

REMINISCENCES AND REFLECTIONS ON GNCA'S EARLY YEARS

It is almost 20 years ago exactly that the meeting was held to establish GNCA, which in its first years was called the Griffith Narrabundah Community Action Group.

The impetus for that meeting on 2 November 2000 was plans by the ACT Government to sell off considerable amounts of community land in the inner south and inner north as a revenue raiser. Section 78 in Griffith (the large block adjacent to and behind the Griffith Shops) - zoned in the Territory Plan as Community Facility Land, Restricted Access Recreation Land and Urban Open Space Land - was an important part of that proposal.

These plans first came to light in the Southside Chronicle in early August and within a few weeks it became apparent that events were moving very quickly. Consultants had already been engaged. There was to be a Draft Development Control Plan by mid-November, with only a 21 day opportunity for comment. Public consultations were to cease before Christmas. The intention was to have a Draft Variation to the Territory Plan by February 2001.

Very significant changes were envisaged. The Griffith Library, which was housed in the former Griffith Primary School was to be demolished. As was the O'Connell Education Resource Centre and the Community Hall in the former Infants School. Documents, which we managed to obtain suggested 200 dwellings on the site, with indications of 1 to 3 story buildings, which included 150 x 2 story units. It was clear that a very intense development was in mind.

That first meeting was attended by about 120 people; agreed goals were established and a committee was formed. Some of those committee members are still playing a very active role in the association. I mention in particular Paul Russell, GNCA's current Treasurer, who has been a committee member continuously over this time, Jane McCabe and also Mac Howell who in recent years has been a leader of the group caring for Blaxland Park. And I can't talk about the early years of GNCA without mentioning the enormous contributions made by Trish Bootes (Vice President for many years) and Jerry Fitzgibbons who both did so much of the research and preparation of submissions that were essential to the effectiveness of GNCA's work. Frank Mestrov, who was Treasurer for a number of years, and Bronwyn Davies were also stalwarts and great contributors over a long period of time. David Palmer, convenor of the first meeting and one of the two first Vice Presidents, played a very important role, as did Iain Macinnis, the first Secretary of the Committee. We owe a large debt to all of them.

In the last months of 2000, feeling was running high not only in Griffith/Narrabundah but also in other parts of inner Canberra. A loose association

of community groups formed and a rally was held in Civic Square in front of the Legislative Assembly on 18 November. I remember well not only the banners but the number of dogs who were dressed up for the occasion. Tony Powell, former Head of the NCDC, gave an inspiring speech and the Rally called for a moratorium on the developments of open space and other sensitive areas that had been earmarked for development.

The campaign intensified in following weeks and months. We were very active in interactions with the consultants, but our main targets were the politicians, given that 2001 was an election year. We worked hard to make it an election issue. There was an intensive letter writing campaign and further community meetings. A picnic rally was held on the old Griffith school oval in March (2001). We invited politicians to speak and my recollection is that both Brendan Smyth (Deputy Chief Minister & Minister for Urban Services) and Simon Corbell (the MLA who was then Opposition spokesperson, and later the responsible Minister, for planning matters) addressed the meeting. We had a sausage sizzle, live entertainment and some organised games and sports – I remember the boules particularly.

Our membership grew to nearly 1,000 during 2001 and we were successful in making the sale of community land and proposed redevelopment an election issue. By mid-year, the Liberal Government had modified its position but only at the margin and the Chief Minister, Gary Humphries, acknowledged at a meeting with resident groups that the issue would have to be resolved in the October 2001 election. Labor committed themselves to retain the land for community purposes and the Greens also were opposed to the Government's proposal. As you know, the commitment by Labor was subsequently honoured by the Stanhope Government when it came to power. But many of the associated issues did not go away, especially the future of the Library.

In those early days we established a good rapport with the Griffith traders. We participated in the annual spring fairs they held at that time. And when we approached them to donate prizes for a raffle as a fund raiser, several responded very generously. The raffle became an annual event and an important source of financial support for GNCA.

Two of the principal goals established by GNCA at the outset were the retention of our community facilities so they would be available for use by future generations and the preservation of open space areas.

We saw the retention of the Griffith Library and its services as particularly important. But notwithstanding an explicit promise by the Stanhope Government to retain the Library, we suddenly found ourselves faced in late 2006 by a decision that the Library was to be closed within weeks. Every effort was put into a campaign to try and get that decision reversed – there was a petition with thousands of signatures and a large rally. Sadly, we were unsuccessful. It was a huge

disappointment, although the [g](#)Government did commit to maintaining the Community Facility zoning.

There were, however, achievements on other fronts. The Association's efforts to protect our community land from being turned over to commercial or residential use were successful. As a result, we now have the Baptist Community Services aged care facility near the Griffith Shops, the Art Space, M16, in the former Griffith Primary School; and a Neighbourhood Hall. Although we lost the much-loved Griffith Library, the Government eventually recognised the need for a library service in this part of Canberra and established [a](#) library facility in Kingston.

We also had major successes with the other important early objective - *i.e.* preservation of the open space land - although it took some years of sustained effort. Changes to the Territory Plan were achieved that formally recognise and protect these areas as Urban Open Space. This was followed by later work, led by David Denham, to recognise a major part of [s.78](#) as Blaxland Park, with gazettal being achieved in 2013, Canberra's centenary year.

I should mention, too, the work that was done to ensure that the Urban Open Space areas occupied by the two Griffith Ovals on Captain Cook Crescent remained protected when the Brumbies redevelopment proposals emerged in late 2009. Our success in getting Griffith Oval No 1 placed on the ACT Heritage Register was especially important. It proved crucial to ensuring that the Oval and its beautiful surrounds remained intact and available for use by everyone.

The other principal area of activity in the early years was work which had as its objective better planning and greater protection of the character of Griffith as one of the original garden suburbs. We wanted to have a Neighbourhood Plan that would amongst other things limit plot ratios, limit areas of more intense development, protect the character and style of streetscapes, and so on.

Undertakings had been given in the 2001 election for improving the opportunities for residents' participation in the planning process and naturally we were keen to see these honoured. There was a period when some community planning forums and workshops were held but they were not designed to develop a consensus or produce substantive outcomes and there were ongoing battles with ACTPLA (the planning authority).

Nevertheless, a Neighbourhood Plan was developed by 2004. It had significant input from us and it was adopted. While it fell well short of what we would have liked to have seen, it was useful and it had some force for a few years.

At a broader level, we increasingly took an ongoing interest in general planning issues and processes, proposed changes to the Territory Plan, development rules and requirements and made many detailed submissions on these matters, as well as making from time to time representations on specific DAs that did not meet the

rules. Sometimes these have been made by GNCA; sometimes through the Inner South Community Council. GNCA was one of bodies involved in the formation of the ISCCC in 2010. It was an inaugural member and contributed in a very substantial way to its activities from the outset.

When I was talking to David Denham yesterday, I asked him about his reflections on the last 20 years. His response was not quite what I expected. He thought it surprising in many ways that GNCA was still going, given that we live in such a rapidly changing world. For my part, I don't find it so surprising. There continue to be many people in the Griffith community who put a high value on our community facilities, our parks, open spaces and trees; who do not want to see inappropriate over-development; and who want to see good planning principles and approaches put into practice. They have continued to support GNCA in what it has been doing.

We are fortunate, also, to have had people who have been prepared to give up their time to work hard on these issues on the community's behalf. There are many who have been directly involved in one way or another over the years. It is not possible in the time available to acknowledge everyone individually, but I must make special mention of some of the office bearers who have borne much of the work load over extensive periods of time.

David himself is one of the main reasons why GNCA has continued to live on as an effective body which the community values. He has been on the committee since 2004 and been an office bearer for most of the time since then, including terms as Secretary, Vice President and President. A prodigious, indeed magnificent, effort.

Other former Presidents – Wayne Arthur, John Edquist and Leo Dobes - have also made huge contributions over extended periods of time, as have Deborah Price and Marguerite Castello in their roles as Secretary. I have already mentioned Paul Russell and Jane McCabe. Hugh Dakin has been another important contributor to the Committee's work over a long period of time; and Colin Walters, the current Vice President, has been very active in recent years in his contributions to the committee work as well.

I am sure others join me in thanking them all.

Margaret Fanning (Foundation President)

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