

Woden's wasteland: community push to end urban decay

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The Alexander and Albemarle buildings have sat vacant for seven years awaiting demolition and the Woden community is sick of living with the decaying derelict sites.

Shattered glass windows, boarded up doors and sprawling graffiti juxtapose the sleek and polished exteriors of the plaza and fresher-faced buildings in the town centre.

Residents have labelled the site "the biggest eyesore in Canberra" on Facebook with other comments calling it "a wasteland, like something out of Detroit" or "straight from the Soviet era".

The stalemate between owners Doma Group and planning regulators has been perpetuated by a lack of demand for office space making redevelopment unprofitable.

Doma Group general manager Jure Domazet said the \$4 million cost of the demolition combined with the potential lease variation charge and now the proposed Icon Water charge meant the development was "financially unviable" in the current market.

"We had also looked at an adaptive reuse but this was not viable," he said.

"The territory and Icon Water development charges need to be finalised before any development can take place – the fact that these are proposed to be higher than current is a major concern."

Vandals relish the rundown, concealed spaces. To keep the area safe, Doma Group is doing weekly fence inspections, has security patrols with dogs and infrared cameras and works with police to deal with trespassers.

Woden Valley Community Council president Fiona Carrick met with Doma Group to discuss planning policy settings and progressing a plan for the dormant sites.

"The town square area has hit rock-bottom," she said. "But there is only so much you can moan and groan. We want to work with the government positively to go about getting the facilities and the amenities we need to build a vibrant community."

The Labor government introduced its controversial lease variation charge in 2011, replacing what was until then called a "change of use" charge, and dramatically increased the amount charged for developers of units, townhouses and dual occupancies.

Debate during the 2016 ACT election focused on the efficacy of the tax with Canberra Liberals promising to scrap it if elected, saying such costs stifled attempts to increase density in town centres and led to urban sprawl.

However, ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr distanced himself from concerns about red tape and charges hampering development, instead saying "not every urban renewal project is driven by the ACT government".

"When market conditions are more favourable for the private owners they will be renewed," he said.

"Ultimately, privately owned buildings, left vacant by the federal Liberal government cutting jobs, are the responsibility of the building owner."

Mr Barr said his government moving 1100 ACT public servants to Woden, upgrading the Woden bus interchange and committing to light rail from Civic to Woden were significant investments in the Woden town centre.

While a \$6.2 million revamp of Phillip Oval was underway, Mrs Carrick said there had been a cleaning-out of several other civic attractions and facilities in Woden.

"We are at risk of becoming a dormitory district," she said. "The CIT has been closed, the pool has been privatised, the basketball stadium has been knocked down."

She said Mr Barr's comments indicated the government wanted the private sector to do the "heavy lifting" and invest, but the planning policy settings and declining numbers of community amenities in the area sent the wrong signal.

"We require the government to provide the community families that do not raise revenue, the private sector will then have the confidence to invest cafes, restaurants and other businesses."

This story was found at: <http://www.canberratimes.com.au/act-news/wodens-wasteland-community-push-to-end-urban-decay-20170226-guaw2u.html>