for human contact

The strange connect and disconnect of this is balanced by a need for human contact. The last decade has seen the revival of the local cafe as meeting place for everyone. These are places with no class or age divide that give us the human connection that helps us stay happy and healthy. Libraries too have become important hubs for gathering. Both have become places we gather to find out what's happening in our local patch or to meet for talks or just to be quietly reading with someone around.

Engaging with communities in newly democratic ways has got easier than it was a few decades ago. Twenty years ago, community activism relied on the meetings of resident societies. These civilized resident vigilante groups of local activists became foot-soldier

armies of volunteers for causes delivering newsletters to get people talking about issues such as protecting heritage buildings and introducing kerbside waste collection for recycling!

Now we really don't need to join the local neighbourhood society, we can find out what they are up to without even going to the meeting.

Information moves rapidly through collaborative technologies. Filtered and interpreted by the opinions of others, most people now get a version of the news which is no longer straight facts, but rather, a kind of Chinese whispers of fact and gossip delivered by a chattering radio identity, on line or delivered like a dinner party conversation on live current affairs TV. The opinion columnists in the daily papers, on radio and TV with their conversational chatter about news, influence the political fortunes of the day and public opinion. The ABC's QANDA with its mix of opinion, chat, audience participation and twitter is now a news source not just analysis.

Meetings like the LA based, online TED Talks, where pioneers in every imaginable discipline present their ideas in an 18 minute grab are an extreme example of how much faith is now placed on human ideas exchange in solving problems in a often without face to face conversation. The individual thought leader has become the 21century guru with his team of young genius troops thinking through and testing the ideas.

Ideas like those hatched at TED or at any international forum and face to face meeting of future thinkers in conversation invite the kind of collaboration communities need to stay healthy. We live in an age of ideas that have a rapid second life in a global online conversation. Engaging with communities in a new open democratic dialogue is the path to shaping healthy communities and the healthy cities we need for our future. Inspired leaders, politicians or simply citizen activists, who want to lead change, need community support and willingness for community to share the problem.

In Time to Talk Canberra 2030 the Canberra community showed a readiness to articulate ideas as engaged local citizens. They demonstrated readiness to think about not only changing local streets and neighbourhoods, but how to adapt to living in their city to ensure there is water and land, to grow food for the future and that the natural bush and open space environment, which stamps the Canberra quality of life now, remains protected as a backdrop as the city grows.

It will be through talking and listening, engagement through collaborative technologies, face to face conversation, and importantly translation into strategies, plans and finally designs, that the community can recognise as their own, that will give Canberra a healthy future.

While this paper has focussed on our journey with the people of Canberra it is a universal lesson for any community seeking to maintain or create a healthy city and its soul a community of citizens who are healthy in body and mind.

David Tacey in his book: *The Edge of the Sacred: Transformation in Australia* argues that the cure for our ecological disastrous abuse of the earth and our culturally debilitating racism is the spiritual renewal of consciousness.

For our cities to be healthy we need to ensure that body and soul are both nourished. If we accept Tacey's premise, then our cities must not only be environmentally, socially and economically sustainable but they must sustain the spirit.