

An alternate vision for the future of Federal Golf Club

Background

With the ACT Government's Red Hill Integrated Plan likely to be delivered soon, reigniting the public conversation around the best way to sustain the a golf course at Federal Golf Club is vital to retain the Club as a golf venue in perpetuity.

Federal Golf Club sits on the south western slopes of Red Hill and requires significant irrigation to maintain. Over years of drought, the cost of water, coupled with declining membership has placed the Club under financial pressure. In an effort to shore up its future, the Club has made valiant attempts to put forward various land development proposals designed to reap a financial return to pay for managing its water needs.

The challenge has been that every proposal to introduce residential development to the site has been met with opposition, from a range of different interests including local residents to environmental groups to government. Multiple iterations, including the most recent pivot to over-55s living, have failed to gain widespread support, and in its draft Red Hill Integrated Plan the ACT Government moved the proposed development much farther south on the site, potentially causing significant disruption to both the golf course and nearby residents.

At the same time, the latest data from Golf Australia about the decline in golf participation over two decades has alarming implications for Federal, notwithstanding gains made in 2019-20. GA's development manager David Gallichio was last year quoted as saying the sport's peak body was working urgently to stem the exodus and had prioritised resources to distressed clubs and "When a club closes, it isn't coming back."

It would be a tragedy for Canberra if this happened to Federal.

The land was originally granted for public use, and it is preferable that it remain in community hands as a concessional lease. Residential development, such as that being proposed, is not the only option and will only provide a one-off windfall to the Club, (assuming a lease variation is granted which arguably it should not be, given the original grant of land for public use).

The only current option on the table is a proposal from an out-of-town developer which significantly disrupts the physical features of the existing golf course, requires a long and expensive lease variation process (about which there is no guarantee), privatises community land, impacts negatively on nearby residents through increased traffic and reduced visual amenity, and puts more pressure on the local ecology.

So, how can things be done differently?

By keeping golf at the heart of the solution while diversifying and finding alternate, sustainable revenue streams Federal can continue in perpetuity as a community golf club. Such an approach must deliver benefits and opportunities back to the Club, the local community and Canberra more widely, it must not impact negatively on local residents, and it must respect the environmental values of the location.

This alternate vision for Federal Golf Club is being put forward to stimulate conversation about what is possible and desirable to keep the Club viable and retain the course for quiet enjoyment by golfers, locals, and visitors alike.

What is being proposed?

For golfers, the game is sacrosanct, so the starting point for this vision is retaining and upgrading the existing 18 hole championship golf course. Federal's location amidst Red Hill's sensitive box gum woodland ecological community also means not expanding beyond the existing area being used, notwithstanding that the Club's land extends well past the boundary of the northern-most fairways. Further, the elements of the vision have to be permissible on the site under the current lease, without requiring a long and costly lease variation process, and help the precinct to achieve carbon neutral status.

The new concept master plan for Federal, designed by Stewart Architecture, sits entirely within the existing footprint and cleverly uses the natural fall of the land as well as taking advantage of the spectacular views to the west across Canberra to the Brindabella Ranges.

The plan includes:

- a new world-class clubhouse (on the site of the existing building) including café/bar/restaurant/office and meeting facilities, pro shop, private Members' bar, lockers and change facilities, and undercover car parking as well as golf cart and bicycle parking
- a new state-of-the-art coaching pavilion at the driving range including video analysis of golf swing dynamics whilst hitting balls in both real time on the practice range and in a simulator setting, with dedicated spaces for video review and tuition
- A new lake and upgraded water reticulation to enable better water management and maintenance of high quality surfaces
- a flexible function venue for up to 300 people able to be used for weddings and other events such as conferences, located separate to the main clubhouse to minimise impact on the golf operations
- a 36-suite boutique hotel offering a truly Australian tourism experience with kangaroos at the doorstep, able to be used year round by golfers, eco-tourists, wedding guests, those on corporate retreats and domestic travellers on mini breaks
- a health club including wellness spa, gym, swimming pool, tennis courts and undercover parking
- upgrading and signing walking and cycling tracks and improving access to Red Hill from the surrounding suburbs via sustainable paths that will discourage intrusion onto the fairways and greens as well as protect the highly sensitive box gum woodland ecological community.

The architect's statement is outlined in full below.

It should be noted that this is a concept, designed to generate discussion and debate, not a final detailed plan cast in stone.

Given no lease variation is required, the project could commence as soon as a Development Application was approved and would take less than three years (depending on the DA process) over two stages to minimise disruption to golf operations (outbuildings first followed by new clubhouse).

The estimated cost of constructing the proposed re-development is \$25 million.

How will it be funded and how much will Federal Golf Club get?

The project will be fully funded by venture partners who would finance the re-development and carry all the risk. There will be no cost to Federal Golf Club.

Once the venues are completed and operational, initial modelling suggests returns to Federal Golf Club will be in the order of \$1 million+ per annum (under a landlord operating model with no investment required from Federal) in addition to its normal income from the existing golf operations (memberships, playing fees, etc) which are quarantined from these revenue forecasts.

Who are the proposed partners?

The proposal is the brainchild of Hughes local resident and former Federal Golf Club member Dimitri Nikias. The three partners proposed to assist Federal Golf Club on this journey are Nikias Diamond, Stewart Architecture and the Canberra Southern Cross Club.

“The idea came out of conversations local residents had been having since May this year with Federal Golf Club around creating dedicated mountain bike tracks on the course periphery,” Mr Nikias said.

“It was obvious the Club was trying really hard to shore up its future but that lots of obstacles were being put in its way.

“We sounded out a range of Club members and other golfers, Hughes and Garran residents, businesses and community groups about what they thought might work, and then set about giving that vision some form and bringing in development partners who could make it happen.

“It made sense to seek partners who are local Canberrans, who have a strong history and affiliation with the Canberra community and are able to engage effectively, listen and fully understand and appreciate what is important to them.

“I have worked with Stewart Architecture over many years and knew they were the right firm for this project. When I approached a friend on the Southern Cross Club Board, he put me in touch with their CEO and we went from there.

“I think we have initiated the start of a really exciting vision for the future of this Club.

“We trust that the Board and Membership of Federal Golf Club will look upon this proposal favourably and as an invitation to start a truly constructive conversation about what is possible for Federal.”

Nikias Diamond is a family-owned business that has been a proud contributor to the ACT property development industry since the 1960s. They have a proven record of accomplishment in catering to the needs of clients who have detailed technical requirements. The company is known for a culture which nurtures and rewards loyalty, honesty and integrity. Respect for that reputation is expressed through a loyal long-term client base and outstanding project developments. Nikias Diamond is the construction team behind the Nishi Hotel and the restoration of the entire heritage precinct at NewActon, the Clinical Services Building at Calvary John James Memorial Hospital, Canberra Imaging in Deakin (the largest private imaging facility in the southern hemisphere), and recently was awarded and commenced construction of the new \$10 million Denman Prospect Childcare and Community Centre for Capital Estate Developments (Canberra Airport).

Stewart Architecture is committed to projects which strengthen communities. Their team is known for its ability to define, draw out and defend the public interest in all their projects. Approaching their fourth decade in practice, Stewart Architecture has a substantial body of built work including the Hotel Realm precinct and master plan, Kingston Foreshore master plan, campus master plans for Canberra Girls Grammar School and Radford College and the Yhuuramulum Building (CGGS Rowing

Shed) on the shore of Lake Burley Griffin, showcasing their inventive and strategic approach to architecture that engages with the community.

The Canberra Southern Cross Club is a highly-regarded community organisation with 80,000 members, operating at multiple sites across the ACT and with vast experience in successful health, wellness and hospitality venues. CSCC has a demonstrated track record in partnering with existing community sports clubs to enable them to focus on their sporting operations while having their venues run professionally and receiving ongoing financial and other benefits from the relationship (such as Western District Rugby Union Club and the Canberra Yacht Club).

What are the benefits of this vision?

- It enables Federal Golf Club to be free to focus on what it does best - golf - without the burden of trying to be hospitality operators.
- The land remains a golf club in community hands, for which it was originally granted, and the fundamental nature of the area is unchanged.
- The golf course will be upgraded to international standard with facilities not available at any other golf venue in Canberra.
- The profile of the golf course will remain the same and the development would be staged so there would be minimal disruption to golf operations and the enjoyment of golf by members.
- All the buildings and activities proposed are covered under the existing lease purpose and no lease variation is required.
- The addition of a health club (wellness spa, gym, pool, tennis courts), hotel accommodation, function venue and a range of food and beverage offerings will be the financial lungs underpinning the vision. Importantly, these will provide a sustainable revenue stream of \$1million+ per annum to Federal and ensure the long-term viability of the Club so that there isn't more ad hoc development in the future.
- The plan minimises impacts on Garran and Hughes residents, especially with respect to visual amenity and no additional access road/s being required.
- Traffic will be at much lower levels than the proposed residential developments and probably less than historic traffic flows along Gowrie Drive when the Golf Club enjoyed membership in greater numbers than today.
- The plan minimises impacts on the environment by keeping within the Club's existing footprint, and being a carbon neutral development designed to achieve 5 to 6-star green star rating.

Next Steps

- Socialise the proposal with Federal Golf Club Board and Membership and begin discussions
- Engage a golf course architect such as OCM to get advice on course upgrades and integrate with the master plan
- Engage a track development specialist such as Makin Trax to develop a plan for world class walking, mountain bike and multi-use tracks, trails and infrastructure

Federal Golf Club Master Plan: Architect's Statement

Our master plan evolves the Federal Golf Club from its current single use to a diverse recreation precinct and destination that will be enjoyed by the wider Canberra community, catering for all ages and interests beyond golf. Improved integration with the surrounding suburbs will draw people into the site to access a range of health and lifestyle facilities. Importantly, the existing 18-hole course layout is unchanged, and the landscaped interface valued by neighbouring residents is maintained and enhanced.

Topography and vistas identified within the site are used to inform the framework for the development of a series of buildings along key axis. In a contemporary architectural style, the buildings integrate with the natural landscape and are linked by paths and boardwalks. The natural topography of the site is employed to relocate parking under buildings and therefore maximise the extent of gardens and landscaping.

A tree-lined avenue formalises arrival to the precinct, culminating in a spacious forecourt to the clubhouse, aligned to spectacular views along the 10th fairway and the Brindabellas beyond. The clubhouse includes pro shop, café, bar and restaurant facilities, together with a series of meeting rooms and shared office space for community organizations.

The new health club offers facilities such as gym, day spa, wellness services and child minding. Outdoor tennis courts and pool will diversify the sports offering within the precinct.

The functions and events pavilion with outlook across the fairways will cater for gatherings of up to 300 people. The flexible design provides variable spaces suitable for weddings, conferences, and smaller groups. Sited away from the clubhouse, there will be no impact to the amenity or operations of the golf course.

The boutique hotel will provide serviced accommodation of around 36 rooms. Set in a peaceful position within the fairways it is bound by an expanded lake. The hotel provides accommodation for golfing weekends, weddings or corporate retreats with outlook over the native landscape.

The existing driving range is enhanced to provide complimentary use as an outdoor events space for evening concerts.

The bushland perimeter of the golf club provides opportunity to better integrate with the surrounding suburbs and will include an enhanced network of nature trails and cycling tracks to allow improved movement and access into the site.

The entire precinct is envisaged as an environmentally sensitive carbon neutral development designed to achieve 5 to 6-star green star rating. All landscaping will utilise native planting endemic to the Red Hill location.

Our proposal provides significant benefit to both the Federal Golf Club and the broader community with increased employment, tourism, and interaction between the club and surrounding residents. This project will provide a leading example of a golf club adapting to maintain commercial viability with only positive outcomes for the club and community.

Stewart Architecture

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