



Facilities such as Cotter Community Garden in Equestrian Park, Curtin, provide children with an opportunity to see and participate in the growing of fruit and vegetables.

Capitalising on COMMUNITY

Canberra's population is growing, and new developments aim to give families a safe, healthy lifestyle, writes Liz de Chastel.

Ask any resident of Canberra and they will tell you that it is a good place to live, especially if you are bringing up children. There are lots of parks, plenty of local schools, safe and friendly neighbourhoods, and hardly any traffic congestion compared to the bigger cities. A recent Property Council of Australia survey that assessed the liveability of Australian cities had Canberra ranked as Australia's second most-liveable city according to its residents (after Adelaide).

So what is it about Canberra that makes its residents happy to live here, when the outside perception may be the opposite? And more importantly, what are the things that should be encapsulated in the planning for our growth areas, in order to ensure future residents feel the same way?

Liveability can mean different things to different people, but one of the contributing factors to community wellbeing is the ability to lead a healthy lifestyle. For families, this means having good access to local parks, opportunities for children to walk to school, and quality sporting facilities.

In this regard, the ACT fares well. An Australia Bureau of Statistics survey found that more than three-quarters of ACT residents participated in at least one sport or physical-recreation activity during the 12 months prior to interview in 2009-10, the highest among all States and Territories. The majority of these people accessed outdoor facilities such as parks or walking trails when undertaking their activity.

Another positive factor is that Canberra's older suburbs are based around neighbourhood centres that traditionally have had a local school and shops as a focal point of the suburb. Children in Canberra can safely walk to

school via pathways and underpasses, with about 25 per cent either walking or cycling to school and a further 25 per cent catching a bus. Further, to maximise the use of government facilities, school ovals are generally available for sporting groups and the community to use after hours. These areas also provide opportunities for unstructured play for children.

Like most cities, Canberra is undergoing a transition in its inner suburbs with new development to accommodate growth. This renewal has not been without opposition from existing residents but,

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generally, new residents in these areas have good access to established recreation and community facilities.

It is a different story in the greenfield areas of Canberra – Gungahlin to the north and Molonglo Valley to the west. These areas are popular with families because they are able to purchase land there and build new houses. All the usual services have to be provided and, like all governments in Australia, the ACT Government is under pressure to deliver these services within budgetary constraints. So how do these new growth areas rate on creating a built form that encourages a healthy lifestyle, especially for children?

Gungahlin is expected to be home to about 55,000 Canberrans by 2019, and when fully developed it will house up to

100,000 people. Recent consultation undertaken by the ACT Government for the future planning of the Gungahlin town centre called for more community facilities, such as a health centre and an aquatic centre, that would preferably be located within the town centre rather than in the surrounding suburbs. Residents also requested continued attention to walkways, and cycle connections that enable access to retail outlets and activities in the town centre.

Overall, the 11 suburbs established so far in Gungahlin have provided residents with local facilities to support an active lifestyle. For example, the developing suburb of Franklin has an extensive open-space network for pedestrians and cyclists, as well as a habitat and movement corridor for wildlife within grassland and creek systems.

Molonglo Valley was identified as being suitable for urban development following the destruction of its pine forests in the 2003 bushfires. The valley is expected to house about 55,000 people in the next 20 years, and land sales in the first suburb of Wright have recently commenced. While the first land sales have occurred, houses are not expected to be on the ground for another two years.

Over the past few years, the ACT Government has undertaken detailed planning for Wright and the adjoining suburb of Coombs, as well as extensive community consultation. The area is expected to be popular with young families who are seeking access to modern facilities, and who want to be close to the employment and service centres of Woden, Civic and Belconnen. This has been reflected in the profile of buyers in the first land sales.

Some of the planning principles from Canberra's established suburbs can be seen in the design for Wright and there are some innovations as well. For example, the proposed development advocates

the principles of a child-friendly city as promoted by UNICEF. These principles include ensuring that children live in safe environments and have good access to basic services, which in Australian terms includes access to schools, healthy food and recreation areas. The design also includes pathways and bikeways that are safe for children to use and that also lead to the school and recreation areas. Specifically, the design provides walkable precincts that have convenient access to recreation, retail/commercial and community facilities. Another innovation shown in the plan is the inclusion of a community garden that will support community-building activities and also provide children with an opportunity to see and participate in the growing of fruit and vegetables. Under the plan, the nearby Molonglo River corridor will be rehabilitated to provide greater access for local residents as well as others across the city. The risk to delivery of these initiatives will be the budgetary constraints of the ACT Government.

So far, the signs for future healthy communities in Canberra look good. The first stage of development in Molonglo Valley has demonstrated sound planning principles that will support a healthy lifestyle for children, and ensure that future residents of this area will enjoy lifestyles that are similar to or better than those in established areas. ●

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