

# ACT Circular Economy Strategy Submission

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*On behalf of a committed group of volunteers and organisations, including Tender Funerals Canberra Region, and Tender Funerals Australia, who want to see a not-for-profit, future-focused, sustainable, third option available to people for disposal of their deceased.*

We commend the ACT Government for its intention to become a circular city that supports sustainability, promotes innovation and allows our community and environment to thrive.

The management of human remains is an essential community service, for which current methods are environmentally unsustainable, and unaffordable for some members of the community.

We encourage you to consider this submission and work in partnership with the community to provide a not-for-profit, greener third option for body disposal, that can improve community wellbeing, address disadvantage and environmental sustainability.

## **Request**

We encourage you to consider this submission and:

- Legislate to allow the research and development of human composting as an environmental and social innovation within the ACT
- Work in partnership with the community to develop this research as a not-for-profit public service to the community
- Establish the regulatory framework to support human composting as an approved method of body disposal

## **Vision**

A comprehensive disruption of and innovation to the disposal of human remains, that is:

- environmentally sustainable and cost effective.
- legally accepted in Australia as a method of body disposal.
- accessible to the economically disadvantaged.

## Need

Burial is expensive, land is finite, cremations release carbon emissions and both rely on single-use products (coffins) and cause environmental pollution. We recommend a third option - human composting.

Human composting is a more sustainable, energy efficient, environmentally friendly option of disposing of a person's remains in a respectful, dignified and sustainable way. It creates a product that strengthens and improves the environment, in the form of nutrient rich, composted soil, that is safe to use in any horticultural or land-regeneration setting.

## Outcomes

- All 3 key principles of a circular economy are met:
  - Eliminating waste and pollution by creation of a usable compost, returning people to the environment in a meaningful way.
  - Genuinely enabling people to 'live on' by contributing to improved environmental outcomes and actively becoming part of the circle of life
  - Reducing the negative impacts of existing body disposal, and regenerating natural systems - if families don't have the interest or space to take their persons composted remains, partnerships could be established with organisations such as the National Arboretum, National Botanic Gardens, Landcare, and community groups doing community gardens, Floriade in the suburbs, regeneration projects etc.

If the ACT Government were to commit to this innovation, it could make an indelible change to our society and have a profound impact on the way Canberra, and hopefully, Australia approaches death and environmental sustainability planning for the future of the nation.

The ACT Government Circular City Strategy has five focus areas:

1. Food and organics
2. Built environment
3. Consumer goods
4. Emerging and problematic waste streams
5. Creating space to showcase our commitment to the circular economy

Our vision incorporates several focus areas - **organics** through purposefully creating useful fertile soil; **emerging and problematic waste streams** by addressing the increased demand on finite resources for burial which also impact ground water, and the increased use of cremation which still uses fossil fuels and emits toxins; and, **creating**

**space to showcase** not just a commitment to the circular economy, but should the ACT Government partner with community, to also address numerous **ACT Government Wellbeing Framework Indicators**:

<b>DOMAIN</b>	<b><i>Assist with these domains by providing Canberrans:</i></b>
Access and Connectivity	★ access to an affordable and sustainable option to farewell their deceased, celebrating life in its final cycle before regenerating into something new
Economy	★ creating jobs
Health	★ improved air quality through the reduction of particulate pollution from cremation
Living Standards	★ reduces the future need for public green spaces to be dedicated solely to memorial parks, improving the accessibility of those spaces to all
Environment and Climate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>★ reduction of carbon dioxide gas through cremation exhaust and use of fossil fuel burning cremators</li> <li>★ reduces needs for single use supplies (caskets/coffins)</li> <li>★ reduces cremation of clothing materials including zippers and plastic buttons and materials such as lacquers on caskets</li> </ul>
Social connection	★ providing opportunities for the compost to be used to beautify parks, landscapes, gardens etc facilitates connection to place as well as providing opportunities and spaces for people to come together
Education and life-long learning	★ giving Canberrans an opportunity to grow and learn at any age and stage of life - to develop and gain the skills needed to understand death and to actively and comfortably plan for this eventuality

Identity and belonging	★ everyone is on equal terms, regardless of age, gender, sexual orientation, cultural background or disability. Canberrans can determine their needs, they are the decision makers. This fosters positive outcomes in spite of the circumstances.
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Generally, The benefits of a circular economy include:

- improving the natural environment
- wellbeing
- supporting the transition to a net zero city
- opportunities for innovation
- economic growth
- job creation.

The ACT Government has had successive consultations into the future of cemeteries and crematoria, which led to the 2020 legislative changes - which enable new technologies and green options, and the development of a masterplan for Southern Memorial Park..

One consultation reported ‘An inquiry into the management of ACT cemeteries in 2017 recommended, among other things, that the Act be reviewed and that the ACT Government continue to monitor community preferences<sup>1</sup>.

Now, as the ACT Government is looking to do the detailed design of the future Southern Memorial Park, expected to be fit for purpose for 100 years, it is time to integrate the circular city, community wellbeing framework indicators and properly plan for the future, in collaboration and partnership with the community it serves.

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<https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/cemeteries-and-crematoria-act#:~:text=The%20Cemeteries%20and%20Crematoria%20Act%202003%20sets%20out%20the%20legislative,continue%20to%20monitor%20community%20preferences.>

## Further reading:

<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/12/05/opinion/human-composting-new-york.html>

Explains the Human Composting (or Natural Organic Reduction) process, as part of an op ed by Caitlyn Doughty, a well respected mortician and author of three books on death and the funeral industry. She founded the Order of the Good Death and is a self-described death activist and “funeral industry rabble-rouser”.

2022 Report of The Lancet Commission on the *Value of Death: Bringing death back into life*

Drawing on multidisciplinary perspectives from around the globe, the Commissioners argue that death and life are bound together: without death there would be no life. The Commission proposes a new vision for death and dying, with greater community involvement alongside health and social care services, and increased bereavement support.

<https://www.thelancet.com/commissions/value-of-death>

**Funeral Poverty** by Victoria J Haneman (2021)

This Article makes a unique contribution to the literature by drawing attention to the financial burden of death service being shouldered by those who are “relatively poor,” or those for whom everyday life may be a financial struggle. The thesis is equal parts positive, normative, descriptive, and prescriptive: it is imperative that options be made available to transition human remains in a way that does not exacerbate cycles of poverty and allows for the living to preserve dignity.

<https://scholarship.richmond.edu/lawreview/vol55/iss2/2/>

**How human composting could reduce death’s carbon footprint - CNN**

"When human composting transforms the organic material of our bodies, carbon is also sequestered in the soil created. Rather than being released as carbon dioxide gas through exhaust during a cremation, the carbon matter contained in each body returns to the earth."

<https://www.cnn.com/2022/11/07/world/human-composting-natural-organic-reduction-scn-lbg/index.html>

### **Bare. Australian Funeral Industry: State of the Nation 2021**

An independent study of almost 3,500 Australians, commissioned by Bare Cremation and endorsed by University of Melbourne's Dr Hannah Gould – a cultural anthropologist specialising in death and religion.

According to the research the majority of Australians have attended at least one funeral in the last 5 years, yet do not know the options or requirements around end-of-life planning. Of those who had arranged a memorial and were dissatisfied; 70% felt that complaining would have been a waste of time and 49% didn't know who to complain to.

As an industry (worth \$1.7bn annually) it would seem little has been done to provide such insight to consumers who in almost every other way demand transparency and accountability when making purchasing and life decisions.

[https://insideageing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Australian-Funeral-Industry-Report-2021\\_Bare\\_FA.pdf](https://insideageing.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Australian-Funeral-Industry-Report-2021_Bare_FA.pdf)

### **The Australasian Cemeteries and Crematoria Authority National Cremation Capacity Survey 2020**

Documenting that the ACT is utilising only 18 percent of its existing cremation capacity - conducted in 2020, prior to the ACT Government Crematoria being operational in 2021.

Survey conducted as a response to Coronavirus Pandemic being experienced around the world, and the unknowns around potential mortality rates, infection, and the absence of an effective vaccine, and the industry seeking to understand its capacity.

[https://accaweb.com.au/images/easyblog\\_articles/45/CREMATION-CAPACITY-SURVEY-2020\\_14Oct2020.pdf](https://accaweb.com.au/images/easyblog_articles/45/CREMATION-CAPACITY-SURVEY-2020_14Oct2020.pdf)

### **Federal Labor Minister Andrew Leigh - Australia faces Civics Crisis and Collapse in Community Life**

The need for social capital, a social contract, and volunteering. We've seen a collapse in the number of people volunteering and a decline in the share of people who are donating to charities.

“Labor respects the role of charities, and wants to empower them to help the community. We will continue to work collaboratively with charities to reconnect Australia.”

‘But Leigh says the problem is broader than volunteerism. Australians are now less likely to be a member of a community organisation, go to religious services, be a union member, play a team sport, give blood, and don’t have as many friends or know as many neighbours as they used to’.

<https://www.themandarin.com.au/198196-australia-faces-civic-crisis/>

<https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/declining-rate-of-volunteering-heralds-collapse-in-community-life-minister-20220812-p5b9ek.html>

ACT government Southern Memorial Park consultation -  
<https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/SMP>

ACT Government Cemeteries and Crematoria legislation review -  
<https://yoursayconversations.act.gov.au/cemeteries-and-crematoria-act>

Current ACT Cemeteries and Crematoria legislation  
<https://www.legislation.act.gov.au/a/2020-7/>

ACT Government 2013 masterplan for Southern Memorial Park  
<https://www.tzg.com.au/project/act-southern-memorial-park-masterplan/>

ACT Government Wellbeing Indicator Framework - <https://www.act.gov.au/wellbeing>

ACT Government Circular Economy Discussion Paper -  
<https://www.climatechoices.act.gov.au/policy-programs/act-circular-economy-strategy>