



**CONSERVATION
COUNCIL** ACT REGION

Submission to the City and Environment
Directorate

Draft Southern Gateway Planning and Design Framework

15 September 2026

The Conservation Council ACT Region is the peak body for environment and climate groups in the ACT Region. We represent close to 50 member groups, bringing together a united voice on environment and climate issues to Government, business and community.

Since 1981 we have been at the centre of the region's most important wins for wildlife, bushland, climate and communities. As a hub for the ACT Region's environment and climate movement and a not-for-profit, non government organisation, we run campaigns, promote and upskill local groups, undertake research, advocate passionately, and engage and inform our community.

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Executive Summary

The Conservation Council of the ACT Region (the Conservation Council) welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft Southern Gateway Planning and Design Framework (the Framework).

The Conservation Council broadly supports the intended vision for the Southern Gateway and welcomes the draft Framework's focus on transit-oriented development, with increased housing density close to public transport and amenities, particularly along the Light Rail corridor. We strongly encourage the ACT Government to set a clear and ambitious vision for compact, well-connected and climate-resilient infill development in the Southern Gateway corridor, avoiding the need for greenfield urban sprawl development in ecologically sensitive areas such as the Western Edge.

The Conservation Council understands that the Transport Corridor Assessment (TCA) for the Southern Gateway is currently under preparation. The TCA will be crucial for identifying options for increasing safe, accessible and rapid public transport and active travel infrastructure throughout the south. We encourage the City and Environment Directorate to make this assessment available for public comment as soon as possible.

The Conservation Council continues to support the rapid development of Canberra's Light Rail network, including as the major transport spine throughout the Southern Gateway. As outlined in our [2025 submission on the Light Rail Stage 2B EIS](#), careful integration of the Light Rail system into the wider transport network will be required in the Southern Gateway, most importantly with active travel modes such as walking and cycling.

With transport emissions constituting 61% of the ACT's emissions, the majority from private internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles, and considering that the ACT Government missed its legislated interim emissions reduction target of a 50-60% reduction by 2025, there is an urgent need to encourage mode shift to active and public transport.¹ Planning for the future of the Southern Gateway gives the ACT Government a significant opportunity to provide safe and accessible walking, cycling, and public transport infrastructure to enable this shift.

The Conservation Council highlights the importance of delivering genuinely safe active travel routes in light of the recent tragic deaths of cyclists on Canberra roads. Roads and streets are for people — the ACT Government must make the design of the Southern Gateway human-centred, and reiterate this message publicly.

The Conservation Council makes the following recommendations:

- 1. Amend the vision statement to acknowledge the importance of cycling and access to nature**
- 2. Deliver safe and accessible walking and cycling pathways and connections throughout the Southern Gateway corridor**
 - a. Invest in a protected cycleway from Woden to Civic**

¹ ACT Government 2026, *Developing a new climate change strategy for the ACT*, available at https://hdp-au-prod-app-act-yoursay-files.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/2717/6957/5303/Developing_the_next_ACT_Climate_Change_Strategy_-_Discussion_Paper.pdf, pg 5

3. **Deliver public transport connections across and throughout the Southern Gateway**
 - a. **Include a light rail stop at North Curtin**
4. **Prioritise protection and restoration of natural spaces**
5. **Prioritise renaturalisation of Yarralumla Creek**
 - a. **Require the use of water-sensitive urban design approaches**

The Conservation Council's comments are made in relation to matters in which we have relevant expertise, including through our Biodiversity and Sustainable Transport Working Groups — namely biodiversity conservation, waterway health and restoration, and sustainable transport advocacy.

1. Amend the vision statement to acknowledge the importance of cycling and access to nature

The Conservation Council broadly supports the Government's vision for the Southern Gateway, with the following amendments to acknowledge the importance of different modes of active transport and to specifically highlight the importance of access to natural spaces.

*"The Southern Gateway to the National Capital will provide more housing in walkable **and cyclable** neighbourhoods supported by commercial activity in vibrant urban villages, close to rapid public transport connections, **a healthy and flourishing natural environment**, and community and recreational facilities.*

The ACT Government's vision for the Southern Gateway could be considerably improved by replacing 'high-quality landscapes' with 'a healthy and flourishing natural environment'. This is the terminology already utilised in the Vision Statement of the draft *ACT Nature Conservation Strategy 2026-2036*.²

The Conservation Council considers that this phrase more effectively encapsulates the importance of biodiverse, connected, and functioning natural landscapes within our urban areas — valued by the Canberra community for providing clean air, lower temperatures, water cycling, and benefits to physical and mental health. We consider 'high-quality landscapes' to be a term that does not accurately capture the importance of biodiverse natural areas that provide habitat for a wide range of flora and fauna species.

Adding the term 'cyclable' would recognise the need for safe, accessible cycling infrastructure and reiterate the Government's intention to improve cycling connections across the south. Bike lanes and cycling infrastructure should be planned in advance throughout the Southern Gateway, rather than added on after construction.

² ACT Government 2026, *Draft ACT Nature Conservation Strategy 2026-2036*, available at https://hdp-au-prod-app-act-yoursay-files.s3.ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/5717/6948/7167/Draft_ACT_Nature_Conservation_Strategy_2026-2036.pdf, p5

2. Deliver safe and accessible walking and cycling connections throughout the Southern Gateway corridor

The Conservation Council strongly welcomes the Framework's vision for a people-first transport hierarchy, which prioritises pedestrians and cyclists over private vehicles (Figure 9). This is consistent with the ACT Government's obligations under the ACT Transport Strategy 2020 and with encouraging the mode shift needed to reduce transport emissions. However, we know that in reality, Canberra's streets can look very different regarding safety and accessibility and that this vision must be supported by physical infrastructure.

The Framework must prioritise the planning and delivery of safe and accessible active transport routes throughout the corridor. Tangible street safety measures include lowering the default speed limits to 30km/hour and using raised pedestrian crossings on any higher-speed streets, in high-pedestrian zones, and within the proposed 'urban villages' in Deakin, West Deakin, Curtin, and Mawson. Additionally, continuous and fully accessible pathways, safe crossings, clear lines of sight, lighting that meets Australian Standards, and shade and shelter are also essential requirements to make truly human-centred streets in the Southern Gateway. Arterial roads should have protected and continuous cycleways with widened paths and separated lanes, especially along the busy C4 corridor.

Linking light rail and active travel routes is a key consideration that the ACT Government must take into account in the Southern Gateway. The Framework should explain how the light rail will connect to new and existing active travel routes. User-friendliness is also vital to the success of light rail — getting to and from the light rail needs to be safe, accessible, comfortable, and convenient for everyone.

2a) Invest in a protected cycleway from Woden to Civic

Adelaide Avenue is currently a hostile environment for people not inside motor vehicles. A continuous protected cycleway linking Woden to Civic (via Yarra Glen, Adelaide Avenue, and Flynn Drive), as championed by Pedal Power ACT, would make riding a bicycle a genuinely safer and more accessible transport option, connecting homes, schools, shops, workplaces, and public transport. The Conservation Council welcomes the Framework's intention to support a protected City to Woden commuter cycleway and encourages the ACT Government to rapidly invest in the infrastructure needed to make it a reality.

3. Deliver public transport connections across and throughout the Southern Gateway

The Conservation Council welcomes the proposed transport-oriented design approach for the Southern Gateway, including locating rapid transport stops close to housing, shops and community facilities. The Government needs to provide the infrastructure to enable and incentivise mode shift away from private ICE vehicles — public and active transport should be a genuinely cheaper, convenient and quicker option. Planning for the Southern Gateway should ensure that access to public transport is effectively supported through adequate pavements,

crossings, lighting and shelter. Even the best public transport will be underutilised if getting to it is inaccessible, uncomfortable or dangerous.

While the Framework places emphasis on the North-South transport spine of Adelaide Avenue, Yarra Glen Drive, Callam Street and Athllon Drive, the Conservation Council also reiterates the importance of rapid public transport connections *across* and *within* the Southern Gateway. The Framework should outline how people will access key areas beyond the study area. For example, ensuring there are public transport connections from light rail stops into Deakin, Mawson, and the Canberra Hospital.

3a) Include a light rail stop at North Curtin

The Framework currently includes an intention to ‘plan for a future light rail stop’ at the North Curtin Residential Area. With higher density housing proposed for North Curtin as part of the approved Conditions of Planning, Design and Development for the North Curtin Residential Area, we recommend the ACT Government firmly commit to delivering a light rail stop at North Curtin and integrate this stop into any future transport corridor planning for the Southern Gateway. New developments must be planned around public transport from the outset so that new residents are not immediately dependent on private ICE vehicles. This requires both infrastructure investment and the incorporation of new routes that deliver the frequency and reliability needed to drive public transport adoption.

4. Prioritise protection and restoration of natural spaces

The Conservation Council welcomes the Framework's ambition to protect and enhance the natural environment throughout the Southern Gateway. We particularly welcome the proposal to redesign Athllon Drive as 'the nature avenue', and the intention to replace invasive exotic species along Yarralumla Creek with native landscaping.

Planning for the Southern Gateway must prioritise the protection and improvement of natural spaces, particularly around high-density urban areas near Woden town centre. The loss of green spaces due to poor planning and design choices remains a frequent occurrence in the ACT. Access to a variety of biodiverse green spaces is crucial — including nature reserves, parks, and urban waterways. These spaces support biodiversity and provide habitat for threatened species, and are essential for community recreation, health, and wellbeing. As the corridor densifies, the ecological and social value of remaining green space will only increase.

The ACT Government should plan to ensure that the impacts of development in the Southern Gateway on native species and ecological communities are as minimal as possible, with the impacts of development avoided rather than offset.

The cumulative impacts of urban expansion and development on nature within the ACT cannot be underestimated. As outlined in the Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment's 'Close to the Edge' report - An Investigation into the Effects of Urban Expansion on the Environment of the ACT:

- The environment lacks primacy in legislation and is rarely prioritised in implementation of government policy.
- Mature trees are legally recognised as critical ecological features but are not sufficiently protected, retained or recruited.
- Urban green infrastructure (such as native plantings and rain gardens) is inconsistently implemented.
- Conservation is focused on reactive measures such as offsets while proactive retention and recruitment of vegetation is underutilised or in some cases actively undermined.
- Future urban expansion of Canberra will impact ACT species and ecosystems, including through habitat loss, fragmentation and connectivity impacts.
- As has already occurred, the likely future impacts of urban development will interact with and augment pressures from broader trends, such as climate change and habitat degradation.³

The impacts of urban expansion on the ACT's environment are not inevitable. Rather, these impacts are the result of strategic planning decisions that continue to be made and continue to ensure the natural environment is threatened by land clearance and urban development activities.

We note that the 'blue-green network', which is frequently referenced in the Framework and outlined in the District Strategies, has no legal basis and does not provide any formal protection to these natural spaces. We recommend that the Framework identify how important natural areas will be incorporated into the soon-to-be-developed Nature Conservation Network, including those areas to be recognised as 'Priority Conservation Areas' as outlined in the draft *ACT Nature Conservation Strategy 2026–2036*.

We urge the Government to prioritise the protection and restoration of biodiversity in the Southern Gateway, rather than merely seeking to 'balance biodiversity with development opportunities' (p. 13). Biodiversity cannot be fairly 'traded off' against development: once lost, ecological function and species habitat are extremely difficult to recover.

5. Prioritise renaturalisation of Yarralumla Creek

The Framework identifies that parts of Yarralumla Creek could be progressively improved and investigated for potential restoration to a more natural channel, where appropriate. The Conservation Council supports the renaturalisation of Yarralumla Creek and the transformation of the creek corridor into a space that improves biodiversity, urban cooling and recreational amenity.

Yarralumla Creek poses a significant and recurring flood risk in its current concrete form, including deadly floods in the 1970s and recent flooding in February 2026 that resulted in significant infrastructure damage and disruptions for nearby residents of the Ivy Towers.

³ Office of the Commissioner for Sustainability and the Environment 2025, *Close to the Edge*, available at https://envcomm.act.gov.au/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/OCSE_Close-to-the-Edge.pdf, p14.

Hard-edged, concrete channels limit ecological function, deliver high sediment and nutrient loads downstream, and concentrate flood peaks rather than allowing flows to be slowed and spread.

The Framework must ensure the Yarralumla Creek corridor is protected now to allow for future renaturalisation — if development proposals go ahead without reserving space for a different creek form, we risk ‘locking in’ potential flooding risks for many years to come. Future planning for higher density development along the Southern Gateway, particularly in the Yarra Glen precinct and areas adjacent to the creek in the Woden Town Centre, should incorporate the renaturalisation of Yarralumla Creek from the outset.

5a) Require the use of water-sensitive urban design approaches

When coupled with water-sensitive urban design (WSUD), renaturalisation can be even more effective at slowing, storing and treating water in urban environments. The ACT Government’s WSUD Guidelines describe WSUD as an approach that integrates management of the urban water cycle into planning and design, with the aim of reducing runoff, treating stormwater, using water more efficiently and improving the amenity of urban landscapes. In practice, this means combining creek naturalisation with measures such as rain gardens, swales, permeable surfaces, wetlands, stormwater reuse and landscape features that retain water where it falls, rather than funnelling it rapidly downstream.

Given the significant flooding risks associated with Yarralumla Creek and broader pollution concerns across the catchment, the Conservation Council recommends that WSUD requirements be integrated into the Framework and be made a requirement for new development and urban renewal projects in the Southern Gateway.