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## **ACT Greens submission to consultation on “The best of Canberra mountain bike experience”**

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### **Introduction / Summary**

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to the ACT Government’s consultation on making Canberra “a great mountain biking destination”.

The comments and recommendations we make in this submission are informed by consultation with the Canberra community over many years, including with its various mountain biking groups and representatives.

The ACT Greens are strong supporters of mountain biking in Canberra. The ACT provides a unique and outstanding environment for people to participate in outdoor recreation that helps them to be happy, healthy and connected to nature. Mountain biking (as with various other outdoor activities) is shown to improve each of these areas of wellbeing.

The ACT Greens believe there is a significant opportunity for Canberra to become a great mountain biking destination, more so than most other places in Australia. This will not only benefit the local community, it will be a boon for tourism and the local economy.

Canberra is particularly fortunate as a location for mountain biking. As the ‘bush capital’ we have beautiful natural environments close to, and integrated with the city, making mountain biking a convenient and enjoyable pastime. Canberra has several pine plantations close to the city, which - if managed well - allow for recreational mountain biking and trail building in an environment that is not ecologically sensitive.

Canberra already has a strong mountain biking community that participates recreationally, is successful in mountain biking competitions (eg. the Australian champions for several mountain biking disciplines live in Canberra), and who also build and maintain trails (eg. Majura Pines Trail Alliance; Kowalski Brothers Trailworks). Some of the most popular mountain biking areas in Canberra have been created by or with the help of volunteers (eg. Kowen Forest / Sparrow Hill / Majura Pines). Canberra also has a strong and growing cycling culture in general.

Canberra has many excellent existing mountain biking locations, including Mount Stromlo, Bruce Ridge, Majura Pines, Tuggeranong Pines, Zoo Pines, the Centenary Trail, various ridges, and Kowen Forest and Sparrow Hill.

Our main recommendation is that the ACT Government specifically invests in mountain biking to improve facilities for the benefit of the local population, and to attract mountain biking tourism to our city.

Overall, the key actions the ACT Greens would like to see undertaken are outlined below:

- Recognise the excellent opportunities for mountain biking in Canberra, and its potential to improve health, wellbeing and tourism;
- Stromlo Forest Park should be expanded and improved, in terms of facilities and tracks;
- The Government should pitch to attract further large mountain biking events to Canberra, to utilise Stromlo Forest Park;
- Investment should be made to improve existing mountain biking areas, and to develop new areas, including infrastructure and trails;
- Trail development should focus on the fastest growing markets – women, families, and older riders – and be built appropriately (ie. a good proportion of 'green' rated trails);
- A dedicated tourism campaign should promote mountain biking in Canberra, and a user-friendly landing portal should be built to assist tourists considering visiting;
- Plantation logging programs should be determined and publicised in advance and in consultation with trail builders to maximize the plantations' recreational value;
- The economic value of planted forests – including their recreational value - should be fully assessed and recognised;
- Trail development should only be done in an ecologically sensitive way and sensitive environmental areas should remain protected;
- The Government should develop and publish a specific mountain biking strategy; and
- The Government should look for opportunities to advance other outdoor recreation activities, like walking, running and horse-riding, in a complementary way.

It is important to note that the investment required to achieve these actions is relatively minor. Mountain biking infrastructure is comparatively cheap, especially when compared to investments made in other sports or infrastructure. A lot can be achieved with community volunteer activity. A relatively modest amount of investment in mountain biking in Canberra can go a long way.

## 1. Canberra is especially suited to take advantage of mountain biking

Mountain biking, and cycling generally, is a fast-growing activity. Generally, mountain biking participation and travel is led by an older male demographic, with a family, who often have money to spend on travelling to events, and on associated activities.<sup>1</sup> However, there is a definite shift towards female and family participation. This is observable in Canberra and the region, with more women participating in events (for example the Dirt de Femme), skills clinics and social riding. Stromlo Forest Park is becoming more popular with children and families. Mountain biking events are increasingly catering to families and including kids' events.<sup>2</sup>

As the bush capital, Canberra is naturally suited for mountain biking. Canberra's outdoor recreation opportunities are an important factor contributing to some of the great outcomes we're achieving: we have high levels of participation in recreational activities, we're the most active city, the healthiest city, one of the most liveable cities, and recently declared one of the best places to visit. Unsurprisingly, Canberra's mountain bikers also perform strongly in competitive mountain biking.

There is increasing recognition in the commercial world that mountain biking is a popular and growing activity, and that Canberra's lifestyle is suited to this pastime. Developers in places like Denman Prospect, Wright and Coombes are advertising using mountain biking imagery. Similarly, Canberra hotels are increasingly advertising themselves as mountain bike friendly.

Taking up mountain biking as a recreational activity often leads to people adopting cycling as a means of travel in other parts of their lives. Eg. commuting to work. This is compatible with the ACT Government's goals of reducing obesity, increasing the use of active travel, and reaching zero net emissions by 2045.

However, it is important for the Government to note that while Canberra was historically renowned for mountain biking, and was home to Australia's largest mountain biking events, it is losing (and has probably lost) its status as a premier mountain biking destination. There is a common recognition of this within the mountain biking community. Mountain biking trips are now regularly made to rival

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<sup>1</sup> Eg. Centre for Recreation and Tourism Research, *Review of Mountain Biking Developments and Potential Opportunities in The Scottish Enterprise Area: Final Report. Developing Mountain Biking in Scotland (DMBiS)* (2013).  
<http://www.dmbins.com/system/resources/BAhbBlSgZmSSI+MjAxNC8wMi8yNi8xMC8yNC8wNC8zNTcvUmV2aWV3X01CX09wcG9ydHVuaXRpZXNfRklOQUwucGRmBjoGRVQ/Review-MB-Opportunities-FINAL>.

<sup>2</sup> There is also a general trend towards more female participants, eg "a gender shift has been taking place, with female participation increasing by 33.9 per cent between 2002 and 2003 in the US, against 5.6 per cent growth overall, a trend that is bound to continue in the future." GAJDA, M. S. 2008. *U.K. Mountain Biking Tourism – An Analysis of Participant Characteristics, Travel Patterns and Motivations in the Context of Activity and Adventure Tourism*. MSc Tourism and Hospitality Management, Napier University.

destinations, such as Thredbo, Derby, Alice Springs, and New Zealand. There is approximately \$80m committed to trail-based projects in other jurisdictions around Australia as governments invest to take advantage of the benefits of mountain biking, and to attract the growing tourism market. Now is an excellent time for the ACT to do the same.

Canberra has well established and experienced mountain biking organisations and volunteers that are willing and enthusiastic to work with the Government. As an example, Canberra Off-road Cyclists (CORC), has been active for over 30 years, and remains the largest mountain bike club in Australia. CORC, and other groups and volunteers (such as Kowalski Brothers Trailworks), have helped bring significant tourism and events to the ACT. CORC has hosted many world level events including various mountain biking world championships. CORC has played a critical role in the establishment of mountain biking at Stromlo Forest Park.

This mountain biking history has assisted local businesses – such as Anthony Burton and Associates, Cox Architects, and Makin’ Trax – who are now working on national and international recreation projects.

## **2. Benefits of renewed investment in mountain biking**

While the ACT Government could invest in many different areas of recreation and tourism, mountain biking investment is particularly suited to and beneficial for Canberra. Canberra has great existing natural resources to draw upon, is conveniently located (eg. a good weekend destination from Sydney), has good complementary on-road cycling facilities (many mountain bikers enjoy road cycling and vice versa), and importantly, can make significant improvements for limited investment. Canberra already has a world class facility in Stromlo Forest Park, which has helped put Canberra ‘on the map’ and has the capacity to attract large scale events (eg. the 2008 mountain biking World Cup event and 2009 World Championships).

Investment in mountain biking will not only benefit the economy through tourism; it will encourage people to be more active, and improve health outcomes. This includes improved mental health outcomes. For example, a recent study on mountain biking and mental health showed that participants reported many positive mental health benefits directly linked to their participation in mountain biking. One in three participants in the study stated they experience common mental health problems and use mountain biking as a coping strategy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Lisa Roberts, Gareth Jones, and Rob Brooks, “Why Do You Ride?: A Characterization of Mountain Bikers, Their Engagement Methods, and Perceived Links to Mental Health and Well-Being” *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol.9 (2018) <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6156442/>

Mountain biking encourages connection with nature, which is well established to improve mental well-being and to have therapeutic benefits.<sup>4</sup> Research suggests that having positive engagements with nature, especially when a person is young, results in a greater appreciation of the environment and an increase in sustainable practices.<sup>5</sup>

The Government should recognise the economic benefit to the ACT's pine forests, beyond their logging value. It may in fact be that the recreational benefit is greater, or could be greater, than their logging value. Numerous other jurisdictions have done work to determine the broader value of their planted forests. As just one example, a study of the recreational value of a planted forest on the fringe of Rotorua in New Zealand estimated its value at about \$5.2 million annually from walking, and \$10.2 million annually from mountain biking. The value of the mountain biking alone is five times the annual timber revenue from that forest.<sup>6</sup>

The ACT Government should do the same work. As the authors of the Rotorua study said, "Recreation is an important environmental service provided by many planted forests. The value of this service, however, is not well known. For policy makers and land managers to make informed decisions on planted forest management for multiple benefits, they need to recognise the value of the environmental services provided."<sup>7</sup>

The Blue Derby mountain bike trails in Tasmania are a well-known example of an economic success story. Since 2015, 30 kilometres of trail have been built in Derby, the first stage of a planned 80-kilometre network that is scheduled to cost \$3.1 million. It is reported that 30,000 visitors are riding the Derby trails every year, tourists are staying four to five nights in Derby, and another five days elsewhere in Tasmania. This adds up to an estimated \$30 million-a-year return on the \$3.1 million investment.<sup>8</sup>

There appears to be a view in Government – which stems from work done for the Cycling Tourism Strategy – that mountain biking is a niche cycling tourism

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<sup>4</sup> Mardie Townsend and Rona Weerasuriya, *Beyond Blue to Green: The benefits of contact with nature for mental health and well-being*. Beyond Blue Limited: Melbourne (2010) [https://www.deakin.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/310747/Beyond-Blue-To-Green-Literature-Review.pdf](https://www.deakin.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/310747/Beyond-Blue-To-Green-Literature-Review.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> See for example: Claudio Rosa et al, "Nature Experiences and Adults' Self-Reported Pro-environmental Behaviors: The Role of Connectedness to Nature and Childhood Nature Experiences", *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol.9 (2018), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6036283/> ("The stimulation of pleasant experiences while in direct contact with nature during childhood seems to trigger interactions with nature in adulthood and consequently, adults embrace pro-environmental actions.")

<sup>6</sup> James Turner, et al, "Non-Timber Values from Planted Forests: Recreation in Whakarewarewa Forest", *NZ Journal of Forestry*, vol.55(4) (2011) [http://www.nzjf.org.nz/free\\_issues/NZJF55\\_4\\_2011/EF04708F-29FF-465d-812E-3D51D07D791C.pdf](http://www.nzjf.org.nz/free_issues/NZJF55_4_2011/EF04708F-29FF-465d-812E-3D51D07D791C.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

<sup>8</sup> Felicity Oglive, "Wheels of progress: What happens when a rural town becomes the mountain bike capital of Australia?", *ABC News online*, 27 December 2017, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-12-26/mountain-bike-trails-driving-major-change-in-derby/9276384>

opportunity and that the mountain biking market is highly segmented. We would challenge this suggestion. In our view, this attitude underestimates the popularity of mountain biking, the ability of mountain biking destinations to attract specific activity-specific tourism, Canberra's natural mountain biking resources, the 'family' nature of mountain biking (ie. children will happily ride off-road but often not on-road), and the ability of mountain biking events to attract competitors. Mountain biking is not particularly segmented, and most mountain bikers simply enjoy off-road riding. They also often participate in road cycling. If the cycling tourism strategy diminishes mountain biking to focus on general leisure cycling or road cycling it will miss a significant opportunity.

Trail development in the ACT should focus on the fastest growing markets – women, families, and older riders – and should be built to cater for them (ie. ensure there are a good amount of 'green' rated trails).

There is an opportunity to attract mountain bikers to Canberra for multiple days, due to the variety of mountain biking locations: eg. Stromlo, Kowen/Sparrow Hill, Majura Pines, Bruce Ridge, Centenary trail, Zoo Pines, Tuggeranong Pines. An existing opportunity is being lost because of a lack of coherent and easily accessible information on mountain biking in Canberra. It would greatly assist if the Government invested in a professional, easily navigable information and tourism campaign on mountain biking. This should include a Canberra mountain biking website, that provides all the details of where to go, accommodation and travel options etc. Examples in other jurisdictions include the "Ride Blue Derby" website<sup>9</sup> and the "Ride Tassie" website.<sup>10</sup>

In our view it would be beneficial for marketing efforts around mountain biking to also emphasise other experiences in Canberra that appeal to families (eg. food and wine, other tourist attractions). Regional mountain bike events are noticeably targeting their marketing at families, highlighting activities in the region that families can do while they are visiting.

### **3. Mountain biking needs to be developed in a way that is ecologically sensitive**

While the ACT Greens support mountain biking and other outdoor recreation, we emphasise that these activities and related developments need to occur in a way that respects and protects the natural environment. We would not support the encroachment of trails into sensitive ecological areas. Development of new tracks should only occur in areas agreed to by Government land managers, subject to strict environmental criteria. Where possible, local Parkcare groups should be involved. Fortunately, there are ample places where recreation can occur without impacting inappropriately on the environment; pine plantations being the obvious example.

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.ridebluederby.com.au/>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ridetassie.com/>

Government should ensure the environment is protected and inappropriate trail building does not occur; at the same time it should work openly with trail builders to ensure they can develop trails in appropriate areas without being blocked by difficult approval processes.

The availability of convenient and high quality trails also mitigates the likelihood of people building illegal trails in inappropriate locations. This practice should continue to be strongly discouraged. Government may note, however, that some trails are naturally formed by walkers or riders in locations where there is a 'missing link' eg. it may link together two other pieces of trail. These trails should be left in situ, where appropriate.

We note that mountain biking and other recreational activities in Canberra can and largely do occur in a way that respects the natural environment. Riders will often ride on fire trails that pass through nature reserves and this does not appear to cause damage (eg. widening of fire roads to encroach into the reserve). Similarly, the trails in Bruce Ridge allow for riding and hiking, and appear to be well used, and well managed, without additionally disturbing the natural environment.

#### **4. Specific points and suggestions**

To advance the goals outlined above, we make the following further points and suggestions.

*The government should invest in, and facilitate the improvement of existing trails and facilities*

Stromlo Forest Park (SFP) is becoming busy and would benefit from an expanded trail network and additional infrastructure. New capital investment in SFP over its lifetime has been minimal. The trail network has not been expanded for many years. Due to the proposed development of ovals at SFP, beginner tracks will soon be removed and reduce the overall trail network. In the least, the beginner trails need to be replaced, as they are favoured by young children, families, and beginner riders. There are many opportunities to develop further trails at Stromlo, particularly in the western area.

SFP would also benefit from additional infrastructure – essentially the initiatives proposed in the Stromlo Forest Park Master Plan, such as accommodation, a new internal road circuit, etc. This additional infrastructure would be a catalyst for new activities, events and tourism, as well as benefit the local Canberra community. New infrastructure will help SFP attain a village atmosphere, like ski resorts or bigger mountain bike parks in other countries, which will amplify its attractiveness. Renewed investment will help Canberra and SFP, regaining its place as the country's premier destination for cycle tourism, especially mountain biking.

The building of a pool at SFP opens opportunities for multi-sport events - such as triathlon – as participants can swim, ride, and run all in the same vicinity. The proposed internal road circuit would assist this. It would also provide a safe(r) environment for people to road cycle, separated from traffic (noting there are sometimes complaints from both drivers and cyclists about interactions around the Uriarra/Cotter on-road loop). This safe environment would potentially attract more people to cycling, as the perceived danger of riding in traffic is a common barrier. The growing population in the Molonglo Valley who would be situated close to this track.

Accommodation on the site obviously opens up opportunities for increased tourism, as tourists can stay on site at SFP.

Additional infrastructure at SFP will lead to new community-led activities, as demonstrated by the recent opening of “the Handlebar” and pump track at SFP. SFP is noticeably busier, centred around the Handlebar. People are now organising social rides, essentially to ride, and then eat and drink at the bar. Similarly, other events are making use of the Handlebar and pump track such as the ‘pump track challenge’ events. These are new activities, spurred by the opening of new, relatively modest facilities.

Improvements to SFP should coincide with a renewed effort to attract major cycling events to Canberra. Previously it has hosted World Cup mountain biking events, and could potentially host more in the future, or alternative cycling events such as the Sea Otter Classic.

Other existing areas around Canberra could benefit from improved trails. While volunteers are probably willing to help build and improve trails, this would benefit from some complementary investment.

Importantly, small and cheap efforts to formalise and improve mountain biking areas go a long way. Signage and maps, parking, water points, logos, etc. make a big difference to attracting more local riders, tourists, and making the experience more enjoyable.

Canberra’s off-road trail network would benefit from more drinking fountains and taps (eg. a tap at Bruce Ridge and Kowen Forest would be particularly useful). A highly legible system of signage and maps makes a big difference to encouraging riders off-road – many potential riders simply don’t know where to go or how to get around. We also recommend that the Government install some road signage, showing how to reach various trails around Canberra while cycling or driving (and alerting people that these facilities exist).



As an example of successful, cost-effective investment, the trails in Majura Pines received a revamp in 2014. The community showed a strong interest in maintaining the area for recreation, with over 680 people contributing to a public consultation process. The Government contributed almost \$300,000 dollars to revamp the trails, and the Majura Pines Trail alliance was formed, a network of volunteers that help create and maintain the trails.

Majura Pines is now a highly used community resource. The Majura Pines Trail alliance has collected data on its use, both from public information available through GPS logs (such as the web application Strava) and from their own installation of infra-red counters on the trails themselves. In a single year they tracked over 26,000 rides on the Majura Pines trails. Most riders are from the ACT but thousands of riders have also come from other States and Territories, as well as a range of countries including the US, UK, New Zealand, Canada, Switzerland, and various parts of Europe and Asia. This example shows how far a reasonably modest investment can go.

### *The Government should invest in new trails*

As well as improving existing trail areas, the Government should invest in the development of new trails. New trails will help grow mountain biking as an activity in Canberra and will help attract tourism to Canberra as a multi-day mountain biking destination.

As noted above, new trails should be aimed at the broad, growing market and should include significant areas of green/easy trails (not exclusively however). Building 'gravity assisted' trails will increase the popularity (note this is different to 'downhill' trails, which are difficult and inaccessible to many riders).

Some areas that appear to have potential include the Cotter area (potentially even linked in a continuous track to Stromlo), and unused areas in Kowen Forest. The recently announced Ingledene pine plantation project also presents opportunities for new recreational trails. New trails in the Cotter have the potential to engage other tourism opportunities, such as a link to tourism activities at Corin Forest. We note that any trail building in the Cotter area would require careful assessment from an ecological perspective, particularly as it is close to the water catchment.

The Government should also consider opportunities for trails in Blue Range, where downhill mountain bike trails already exist, and opportunities to link this trail to SFP, and to other tourism activities in the area.

New trails should also be developed and managed in a way that allows them to be a long term, valued resource (note comments about plantations and logging below).

### *Community support / investment*

The ACT Government might like to consider how it can cooperate with the community to develop new mountain biking infrastructure, not just in terms of design, but also in funding the projects. As an example, Valmont Bike Park in Boulder, Colorado is a public urban bike facility located in the city. The project was managed by the Boulder Municipal Council and largely paid for by the council. However, local businesses and individuals also contributed approximately \$500,000 to the project to help it come to fruition. The names of contributors are listed on plaques and signage at the park. The model allows local businesses to reinvest in their community, and to receive some recognition through that process. Some bike paths in Boulder are also 'sponsored' by local businesses, and signage on the paths notes this. This model of shared investment/philanthropy/advertising seems to occur regularly in the United States, but not in Australia.

### *Improve logging and trail building issues*

The Government should ensure that it works closely with trail builders and the community so that recreational activities in plantation forests are supported. Long term logging plans need to be made public, so that the community knows where and when trails can be developed and used. Logging contractors should be required to follow certain protocols so as to not unnecessarily damage or interfere with trails, and to undertake remediation work where possible. The Government should take opportunities where possible to leverage equipment for trail building or remediation where logging or other work has occurred.

The Government should work with the community to identify areas where volunteers can build trails. Any approval processes required for volunteers to build trails should be made clear.

### *Allow for multi-use recreational activities*

People in Canberra enjoy a variety of outdoor recreational activities which are compatible with mountain biking. Consideration should be given to how activities such as walking, horse-riding, trail running etc can be developed in conjunction with mountain biking. For example, new areas could be designed so that some trails are open to all these activities, and some for a single activity only. We note that the equestrian community in particular has been concerned for many years about the gradual loss of areas where horse riding can occur.

### *Publish a specific mountain biking strategy*

The ACT would benefit from developing its own mountain biking strategy, and can draw on mountain biking strategies developed in other jurisdictions (for example, NSW's "Sustainable Mountain Biking Strategy"). Such a strategy would formalise

issues such as how and where trails can be developed, planning issues, environmental requirements, approach to tourism and communication, and logging issues. It appears that issues are currently managed through a collection of internal and disparate processes, which can be difficult for the public to understand, could be lost with corporate knowledge, and aren't conducive to making good long term strategic decisions. We are aware of significant work that has been done in the past to develop a strategy, including consultation with the mountain biking community, but this has not been formalised into a final Government strategy.