

Mr Chris Steel MLA
Treasurer
Chief Minister, Treasury and Economic Development Directorate
GPO Box 158
Canberra ACT 2601
Via email: steel@act.gov.au; budgetconsultation@act.gov.au

7 April 2026

Dear Treasurer,

Belconnen Community Council Submission to the 2026–27 ACT Budget Consultation

The Belconnen Community Council (BCC) thanks you for the opportunity to contribute to the ACT Government's 2026–27 Budget process. Since 1991, the BCC has advocated for everyone who lives, studies, works, and holds interests in the Belconnen district; home to approximately one quarter of Canberra's population and forecast to grow by 75,000 residents by 2065.

This submission is organised around commitments the Government has already made to Belconnen. We are not asking for new promises. We are asking for delivery of existing ones, and making the case that acting now is cheaper than the alternative.

We welcome further discussion and can be reached at chair@belconnen.org.au or 0438 458 220.

Yours sincerely,

Lachlan Butler

Chair
Belconnen Community Council

Submission summary

This submission is primarily structured around key commitments made by the ACT Government in its 2024 election platform.

1. **Northside Hospital:** completion date has slipped; approve the business case and adequately resource the project team.
2. **West Belconnen Health Centre:** no site after five years; confirm a site and progress the design phase.
3. **Bus Services:** services reversed; restore them and fund the additional rapid route for West Belconnen.
4. **Belconnen to City Transitway:** feasibility work remains incomplete, 2028 completion date unlikely; resource delivery now.
5. **Belconnen–City Light Rail:** preliminary planning unfunded; resource it before corridor decisions become irreversible.
6. **Belconnen Renewal Authority:** no coordinating mechanism exists; establish one in this Budget.
7. **BTC Primary School:** feasibility study underway; act on findings and secure a site before options close.
8. **Tree Canopy:** 5,000 trees per year below target; increase funding and prioritise Belconnen.

The Case for Investing in Belconnen

Belconnen is not a district in decline asking to be rescued. It is Canberra's largest district, growing by more than any other, asking for investment commensurate with its scale.

Approximately one quarter of the ACT's population lives in Belconnen. Its residents pay rates, generate economic activity, and contribute to the Territory's revenue base.

The district will grow by almost 75,000 residents by 2065. The Belconnen Town Centre currently has 10 additional apartment precincts approved or under construction, resulting in at least 22 high-rise buildings within five years. West Belconnen is projected to be one of the fastest-growing areas in the Territory over the next four decades.

Growth at this scale generates obligations, not just revenue. Infrastructure and services that lag behind population growth don't simply create inconvenience, they create costs that compound. Congestion worsens. Health problems present later and more acutely. Retrofitting infrastructure into a built environment is significantly more expensive than planning for it in advance. Communities that feel underserved lose confidence in the institutions that are meant to serve them.

The BCC acknowledges the fiscal pressures facing the Territory. Our position is that the investments in this submission are not in tension with good fiscal management; they are an expression of it. A government serious about long-term value for money invests in the right place at the right time. For a district that houses a quarter of the population, that time is now.

Every recommendation in this submission addresses a commitment already made. The question is not whether to spend, but whether to spend now, at planned cost, or later, when deferred problems are harder and more expensive to fix.

Health

1. Northside Hospital

What was promised

“ACT Budget difficulties would not delay a start, with main construction works to commence in 2027, aiming for completion in 2030.”

Minister Stephen-Smith, March 2025

What has happened

The committed completion date has already slipped. In the project's Territory Priority Project Declaration, the projected completion date is 2031, a year beyond the commitment made. The business case has not yet been approved by government. A 2027 construction start requires that approval to occur, and project resourcing to follow, within months. The window is narrow and closing.

What we are asking

The ACT Government must approve the business case in time to resource a 2027 construction start. The 2026–27 Budget should provide the project team with what it needs to meet that timeline. A further slip in the completion date is not acceptable.

Fiscal note: Every year of delay means continued expenditure maintaining ageing facilities at the North Canberra Hospital, facilities the new hospital is intended to replace. Construction cost inflation means the project will cost more in 2028 than it would in 2027. The cheapest version of this project is the one that is built on time.

2. West Belconnen Health Centre (Macnamara)

What was promised

“ACT Labor will build a new Health Centre in Macnamara to support the growing population in Ginninderry and West Belconnen.”

ACT Labor’s Plan for Belconnen, 2024

This commitment built on a 2020–21 Budget announcement to establish four new walk-in health centres across the Territory. That announcement is now more than five years old.

What has happened

Progress across the four centres has been markedly uneven. South Tuggeranong began construction in April 2025. The Inner South has completed consultation. North Gungahlin has a confirmed site with design underway. West Belconnen remains at site review stage, further behind than any of the others.

What we are asking

The 2026–27 Budget must fund confirmation of a site and the design phase. Every year of delay is a year in which West Belconnen’s population grows without the health infrastructure to support it.

Fiscal note: Walk-in health centres reduce unnecessary emergency department presentations, one of the most expensive points of contact in the health system. Locating a centre close to a fast-growing residential population means earlier, cheaper intervention.

Transport

3. Bus Services: West Belconnen Rapid and R2 Frequency

What was promised

“A re-elected Labor Government will deliver more bus services for Belconnen residents, including a new West Belconnen Rapid Service from Ginninderry to the City, supported by a new Park and Ride, and increase services on the popular R2 service between Belconnen and Fyshwick via the City.”

ACT Labor’s Plan for Belconnen, 2024

What has happened

The February 2026 timetable changes moved in the opposite direction. Increased R2 services were cut. Rapid services to West Belconnen were removed. The Park and Ride has not been delivered. Residents in West Belconnen are now worse off than they were before the election, and worse off than they were promised they would be.

What we are asking

The 2026–27 Budget should fund the buses and driving staff needed to restore the removed rapid services and deliver the additional West Belconnen Rapid Service promised. These were election commitments with a clear timeline; the Budget should reinstate that timeline and resource it accordingly.

Fiscal note: Residents without viable public transport options will drive, adding to road congestion, higher emissions, and the long-term cost of road maintenance and infrastructure.

4. Belconnen to City Transitway

What was promised

In 2023, a motion committing the ACT Government to deliver the Belconnen to City Transitway by October 2028 passed the Legislative Assembly unanimously, with the support of all three parties.

ACT Labor subsequently reaffirmed this commitment in its 2024 election platform.

What has happened

A feasibility study due in July 2025 remains incomplete. In October 2025, when questioned in the Assembly, the responsible minister did not maintain the commitment to deliver Stage 1. A Freedom of Information request has revealed that the incomplete feasibility study itself recommends further study. Twenty-seven months after a unanimous Assembly vote, the project has not progressed beyond the study phase, and the study recommends more studying.

What we are asking

The 2026–27 Budget should fully fund delivery of the Transitway on the committed 2028 timeline and provide the project team with the resourcing needed to meet it.

Fiscal note: This corridor carries the R2, R3, and R4 rapid routes. Dedicated bus lanes would improve timetable reliability across all three and allow more peak services to be run without additional vehicles. Construction cost inflation means the project costs more today than it would have when it was first committed. Every year of further delay widens that gap.

5. Belconnen–City Light Rail: Preliminary Planning

What was promised

The ACT Infrastructure Plan and the Belconnen District Strategy both identify Belconnen to City as Stage 3 of the light rail network. The ACT Government committed to expanding light rail as part of the Territory’s long-term transport vision. No funding for preliminary planning of Stage 3 has been allocated in any Budget to date.

What has happened

Community consultation on the Woden light rail extension began in mid-2017. Construction on Stage 2a commenced approximately eight years later. No equivalent process has begun for Belconnen. If the Woden precedent holds, preliminary planning funded in this Budget would support construction commencing in the mid-2030s, but only if that planning begins now.

In the meantime, development continues in the Bruce precinct, on the University of Canberra campus, and across the broader Town Centre without a confirmed corridor. Decisions made now without route certainty risk creating conflicts that will be costly or impossible to reverse.

What we are asking

The 2026–27 Budget should fund preliminary planning for the Belconnen–City light rail corridor. This is low-cost work relative to the investment it protects, and the longer it is deferred, the more constrained the options become.

Fiscal note: Route certainty enables better interim decisions across bus, park-and-ride, and active travel infrastructure, avoiding the costly retrofits that result from planning in its absence. Preliminary planning is among the highest-value, lowest-cost investments available to the Government at this stage of the project. The alternative is spending more, later, to fix decisions made without it.

Belconnen Town Centre

6. Belconnen Renewal Authority

What was promised

“A re-elected Labor Government will deliver a major renewal of the rapidly growing Belconnen Town Centre.”

ACT Labor’s Plan for Belconnen, 2024

What has happened

No authority, taskforce, or coordinating mechanism has been established to deliver on this commitment. The consequences are visible. Upgrades to Margaret Timpson Park have been referenced in ACT Government planning documents for more than a decade; concept designs have not been released. Development applications are assessed for technical compliance, but no entity has a mandate to consider whether the Town Centre as a whole is becoming more liveable, functional, or attractive as it grows. No single body is accountable for the outcome.

10 apartment precincts are approved or under construction in the Town Centre. The rates revenue generated by this growth is a meaningful and growing contribution to consolidated revenue. The public infrastructure and amenity available to the residents generating that revenue has not kept pace.

The ACT Government is considering an urban renewal authority for the Woden Town Centre in this Budget. Belconnen is the larger district. It is growing faster. Its need for coordinated renewal is no less urgent. There is no equitable basis for providing Woden with a dedicated renewal mechanism while leaving Belconnen without one.

What we are asking

The 2026–27 Budget should establish and fund a Belconnen Renewal Authority with a mandate to coordinate across directorates, develop a renewal strategy with clear timelines and accountabilities, and engage the community and business sector.

Fiscal note: Without a coordinating entity, individual directorates make decisions that are locally rational but collectively poor. The result is deferred public investment, suppressed private investment, and a Town Centre that grows in volume without growing in quality. A renewal authority would deliver greater benefits from public investment and avoid costly retrofits or lost opportunities.

Education

7. Primary School in the Belconnen Town Centre

What was promised

“ACT Government is working with the University of Canberra to undertake a feasibility study on sites for a future public primary school on campus.”

ACT Labor’s Plan for Belconnen, 2024

“It is critical that we plan for a primary school in the sense that it is more difficult for children in that age group to be catching buses out of a town centre.”

Education Directorate Official, Select Committee on Estimates 2025-2026

What has happened

The feasibility study is expected to be completed before the end of the current financial year. The BCC welcomes this progress. However, the Town Centre is not waiting. Development approvals continue to be granted, land is being released, and the number of sites that could feasibly accommodate a primary school is shrinking. A feasibility study that concludes there are viable sites is of limited value if those sites are developed before the Government acts on the findings.

At least 10 additional apartment precincts are approved or under construction in the Town Centre. The families who will live in them will need a school their children can walk to. The Education Directorate's own assessment is that bussing primary-age children out of a town centre is not the ideal solution. The time to secure a site is before the options are gone.

What we are asking

The 2026–27 Budget should fund the acquisition of a suitable site, on the University of Canberra campus or elsewhere in the Town Centre, on the basis of the feasibility study's findings.

Fiscal note: Land in the Belconnen Town Centre is being developed at pace. Every development approval that proceeds without a school site being secured reduces the options available and increases the cost of the ones that remain. The feasibility study represents the planning investment; this Budget should represent the delivery investment.

Environment

8. Tree Canopy: Delivering on the Government’s Own Target

What was committed

The ACT Government’s Urban Forest Strategy 2021–2045 sets a target of 30% tree canopy cover by 2045, requiring an average of 18,000 trees planted per year on public land. Then-Minister Steel committed to this target in the Strategy’s foreword.

What has happened

In 2024-25, 12,730 trees were planted, a shortfall of more than 5,000 against the annual target of 18,000. Belconnen as a district sits at 23.43% canopy cover, with significant gaps in both established and newer suburbs. Newer areas are critically low: Macnamara at 3.07%, Strathnairn at 10.51%, and Lawson at 11.67%. Established suburbs also fall well short: Dunlop at 13.61% and MacGregor at 19.64%.

In February 2026, Minister Orr acknowledged that healthy ecosystems help cool suburbs, protect water resources, support wildlife, and improve liveability. The BCC agrees. Current planting rates are not sufficient to deliver that outcome.

What we are asking

The 2026–27 Budget should fund the planting of at least 18,000 trees on public land, as the Urban Forest Strategy requires, with priority given to Belconnen suburbs with the greatest canopy deficits.

The Government should also examine its land management practices to better support and retain self-sown trees on public land. Changes to mowing and clearing regimes in appropriate areas represent low-cost canopy gain that is already in progress and costs little to protect.

The Belconnen Town Centre warrants specific attention. Rapid densification is reducing permeable surface and increasing urban heat risk in an area that will house a significantly larger population.

Fiscal note: Every year the planting shortfall continues, the gap between current canopy cover and the 2045 target widens, and the cost of closing it increases. Urban heat is a health and productivity cost borne disproportionately by residents in low-canopy suburbs, many of whom are in Belconnen’s newer growth areas. Increased canopy reduces urban heat island effects and lowers household energy demand. The compounding cost of inaction makes early investment the fiscally responsible choice.

About the Belconnen Community Council

The Belconnen Community Council is a non-partisan, volunteer-driven organisation advocating for everyone who lives, works, studies and holds interests in the Belconnen district. The BCC receives support and funding from the ACT Government.

Contact: chair@belconnen.org.au | 0438 458 220