

# **Submission to the ACT Government on the Planning System and District Strategies**

**Regional Development Australia (ACT)**

*The Canberra Region Food Collaborative*

*2 March 2023*

This submission should be read together with our original submission of June 2022 on the food aspects of planning in the ACT.

Regional Development Australia (RDA) ACT is an independent NFP with a Board/Committee of nine local leaders, focused on economic development. We are part of a national network of 52 Regional Development Australia organisations, largely funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Infrastructure, Regional Development and Cities. Our charter is to secure more investment and jobs for our region aligning our work with the ACT Government priorities. Our industry focus is on the agrifood industry.

We have launched a new initiative called the Canberra Region Food Collaborative (CRFC) <https://www.agrifood-hub.com/>. The CRFC will be an independent information broker and coordinating body responsible for helping establish an integrated, sustainable, inclusive local food system. We also have developed the highly successful Food in the Capital Event Program – now Australia’s only national event focusing City-Region food systems. The CRFC is mentioned in the current Government Agreement for action this parliamentary term subject to funding.

RDA (ACT) welcomes the ACT Government’s decision to reform and improve the ACT Planning System and its work in consulting with all stakeholders relative to the various district strategies. The reflections and suggestion below apply to all districts, although the East Canberra Plan is given specific reference as it presents the area of most fertility and promise for boosting the Territory’s local food supply.

Apart food production requirements detailed below, the heritage value of areas such as Majura Valley and surrounding districts are significant along with valuable plant and animal life adding to our local biodiversity. Moreover, our own district hosted the trials to breed better higher yielding grain varieties which ultimately helped solve the food crisis of the 1970s. Unbalanced development could severely degrade these important domains which make our territory such and interesting, historical, and captivating place in which to live.

RDA ACT is suggesting a major shakeup of the ACT’s approach to the local food system. Drawing attention to serious and growing threats to food supply chains we are suggesting a range of key measures the ACT government needs to initiate. These include allocating at least 5 large spaces/areas in and near the City to food production, agritourism, training, community education and retail sales. In addition, hundreds of smaller plots need to be identified for small scale and collateralised production of food stuffs. Food must be a specific government food procurement priority along with direct support for sustainable food projects. Urban Agtech, water systems integration and incentives for integrating food into the built environment are all part of the formula. The Canberra Region Food Collaborative provides the framework and operational mechanism to make sense of the complexity and diversity the food system – and can help operationalize the Governments strategic objectives once they are settled upon.

The clear message is that, to cope with shocks such as COVID-19, cities with suitable socio-economic and agroclimatic conditions should adopt policies and programs to empower local producers to grow food and promote short food chains to enable urban citizens to access food products.... Cities have to diversify their food supplies and food sources, reinforcing local sources where possible, but without shutting off national and global supplies. (FAO - September 2020)

### **Food Security**

While recognising the need to build more housing for our growing population there are other 'balancing items' on how far this should go. Key among these issues is the need to shore up our city's food security. The Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN has called for creation of city food buffers. There are a range of threats to global and national supply chains, which are expected to continue and increase in coming decades. We are already seeing these in the shape of disruptions to supply from shipping container shortages; shortages of fuel inputs, lack of labour, climate change driven natural disasters, failure of transport companies (e.g. Scott's Transport a key national food transport provider), various disease threats (human and animal) and various strategic disruptions including war. The Federal Government is looking to support more value-add and more sustainable systems across our food producing regions.

Canberra is particularly vulnerable as most of our food comes from much further afield. Our only milk processor is closing. We need to secure substantial scale opportunities to allow farmers to build and encourage them to innovate and even serve a local food manufacturing and research capability. This means quarantining sufficient land to facilitate food production and food innovation as well providing the dignity of secure tenure for farmers on whom we will depend much more in coming decades.

The vagueness of references to food in the East Canberra Plan are particularly concerning in this respect, reflecting a lack of recognition of the changed national and international food situation and our geographic vulnerabilities.

### **Economic Opportunity**

Taken together, the value of the various projects in the ACT assessed by Food Innovation Australia could be worth nearly A\$545 million in the ACT by 2030, in terms of value-added. In perspective, this is over four times the current value-added by the food and agribusiness sector in the ACT. These opportunities could also create over 2,000 jobs – nearly a third higher than the territory's food and agribusiness workforce today. Post-farm gate opportunities constitute 96 per cent of potential value-added and potential jobs created. 85 per cent of these opportunities are geared towards improving production standards and supply chain capacity domestically.

### **Social Inclusion and Wellbeing**

Farm experiences, food bowls and novel food production approaches have been shown to improve mental health outcomes and nutrition benefits across the world. They are a source of new career paths ways for people who are not attracted to office jobs and more traditional jobs and career choices. Where these are close to or inside a city they provide access to schools, researchers, community and welfare groups which would otherwise be much more difficult to achieve without long trips outside our jurisdiction. We are demonstrating various programs which will help various disadvantaged groups, such as the disabled and long-term job seekers, engage more with food and secure employment through it. We need farms and urban farming precincts and food business incubators to do this.

### **Integrated development**

We would suggest that new developments, where they need to occur, favour mixed-use developments. This means avoiding blanketed concrete – but incentivising or requiring developers to deliver locations in which food can be grown in, around, underneath and on top of buildings. There are a range of Agtech and food tech solutions which can be integrated in this way- such as Vertical Farms, urban farms and garden commons which lend themselves to this approach. This would mitigate the negative effects of productive farmland being eaten up and provide new sources of income and fresher more abundant food to Canberrans.