

Belconnen Alliance of High-rise Apartments

~ Republic, Dusk, High Society, Nightfall, Wayfarer, Altitude, Sentinel, Linq, Oracle 1 & 2, Cirrus ~

ACT Government Budget 2024-25

Submission

Context:

Belconnen city centre, despite being classed as a “commercial centre” has the highest population density in the ACT and it set to continue to increase in density as new high-rise mixed residential towers are approved for development. It appears as though the Belconnen City Centre is an “accidental experiment” for the ACT as it is the only precinct where such relatively tall mixed residential towers are being approved without commensurate planning upgrades.

An unintended consequence of the high-density experiment is that thousands of residents in high-rise towers are totally dependent on gas for hot water and have electrical supply systems that were not designed for all electric hot water (or electric vehicle charging). The ACT Government policy to “de-gasify” the Territory and phase out fossil-fuel vehicles, while being welcomed as good for our carbon emission footprint, has introduced significant angst and concern for the residents in Belconnen as there is no obvious alternative to using gas or in-home charging.

While Government Departments have acknowledged that the situation is “complex” they do not appear to have a way forward and suggest that residents/owners just wait-and-see until closer to the end of the transition period before adapting in the hope that alternatives will be available. Unfortunately converting gas hot water to other forms in high-density towers is fundamentally different to making similar changes in low-density or detached housing. Each entire tower, incorporating multiple hundreds of individuals, must change at the same time after sufficient funds (likely in the order of millions) have been built up via special fund levies, approved by the Owners’ Corporation. Executive Committees are unlikely to be willing to submit a bid for these special levies without a detailed understanding of what will replace the gas hot water. The longer the delay in determining a reasonable alternative to gas, the shorter period available to collect a sufficient fund which means the annual levy will end up being more and have less chance of being approved.

The Executive Committees for the majority of high-density towers in Belconnen City Centre – represented by BAHA (Belconnen Alliance of High-rise Apartments) and representing over 7,000 residents and owners – have expressed their concern at the lack of any way forward to de-gasify their hot water systems. Some members of the Alliance have researched alternatives to gas hot water, especially in the context of limited or expensive electrical capacity. The most promising of these alternatives include community heating systems that harvest heat from wastewater and/or the ground. Such heating systems have been proven

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in a number of similar sized communities in Europe and the US but require extensive collaboration between the Government/council, utility providers and residents.

Waste heat mining could be an effective and efficient alternative to gas hot water and would not demand a substantial increase in electricity. The ACT Government could continue its “accidental high-density experiment” in deliberate “action research” that advances its environmental credentials, demonstrates leadership in community solutions to climate change, gives certainty to thousands of residents in Belconnen and decreases the cost of living.

The Proposal:

Initiate a working group and fund a substantial study on the use of wastewater heat mining for community hot water. The working group would need to include representatives from BAHA, ACTEWAGL, Icon Water and relevant Government Departments.

The working group should report to Cabinet via the Minister for Water, Energy and Emissions Reduction.

The study should incorporate details from successful community heating systems, e.g. Holland.

A Government initiative to support community hot water systems should be established. Matching funds raised by Owners’ Corporation would be an equitable move given high-density residents are practically excluded from all other Government energy transformation support programs.

We submit this proposal in a hope that the budget will incorporate funding to begin this process.

Margaret Kenna

For Belconnen Alliance of High-rise Apartments

Representing Republic, Dusk, High Society, Nightfall, Wayfarer, Altitude, Sentinel, Linq, Oracle 1 & 2, Cirrus Apartments