

WODEN AND WESTON CREEK OPTIONS WORKSHOP – SEPTEMBER 2007

NEW USES FOR FORMER SCHOOL SITES

INTRODUCTION

This report summarises the key outcomes of the Woden and Weston Creek Options Workshop convened as part of the consultation process by the Department of Territory and Municipal services (TAMS) for the ACT Government on the future use of school sites in the District.

The main purpose of the Workshop was to discuss the four generic options identified by the Government for re-use of the school sites, to identify other potential options and to consider community needs in Woden and Weston Creek.

The Workshop was undertaken by Purdon Associates as independent facilitators to inform the decision making process for TAMS.

The Workshop was held at the Hellenic Club, Woden from 6pm to 9pm on Thursday 27 September, 2007. Information about the workshops was made available through personal invitations which were sent to all stakeholder groups and individuals on the TAMS contact list, media advertisements and the project website. About 70 participants attended, including representatives from a wide range of community interests as well as residents living in the vicinity of the sites identified for closure in Woden and Weston Creek.

The workshop comprised two sessions exploring:

- The background and purpose of the project and a discussion of existing and emerging community needs within the local area.
- Discussion of the strengths and weakness of four different generic options for the use of the sites and identification of additional options the community considered should be included in any assessment of the re-use of the sites.

Each session included a briefing from the consultant team, as well as table discussion/reporting in greater detail, in smaller groups.

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Two discussion sessions were held where table groups were able to discuss the topics in greater detail, in smaller groups. The first session focused on three broad questions:

1. *What is community?*
2. *What are the unmet needs in the community?*
3. *What are the emerging needs of the community?*

The second session discussed four generic options for possible uses for the school sites, which ranged from retaining the current buildings and adding the oval to existing public open space to complete redevelopment of the school site.

The following notes summarise the main themes and messages arising from each session. Appendix A provides a full listing of comments and issues recorded on the night.

SESSION 1: COMMUNITY NEEDS

What is community?

There was a wide variety of responses to this question, recurrent themes included:

- A residential community with a common memory/story/narrative. A place to focus.
- local groups and services with passions and interests in common
- a mix of ages and diversity of interests is important to local communities



- The capacity to come together, interact and share mutual interests. Groups that work together on behalf of other people
- a sense of ownership and belonging which provide cohesion within the community
- community consists of people who care enough to pull together
- Connectedness and self determination were also important characteristics of functioning communities.

What are the unmet needs in the community?

The strongest and most frequent response to this question was that a major unmet need in the community is a local school. Other responses included:

- planning to build social networking opportunities to strengthen social networks and relationships
- sporting and recreational facilities including indoor competition sport facilities
- an arts facility with a community and cultural centre
- the sites provided an opportunity for guaranteed long-term lease arrangements for community non-profit groups. Concern was expressed that if the possibility of site reverting to a school was taken into account in the proposed re-use this could jeopardize non-profit groups in the future
- office space for community organizations - Administration and program space for the Woden Community Service and Woden Valley Community Council in addition to other community groups, alleviating the need for government to provide these services and representing a financial savings to government
- aged care services and facilities that did not isolate older people
- space for the arts – music, dance, artwork and theatre as these facilities are lacking in the district
- commercial accommodation – motel/hotel in Weston Creek as there is nothing now.
- medical centre
- an accessible centralized community meeting place that recognizes the existence of poor community transport, increasing fuel costs and limited ability of older people to take advantage of physically diverse activities
- affordable community centres for all groups particularly those in the lower socio-economic groups
- multi-purpose flexible community hubs, which are affordable and cater for the wide-ranging needs of a diverse community.

What are the emerging needs of the community?

Common suggestions around emerging needs included:

- “the Shed” concept as seen on ABC TV.
- sustainability education centres
- community centres close to shops and transport networks, possibly including internet café, photocopying/ fax facilities for older and unemployed people as well as a place where a JP could be available
- art and cultural spaces
- with an aging population, the need to keep older people healthy and active physically, mentally, socially and emotionally.
- climate change may drive need for indoor sport and recreation facilities
- child care services



SESSION 2: GENERIC OPTIONS

General comments on generic options:

Many participants stressed that they did not support any of the options put forward, instead proposing the schools be reopened.

It was stated that any discussion of the options should not be construed as endorsement of them.

Many participants suggested it was difficult to review the generic options without considering how they apply to individual sites. Many considered that additional information about the community benefits deriving from any change of use was needed, together with site specific details on building design, conditions of buildings, traffic conditions, car parking and public transport, orientation of sites and intergenerational equity ensuring land is available for future use.

A request was made to receive building condition reports for the Mount Neighbour and Rivett schools. Also that building condition reports should be released for schools that will not be closed but are of a similar age and condition. This would enable the community to gain confidence about the decisions already taken by the government to close some schools and not others.

Other general comments included:

- the preferred options must be financially feasible for the community to operate.
- community services should reflect the activities and mix of age in the local area.
- planning should be based on long term needs and not just the short term.
- flexibility is the key for modifying buildings and land use as needs change in the longer term.
- it was not appropriate to develop one option across all sites.

There was concern among participants about how the revenue raised from the sale or development of the schools would be directed. A number of participants suggested that some or all of the revenue raised be used to support affected communities through strategies including:

- upgrading community facilities on the school sites
- long-term maintenance of community facilities on the school sites
- employment of community development officers to support affected communities
- developing and maintaining community based management structures for the sites.

The most critical issue for the majority of participants was not to alienate the sites from long term public ownership either as school sites or for a range of community uses that may not be consistent with ACT Territory Plan's definition of community uses. It was also noted that at the local level the community should play an active role in determining the suitability of any future community use on the sites or the appropriateness of any community benefit deriving from a site's disposal.

It was suggested that government sell off 80% of sites that need substantial maintenance and use the funds to maintain the remaining buildings and sites.



Generic Option 1:

[Note: This option proposed that the existing buildings be re-used for community purposes and the grounds be incorporated into the Urban Open Space system.]

The clear message from the workshop was that this option (or it's variant where the school playground is not dedicated as open space but retained for use by community groups occupying the building) was the preferred options that should be applied to all sites.

Strengths of this option as noted by participants included:

- it keeps the asset as it is allowing for site to be reopened as a school in the future
- existing buildings immediately available
- community use of the site retained
- green space and playgrounds retained. If playground can be used for community use then do not add to urban open space by changing the Territory Plan

Weaknesses of this option as noted by participants included:

- government commitment to adequate maintenance of premises is unknown
- no monetary return to government
- risk that buildings will not be adequately maintained
- If buildings fall into state of disrepair this may lead to sale of whole site
- layout of classrooms may limit use by community for different purposes.
- buildings may be old and require extensive financial commitment to maintain building which may be outside the scope of the community groups – no funding offset
- water usage to maintain outside grounds
- without supervision, site may be used as a rubbish dump
- no ability to convert to specific needs

Generic Option 2:

[Note: This option proposed that the existing buildings be re-used for community purposes and that the grounds be developed either within the existing land use policy for the site (Community Facility) or with a variation to the Territory Plan to permit an alternative use.]

Strengths of this option as noted by participants included:

- more flexible than option 1
- community use of existing buildings retained
- application of capital gain used to maintain development of community facility
- potentially meets the need of a greater number of requirements of commercial and non-profit groups
- if the facility is not being used as a school then the play space is not required so sell and develop and use proceeds to maintain existing facilities

Weaknesses of this option as noted by participants included:

- not all development would be appropriate in a mixed use area with community facilities
- loss of open space
- site no longer suitable to be reopened as a school in future
- potential uses may be limited due to small area of land available unless a covenant is set in place



Generic Option 3:

[Note: This option proposed that some of the existing buildings be demolished and the remaining buildings be re-used for community purposes and that undeveloped areas be developed either within the existing land use policy for the site (Community Facility) or with a variation to the Territory Plan to permit an alternative use.]

Strengths of this option as noted by participants included:

- some buildings retained for community use
- better than no community facilities
- reduction in site maintenance

Weaknesses of this option as noted by participants included:

- insufficient space for all potential occupants
- community use severely curtailed
- problem with identifying buildings suitable for retention
- driven by economic needs rather than community needs
- loss of community buildings for ever
- future development may not be compatible with community uses which generate noise

Generic Option 4:

[Note: This option proposed the demolition of all buildings on the site and development of the whole site within the existing land use policy for the site (Community Facility) or with a variation to the Territory Plan to permit an alternative use.]

Some participants thought this option could be suitable for some sites, with caveats around zoning of development and use of revenue raised from sales, but most found this option completely unacceptable.

Strengths of this option as noted by participants included:

- greatest return to government
- site could retain community use zoning and used for Aged Care development or a non-government school
- could potentially unite local communities to keep community space.
- land could be used for recreation development
- revenue from sale could be used to support other community uses.

Weaknesses of this option as perceived by participants included:

- potential environmental impact from redevelopment
- loss of community facilities and space
- loss of community ownership of site
- risk that development of site will be unsuitable to surrounding community.

Alternative options suggested:

The Workshop suggested three alternative options for consideration:

- demolish existing buildings but retain community use facilities and develop new community use buildings funded by industry and government partnerships, which would lead to better use of the remaining site and the provision of purpose-built facilities



- school site retained as is in option 1 but community trades off the unused green space the oval
- retain playgrounds for community use such as gardens, festivals, sporting groups and playgrounds and sell rest
- partial demolition and rebuilding of community buildings. Retain parts of the site suitable for community use in existing buildings, release some land for sale and development, and use revenue raised to build new purpose built community buildings on the site
- the existing Weston Creek Community Centre should be sold as it was no longer adequate for purpose and the funds raised could then be allocated to the redevelopment of the Weston school site as a Community Centre.



Appendix A – Table Notes

Session 1: Community Needs

What is community?

There was a wide variety of responses to this question:

- there was recognition that a community could be both geographic and interest based
- a residential community with a common memory/story/narrative. A place to focus.
- group of people with something in common, including identifying with a common location
- a group of people with shared interests or objectives
- a group of people working for the welfare of others or a common sense of sharing and support (especially for more vulnerable members of a community)
- a group or collection of people in a geographical location which in turn results in sustainable living
- group of people gathered together in a specific locale with common aims, identification and interests
- local groups and services with passions and interests in common
- a mix of ages and diversity of interests and difference are important to their local communities
- community is good if it includes diverse ages and interests
- the capacity to come together, interact and share mutual interests. Groups that work together on behalf of other people
- a sense of ownership and belonging which provide cohesion within the community, especially in a geographic area
- networks
- community consists of people who care enough to pull together
- connectedness and self determination were also important characteristics of functioning communities
- schools are the centre of the community
- role of organisations and institutions in informing the community
- community provides opportunities for everyone, including people who are disadvantaged, to grow
- places to meet and come together as there is a need for a common space to come together to get to know people
- a place to focus and express common interests
- sporting teams and clubs bring people together at different levels
- there was a sense of community care during the bushfires
- social capital – is the sale or use of a site helping broader social capacity
- planning needs to be open to building the social networking opportunities which strengthen networks and relationships
- a sense of community is a key factor to well-functioning adults

What are the unmet needs in the community?



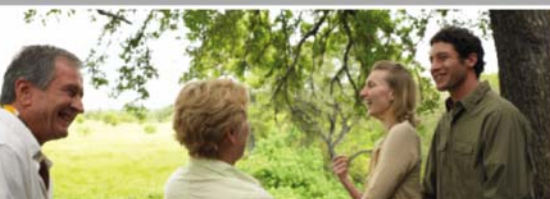
- a major unmet need in the community is a local school once the school is gone it can't be easily gotten back again and that there is a new generation moving into Weston Creek and this will require school facilities in the future.
- retention of school sites to allow for future development of Molonglo
- sites for students with varying needs
- it must be recognized that needs change over time. What time frame should participants and communities be looking at?
- demographics indicate an ageing population with a need for 1 or 2 bedroom homes
- a holistic approach to planning that embraces opportunities for social networking to strengthen social networks
- indoor and outdoor sporting and recreational facilities including indoor competition sport facilities (such as indoor aquatic centre). Retention of the indoor recreation facility, with a sprung floor, at Rivett for community use. Outdoor recreational areas should include areas for picnics and water features/spaces
- small schools both independent and public
- large meeting spaces for lower-socio-economic groups
- an arts facility with a community and cultural centre, including spaces for performing arts and visual arts workshop spaces which are properly lit and include kilns. There is also a need for spaces for music, dance, artwork
- multi-functional facility
- opportunity for guaranteed long-term lease arrangements for community NFP groups. Concern was expressed that if the possibility of reverting to a school in the future was incorporated into the proposed treatment of a school site, then this could jeopardize NFP groups.
- office space for community organizations - administration and program space for the Woden Community Service and Woden Valley Community Council in addition to other community groups. This alleviates the need for government to provide these services which is a financial savings to them
- a better community centre which includes meeting rooms, activities rooms, internet facilities, and in a better location
- community meeting spaces for volunteering and not for profit organisations (office, storage and administration spaces
- spaces for small interest groups which are cheap enough to rent
- mechanisms for retention of public assets
- aged care facilities and accommodation
- spaces where older people can do things or meet up with others in the community rather than aged care facilities
- integrate aged care facilities into the community, so that they can take on the former role of schools, for example by having fetes
- the need to provide aged care services and facilities that did not isolate older people
- there are limited opportunities for active ageing opportunities
- the needs of single isolated people should be taken into account
- affordable and appropriate housing
- development of community infrastructure including community transport, which is current poor
- capacity to access community education
- need commercial accommodation – motel/hotel in Weston Creek as there is nothing now.
- need for medical centre



- an accessible centralized community meeting place that recognizes the existence of poor community transport, increasing fuel costs and limited ability of older people to take advantage of physically diverse activities
- affordable community centres for all groups particularly those in the lower socio-economic groups
- the need for multi-purpose flexible community hubs, which are affordable and cater for the wide-ranging needs of a diverse community
- detailed analysis of future demographic trends is required in this process before decisions can be made
- the relocation requirements of community organisations and childcare facilities, including their continuing requirements and competing demands, need to be considered in the process
- there are opportunities for some former school sites to be shared between community organisations. Common areas that could be used by multiple organisations for different purposes
- long term users require some stability of access to facilities, especially if requirements change in the future
- needs of young carers
- community health services so that acute care services are not reduced – schools could be used for health services

What are the emerging needs of the community?

- many groups and individuals expressed the need to plan for the long-term, with reference made to the cyclical nature of demographic trends over the long term
- there is a new generation moving into Weston Creek as demonstrated by the recent birthrates
- demographic changes which include infill development and higher density living, increasing Generation X and Y populations
- climate change driven requirements for indoor sport and recreation facilities
- there will be requirements that are driven by lifestyle changes
- there are emerging infrastructure needs including the need for public transport
- inbuilt flexibility should be retained so that it is possible to address changing needs of facilities
- demand for aged care facilities and needs of an ageing population
- preventative health care
- future education needs, including the need for future schools
- proposed “the Shed” concept as seen on ABC TV.
- sustainability education centres
- community centres close to shops and transport networks Also could provide internet café, photocopying/ fax facilities for older and unemployed people. Somewhere for people to find a JP
- environmental impacts and the need for education about this
- with ageing population, need to keep older people healthy and active physically, mentally, socially and emotionally
- emerging aged care needs include medium density housing, continuing social networks and activities, accessibility including to library and continuing education, internet infrastructure
- affordable housing since public and community housing is not being replaced and the housing crisis is worsening as rents increase



- pressure on existing facilities associated with increasing housing densities
- the question was raised as to how flexible is planning to accommodate changing needs
- climate change may drive need for indoor sport and recreation facilities
- child care services
- not convinced an aged care facility at Rivett is required as older people are now fitter than previously and do not necessarily need nursing homes
- various forms of housing for older people including townhouses
- motel
- swimming pool (also useful for healthy aged people)
- medical centre

Session: Generic Options

General comments on generic options:

- Many participants did not support any of the options put forward, instead proposing the schools be reopened.
- The strengths or weaknesses of the generic options could only be assessed in the context of individual sites and identification of the community benefits deriving from any change of use.
- A request was made to receive building condition reports for the Mount Neighbour and Rivett schools. Also that building condition reports should be released for schools that will not be closed but are of a similar age and condition. This would enable the community to gain confidence about the decisions already taken by the government to close some schools and not others.
- The options arrived at must be financially feasible for the community to operate.
- Community services should reflect the activities and mix of age in the local area.
- Planning should be taking into account an extended future not just the short term and flexibility is the key for modifying building and land use as needs change in that extended future.
- One option should not be considered across all sites – it is not appropriate to develop a one size fits all approach.
- There was concern among participants about where revenue raised from the sale or development of the schools would be directed.
- A number of participants suggested that some or all of the revenue raised be used to support affected communities through strategies including:
 - upgrading community facilities on the school sites
 - long-term maintenance of community facilities on the school sites
 - employing community development officers to support affected communities
 - developing and maintaining community based management structures for the sites.
- It was suggested that the community should play an active role in determining the suitability of any future community use on the sites.
- It was suggested that government sell off 80% of sites that need substantial maintenance and use the funds to maintain the remaining buildings and sites.



Generic Option 1:

[Note: This option proposed that the existing buildings be re-used for community purposes and the grounds be incorporated into the Urban Open Space system.]

Of the options put forward, many people found this option preferable to other options.

- Strengths of this option as perceived by participants included:
 - ease of linking open spaces with community facilities
 - this option retains flexibility and enables the land to be re-used in the future and retains the existing assets
 - retention of existing buildings means more green space
 - retention of the buildings offers increased flexibility compared with options where they are demolished
 - community use of the site retained
 - green space and playgrounds retained. If playground can be used for community use then it should not be added to the urban open space network by changing the Territory Plan
 - the existing buildings would be immediately available for community use
 - the capacity for the community to use the external areas would be beneficial and the area could be used for community exercises or for communal gardens for older people

- Weaknesses of this option as perceived by participants included:
 - buildings are old and government commitment to adequate maintenance of premises is unknown
 - the floor plan and fitout are not appropriate and the building is not very flexible
 - there is no funding offset for government
 - the green spaces may not be adequately maintained, especially given the current water situation
 - no monetary return to government
 - there would be costs to government to maintain the facility and also any open space and if it was not properly maintained or supervised it is likely to be used to dump rubbish. At the same time there is not capacity for local supervision or maintenance
 - risk that premises will not be adequately maintained into the future leading to deterioration and eventual sale
 - existing building designs may limit use by community for different purposes.
 - buildings may be old and require extensive financial commitment to maintain building which may be outside the scope of the community groups – no funding offset
 - if the area was converted to open space there would be no ability to respond to specific needs as they arose

Generic Option 2:

[Note: This option proposed that the existing buildings be re-used for community purposes and that the grounds be developed either within the existing land use policy for the site (Community Facility) or with a variation to the Territory Plan to permit an alternative use.]

- Strengths of this option as perceived by participants included:
 - more flexible than option 1 community use of existing buildings retained
 - application of capital gain used to maintain development of community facility



- potentially meets the need of a greater number of requirements of commercial and NFP groups
- if not a school then don't need playground so this area could be sold and the proceeds used to maintain the existing facilities in the area
- application of the capital gain to maintain and develop community facilities
- retention of the whole school building provides more options
- Weaknesses of this option as perceived by participants included:
 - loss of flexibility for future use and in particular it would not be possible to re-open a school on the site if the demographics changed
 - land uses should not be mixed
 - not all development would be appropriate in a mixed use area with community facilities
 - loss of open space
 - the benefit/use of the site is lost to the community if it is developed for commercial [private] purpose unless subject to a covenant for part of the site

Generic Option 3:

[Note: This option proposed that some of the existing buildings be demolished and the remaining buildings be re-used for community purposes and that that undeveloped areas be developed either within the existing land use policy for the site (Community Facility) or with a variation to the Territory Plan to permit an alternative use.]

- Strengths of this option as perceived by participants included:
 - if government rebuilt a facility this could be a good option, for example a cultural facility in Woden, public playground in Weston
 - if, and only if, buildings are unfit for occupancy could be used for local or regional community purposes
 - some community buildings retained, which would be preferable to not retaining any buildings for community use
 - reduction in site maintenance costs
 - opportunities for specific uses to be established
 - more flexibility than selling all of a site
 - limited residual community use
 - better than no community facilities
- Weaknesses of this option as perceived by participants included:
 - the land would be lost forever and there is a strong risk that the community would be sacrificing a lot and that the costs would outweigh the benefits
 - reduces flexibility of building use because of the adjacent land uses
 - the building could not be as well used for multi-purpose activities as in the other options
 - insufficient space for all potential occupants and the amount of community space would be severely curtailed
 - there is uncertainty about type of development on the site and whether development will be compatible with community uses such as band practice and youth activities, some of which could be noisy
 - uncertain about mix of residential with aged care and youth groups
 - the option is driven by economic rather than community needs.



Generic Option 4:

[Note: This option proposed the demolition of all buildings on the site and development of the whole site within the existing land use policy for the site (Community Facility) or with a variation to the Territory Plan to permit an alternative use.]

Some people thought this option could be suitable for some sites, with caveats around zoning of development and use of revenue raised from sales, but others found this option completely unacceptable.

- Strengths of this option as perceived by participants included:
 - this option offers the greatest return to government
 - more land would become available to meet the demand for aged care facilities
 - site could be zoned for community use and used as non-government school or retirement village
 - the option could potentially unite local communities who wanted to retain the community space.
 - land could be used for recreation development
 - revenue from sale could be used to support other community uses
 - this option would only have community benefits if there was a covenant to achieve community development.
- Weaknesses of this option as perceived by participants included:
 - greater community consultation required to ensure appropriate use of the site
 - potential environmental impact from redevelopment of the site, depending on the use and nature of development
 - loss of community facilities and space and loss of community ownership of the site
 - risk that development of site will be unsuitable to surrounding community
 - if this option were to proceed, a developer should be required to include community space in any development.

Alternative options suggested:

- Option 3.5 – demolish building but retain community use facilities where new community use buildings are provided by industry and government partnerships which would lead to better use of the remaining site and would be specific to the purpose.
- Option 5 – school site retained as is in option 1 but community trades off the unused green space the oval.
- Sell existing Weston Creek Community Centre and use money to redevelop Weston school site as a Community Centre
- Alternate Option 5 – retain playgrounds for community use such as gardens, festivals, sporting groups and playgrounds and sell rest
- Partial demolition and rebuilding of community buildings. Retain parts of the site suitable for community use in existing buildings, release some land for sale and development, and use revenue raised to build new purpose built community buildings on the site.
- It was also suggested that there should not be a change to the Territory Plan to permit a wider range of uses than under the existing land use policy.
- One alternative approach would be to sell 80% of a site and use those funds to redevelop the remaining 20% of the site for community uses.
- It was suggested that the Weston Creek Community Centre is now old and inadequate to meet needs and that an alternative approach could be to sell this building for redevelopment and develop a community centre on the former Weston Creek Primary School site. The community centre would include indoor recreation facilities, a library (annexe of the Woden Library), art centre and swimming pool. In addition the development could incorporate a town park. Such a development would provide some of the facilities in Weston Creek which are available in other districts.



Other Comments

- Planning should be undertaken for the long term and not just the short term.
- Flexibility is the key when considering modifications to the building or land use as needs change in the future.
- It is not appropriate to develop the same option across all sites.
- It was noted that a weakness of all of the generic options is that they do not take into account site specifics including the design of the buildings on the site, building condition, traffic conditions on surrounding roads, the provision of parking and the need for parking associated with different activities, access to public transport, the orientation of the sites and the need to ensure intergenerational equity through the availability of land for future use.

