



Investing in Canberra's conference infrastructure

An industry position paper

Background

Canberra's business events and tourism industry is united in its push to ensure that the city's convention centre needs are solved practically and strategically for the long-term benefit of the industry and the community.

This paper represents the combined views of the industry's major peak bodies including the Australian Hotels Association (ACT Branch), Canberra Business Council, ACT & Region Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Canberra Convention Bureau, Meetings Events Australia (ACT), National Capital Attractions Association (NCAA) and Tourism Industry Council (ACT & Region).

The paper has been prepared to complement a submission to the City Redevelopment Taskforce titled *Canberra city: a redevelopment vision statement - a paper by members of the Canberra tourism and business events industry*. This submission outlined a vision for the tourism industry covering broad planning issues associated with the redevelopment of the city centre.

This paper has been developed to provide a clear understanding of the industry's position on the design and development of a new convention centre. It also provides guidance on critical issues to be considered during the planning and consultation phase for a new facility.

The centenary of Canberra in 2013 will be a time of celebration and an ideal time for a new centre to be showcased as the best and most modern facility of its type in Australia. As the meeting place of a nation, Canberra deserves a convention centre that meets its structural, logistical and operational needs, as well as its iconic status.

The national picture

Canberra is unique in that the declining quality of its existing business events infrastructure now has it standing well apart from its interstate rivals. In Adelaide, Cairns and Melbourne, extensive refurbishments and extensions have been undertaken since their centres were opened totalling hundreds of millions of dollars, while in Perth, Alice Springs and on the Gold Coast state-of-the-art new centres have opened in the last three years.

In other major cities, the level of state government investment in their convention facilities is well over the \$100 million mark, demonstrating the importance placed on the income generating capacity of these centres. Such facilities traditionally attract high yield events that inject enormous economic benefit into the community from direct expenditure on services including airlines, hotels, taxis, banking, restaurants and retail, as well as indirect expenditure on a host of businesses from service providers to caterers.

As the national and international market for business events continues to grow, the competition to secure a share of the meetings market heats up. Already further extensions and upgrades are planned for domestic facilities in cities including Melbourne and Darwin to ensure they can meet the capacity demands

of the future. Internationally, competition also continues to grow, particularly throughout the Asia Pacific and China where dozens of new facilities have and will be commissioned in the next few years.

Recommendations

Location

The city's convention centre must be just that – a convention centre located within close proximity (no more than five-minutes walk or a short shuttle ride) to the city's facilities including hotels, restaurants, shops, banking, transport and other amenities. Many cities have faced significant compromises on the choices available for siting their new convention facilities. Canberra has the opportunity to learn from the lessons of other cities and to avoid similar compromises. Unlike other major cities, Canberra has a good selection of undeveloped sites in the city centre with excellent potential for a convention facility. The advantage this opportunity provides should not be underestimated.

Professional conference organisers will confirm that avoiding the necessity to continually coach delegates to and from a convention centre to hotels and other venues is a major incentive.

While a scenic view from the facility is desirable, more critical is appropriate and conducive surrounding landscaped areas, which can be used as a sanctuary for delegates between sessions, allowing them to network and re energise.

Moving the facility out of the city, perhaps to the lake's shores, would discourage delegates away from the city centre and remove valuable direct delegate expenditure from our economy. The preference of event organisers to offer delegates pedestrian access to the city's amenities is well documented and was also highlighted in the recent delegate satisfaction survey as part of the National Business Events Study released in March 2005.

If the facility were to be sited by the lake to take advantage of Canberra's views, a shuttle service would need to be provided to ensure it was linked with the city's centre and essential amenities. The service would need to run at 15-minute intervals at a minimum.

As in other cities, the facility needs to become a centre of interaction for Canberra. For example, locating the facility near London Circuit where the Legislative Assembly is placed would provide a valuable link to the Canberra Theatre and an active social hub. Moving it across Constitution Avenue to the site opposite the existing facility, or on or near City Hill, would also keep it centralised and allow room for expansion.

Infrastructure

Access must be easy for visitors, general traffic and large coaches and service trucks. That means having good pedestrian links from the city centre, good

access to transport including buses and taxis, good street and directional signage, and easy access for general traffic and over-sized delivery vehicles.

Loading docks must be of sufficient size and capacity to handle large deliveries and heavy vehicles, while load limits for paving, building access (including door size) and internal fit out must meet the most stringent specifications for major events.

A lot of work has already been done to scope and specify requirements for the development of new convention facilities. Meeting Events Australia for example has developed a *Guide to new convention centre development* which lists in detail the minimum requirements.

The proposed Centre for Dialogue could be one component of the development. It would make sense to share infrastructure such as back of house services, while creating an individual identity with its own characteristics to meet the needs of this specialised meeting facility.

Capacity

A minimum of 5,000 square metres of divisible exhibition floor space is required to meet the capacity requirements of major business events and conferences, and to allow facilities to be provided for up to 3,000 delegates.

Kitchen and other amenities must be designed to allow a range of different functions, including a minimum of two conferences of 600 to 1,000 delegates, to run concurrently.

Floor loading in and around the centre is also an important consideration to ensure industries such as defence and other heavy equipment exhibitions and displays can be catered for.

Concurrent conferences would require simultaneous use of plenary, stream and breakout sessions plus delegate registration/office secretariat, exhibition space and venues for catering. To meet these needs, large spaces need to be flexible to allow size to be altered, and need to be supported by a range of tiered and flat floor smaller support spaces.

Catering for a dinner of 1,000 delegates, with stage and dance floor, is also essential so a major event could hold plenary sessions, a trade exhibition and a dinner within the centre at the same time.

Based on estimates from Cox Humphries Moss architects, which has designed many convention centres in Australia and overseas (including Sydney, Brisbane, Perth, Canberra, Singapore, Durbin in South Africa and Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia), the cost of the required fully fitted facility is \$4,500 per square metre. To meet the minimum requirements outlined above, an investment of some \$200 million would be required.

Security

Canberra's new convention centre must fit the city's national capital status and enable our city to host major national and international government and business events.

The centre must be the most secure facility of its type in Australia. It must meet international security standards and have full security systems in place to cater for global meetings, heads of state and other VIPs. The facility should support and compliment the new defence headquarters planned for Bungendore

All security initiatives should be designed in consultation with the Australian Federal Police, ASIO, DFAT, Department of Defence and other security experts.

Technology

The advanced technology features of the centre should set it apart from other similar facilities, reflecting the standing of Canberra as the national capital, and a leader in the hi-tech industry in Australia, and in some cases internationally.

A clean, green building would showcase Australia's already enviable reputation in environmentally sustainable building solutions and provide a showcase facility for Canberra. It should also feature the latest developments in terms of safety, security and fire, communications, audio visual and emerging technologies.

Essential amenities

Simple, but essential amenities must be established in conjunction with the new facility and within close proximity. These include an after hours chemist, newsagent, grocery stores, internet cafe, bureau de change, drycleaner and laundromat.

City positioning and destination appeal

Canberra's position as the national capital should be reinforced through the centre, and the city promoted as *the* destination to conduct major business events, similar to the positioning Washington has adopted in the United States.

Our access to government decision-makers, the range of iconic attractions, our natural environment, the proximity to other major capital cities and ease of movement in and around the city is unmatched by other destinations.

The city also has an enviable list of knowledge-based organisations and facilities that lead the world in their field including the Australian National University, CSIRO, the John Curtin School of Medical Research, and Department of Defence. Yet Canberra has no facility to support the world-class standing of these organisations or to cater for their major international meetings, conferences or symposiums.

The opportunity also exists to stimulate downstream business through the facility. As Canberra's ability to host such major events and conferences grows, so too does its exposure to increased business opportunities and collaborations across a wide range of industries and sectors.

Accommodation

A mix of accommodation standards from three to five star hotels is required including all-suite hotels with self-catering amenities. The centre's development must include an upscale, international standard accommodation component as part of the complex.

High volume hotel options (300 rooms) make the best sense for conferences and events because organisers can secure large blocks of rooms, sometimes years in advance. Block bookings are also required across a range of different configurations, standards and price points.

Compelling evidence of the importance of collocating a hotel next to a convention centre is available from other cities.

Economic benefits

The Sustainable Tourism CRC's National Business Events Study shows that in 2003, Australia's overall estimated expenditure associated with business events was about \$17 billion. Canberra's share of that pie was 6% or \$990 million.

According to sources including MICE.net magazine, the business events sector is continuing to grow in Australia, however the study found that Canberra's market share had remained static.

While the ACT hosts a larger proportion of association and government events than other cities, Canberra's share of the corporate sector is much less than its interstate competitors. A new convention facility would enable Canberra to increase its share of the market as well as generate greater direct and indirect delegate expenditure.

If Canberra's share of the total business events market could be lifted from 6% to 7% (as measured in the 2003 business events study), the ACT would generate an additional \$200 million a year in expenditure.

Naturally funding for a concerted marketing effort would be required to grow this market sector and to ensure Canberra could capitalise on its potential.

More emphasis should be placed on attracting events from the corporate sector and the 'best-fit' international association events, and Canberra's share of major government events should also be targeted to halt the current loss of these opportunities to other cities.