

9. BUDGET CONSULTATION

Introduction

In December 2004, the Government sought input from the community on the key issues for consideration in the 2005-06 Budget. This was accompanied by a Budget consultation document, which provided an overview of the Territory's financial position to aid the discussion and debate.

The Government received fifty-five submissions from a range of community, business, sporting, union and environmental groups. Collectively, these submissions contained in excess of 400 recommendations, including suggestions for new or additional expenditure with specified funding in the order of \$190m.

In general, the issues raised in the submissions are high on the Government's policy agenda. It is also apparent that many of the proposals are consistent with existing government policy objectives and initiatives. As with any budget, the Government was faced with balancing the many initiatives proposed by the community and ensuring expenditures are maintained at levels that do not create a burden for the community now and in the future.

Headline Issues for Consideration

As many of the submissions covered a wide range of issues, the proposals have been broadly identified under three main categories: community and social issues; business, employment and development issues; and environmental issues.

Community and Social Issues

Community Input

Most submissions in this category sought increased funding for housing, education and health programs, particularly for disadvantaged groups such as people with a disability, mental illness, the ageing, children and young people.

Specific proposals under this category were directed towards:

- promoting housing choice and affordability for groups with particular needs in the community, including people with disabilities and people in need of emergency or supported accommodation;
- promoting health and safety throughout the community including diabetes and cancer prevention programs and continuing the Active Ageing program for older people;
- service planning and delivery for groups with particular needs in the community;
- promoting the participation of children and young people;
- consideration of the needs and rights of Aboriginal and other disadvantaged groups;

- providing education and training opportunities for skills development and participation in the workforce for older people, young people and people with disabilities;
- promoting community acceptance and belonging;
- improving access to basic family, health, leisure and education services in particular areas such as Gungahlin;
- reviewing community sector viability including the consideration of indexed funding to the sector; and
- extending funding for various education programs and non-government schools.

The Government has considered the community's concerns and has responded to many of these concerns by providing within either the 2004-05 Supplementary Appropriation and the 2005-06 Budget:

- an initiative to establish a Human Rights and Service Review Commission, which will include a Children and Young People's Commissioner;
- additional resourcing to support the Education sector, including increasing preschool hours from 10.5 to 12 hours, additional funding for Vocational Education and Training, the establishment of a Student Support Fund to help disadvantaged children to access and participate in school activities, and additional support in non-government schools for kindergarten to year 3;
- additional funding for families, including supplementation of existing funding for the Government's second Child and Family Centre in Tuggeranong and the expansion of the Family Violence Intervention Project;
- additional funding for the people with disabilities and high complex needs, including: providing centre-based community support to youth and young adults with a disability; increasing critical support to a number of people with a disability, or their carers, who have high or very high support needs; and additional support for students with a disability under the Student Centred Appraisal of Need (SCAN) program;
- additional funding for the children of the ACT, including the upgrade of the level of community services provided to children with very high health care needs, and additional support for children with high and complex needs;
- adoption of indexation funding model to assist the community sector in meeting increasing wage-related and administrative costs;
- additional funding for a fall prevention program in residential care facilities; and
- a range of initiatives to address specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, including funding for: an ATSI youth supported accommodation facility for young 'at risk'; Aboriginal dental health; an Aboriginal liaison officer for the Ngambra Circle Sentencing Court; and funding to provide culturally appropriate child protection and youth justice support and services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families.

These initiatives supplement the Government's considerable investment made in the 2004-05 Budget and have been set to build upon the principles of the *Canberra Social Plan*.

In addition to the above initiatives, policy work is underway to address some of the issues highlighted in the submissions, for example:

- the *Mature Age Employment Strategy* is currently being developed by ACT Office for Ageing;
- the ACT will participate in the National Health Care Reform Agenda;
- a Primary Health Care Strategy for the ACT is currently being developed;
- Disability ACT's *Future Directions Framework for 2004-2008* will continue to be implemented; and
- work will progress on community sector funding issues.

Business, Employment and Development Issues

Community Input

The business community has again called for a balanced budget over the economic cycle, and reduced taxes. The business community has also proposed various programs to address skills shortages including aged employment initiatives. It has also called for an improved integrated land use planning system, increased funding for tourism including an upgrade of the existing convention centre or a new convention centre, and taking action to resolve the ACT's water needs.

Several submissions contained proposals in support of improved public transport including the busways project, new trunk cycle routes, community paths, and improved road works.

The community believes the Government should:

- work co-operatively with the Commonwealth, States and Territory Governments to improve the efficiency of current taxation structures for the overall benefit of Australian business and the economy;
- foster economic development and employment opportunities;
- cap the increase of land tax in 2005-06 to 2004-05 levels;
- re-align land tax with the rates system by assessing land tax on a fixed component and a variable component as per the rates system;
- reduce any taxes and charges that affect the cost of goods and services produced in the ACT, which are higher than in NSW;
- evaluate the effectiveness of the Land Tax and Stamp Duty Concessions in increasing the supply of affordable housing and introduce equitable and transparent taxes/charges or other means to support an increase in affordable housing providers;
- upgrade of the existing convention centre or a new convention centre;
- include funding for priority tasks to revitalise central Canberra;
- improve planning and delivery of basic family, health, leisure and education services on an equitable basis in every community district;
- develop programs to avert the skilled labour shortage and to attract construction industry skills to the ACT;

- develop a plan with the Commonwealth Government to encourage migration of skilled overseas workers to the ACT;
- resolve the ACT's water needs; and
- implement a range of employment programs for older people.

The Government has considered the concerns raised in the submissions and has responded to many of these concerns by providing within the 2004-05 Supplementary Appropriation and the 2005-06 Budget:

- support to ACT based innovative, creative and entrepreneurial businesses through the Knowledge Fund by committing \$5m in 2005-06;
- cessation of debits tax from 1 July 2005 to assist in reducing the level of tax burden to residents and businesses;
- funding Vocational Education and Training growth, \$3m over two years, to address skill shortages;
- incorporating an additional \$1.9m in 2005-06, as revenue foregone, resulting from the expansion of the Home Buyer Concession Scheme in 2004-05 provided for a higher income threshold and higher thresholds for land or property values; and
- 2005-06 tax rates will be adjusted to limit aggregate land tax increase to CPI, at a cost of \$8.1m in revenue foregone.

These initiatives build on the Government's considerable investment made to date on business, employment and developmental issues. Since the release of the *Economic White Paper*, in December 2003, the Government has committed \$128m to implementation activities.

In addition to the above initiatives policy work is underway to address some of the issues highlighted in the submissions, for example:

- work will continue on planning and creating a 'Sustainable City' through objectives set in the *Spatial Plan* and the *Sustainable Transport Plan*;
- Canberra Central revitalisation is being undertaken through the Government supported 'Canberra Central Project';
- the Government will continue to undertake activities to improve access, visibility and maintenance of cycle lanes and community cycle paths;
- the ACT Business Investment Fund will continue to support the eligible businesses;
- the Government will continue to pursue objectives outlined in the '*Think tank, act water strategy*';
- the Office of Sustainability will oversee the Government's assessment and response to the two ACTEW reports on future water supply options. Both reports require a careful and critical evaluation before a decision can be made on a new dam for the ACT; and
- the Government is currently preparing a Mature Age Employment Action Plan that will provide a range of initiatives to support employment opportunities and training for older

Canberrans. The plan will be work-shopped with government, business and community organisations.

Environmental Issues

Community Input

Several submissions included proposals and strategies to protect the natural environment. Most submissions in this category focussed on:

- an increase in the overall budget for environment and sustainability initiatives such as environmental education, the ACT Sustainable Schools initiative, catchment management and a wood heater replacement scheme;
- additional funding for Environment ACT to improve recreational amenities, rehabilitate degraded tracks and wildlife ponds within the Majura Nature Reserve;
- a commitment to establish a program within the Office of Sustainability, to encourage the involvement of local expertise, skills, services and products as an integral part of a ‘Sustainable City’;
- Government agencies undertaking to consult with business on developing Environmental Management Strategies and a recommitment to the ‘No Waste by 2010’ objective including the promotion of these objectives outside Canberra to raise the profile of the ACT environment industry; and
- the Government ensuring that the Office of Sustainability is involved in all decisions on land and planning.

The Government is considering, in consultation with the community and sustainability experts, the possibility of establishing sustainability legislation that will ensure all Government decision-making, including land and planning decisions, takes account of the principles of sustainability.

Further details on the Government’s actions on the environment are included in the Environment Chapter.

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ACROD (ACT Division)
ACT Council of Parents and Citizens Associations Inc
ACT Disability Advisory Council
ACT Mental Health Consumer Network
ACT Ministerial Advisory Council on Ageing
ACT Playgroups Association
ACT Shelter
ACT Sport
ACTCOSS
Anglicare Council
Association of Independent Retirees (AIR) Canberra
Association of Independent Schools (ACT)
Australian Education Union ACT Branch
Canberra Business Council
Canberra Rape Crisis Centre
Canberra Schizophrenia Fellowship Inc
Cancer Council of the ACT
Carers ACT
Catholic Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn
Charnwood Community Health Committee
Citizens' Advice Bureau ACT
Coalition of Community Housing Organisations of the ACT
Community Information Technology Advisory Group (CITAG)
Conservation Council of the South East Region and Canberra
COTA National Seniors
CPA Australia
Diabetes Australia - ACT Branch
Domestic Violence Crisis Service
Friends of Mt Majura Parkcare Group (FOMM)
Gungahlin Community Council
Health Care Consumers Association
Lifeline Canberra
Mental Health Community Coalition of the ACT (MHCC)
Mental Health Foundation - ACT Inc
Mental Illness Education ACT (MIEACT)
Ministerial Advisory Council on Women
Multiple Sclerosis Australia
Northside Community Service
Pedal Power ACT
Planning Institute Australia, Australian Capital Territory Division
Property Council of Australia
Property Owners Association of the ACT
Refugee Resettlement Committee
Superannuated Commonwealth Officer's Association

The Australian National University
Tourism Industry Council ACT and Region
Unions ACT
University of Canberra
Volunteering ACT
Warehouse Circus Inc
Weston Creek Community Council
Woden Community Services Inc
Woden Valley Community Council
Youth Coalition of the ACT
YWCA Canberra

