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Canberra footpaths blocked by construction, making streets inaccessible and causing safety risks



Caption: Canberran Lindy Hou, who is blind, says navigating around construction in Canberra's city centre is very challenging, even with her guide dog Flash. (ABC News: Adam Kennedy)

Canberran Lindy Hou suffers from a degenerative eye condition called Retinitis Pigmentosa, which has left her legally blind, with only light perception.

"That means if there's brightness or lights or something I might notice it, other than that sometimes I notice shadows, but not much," she said.

With significant construction around Canberra's city centre, Ms Hou's been facing increasing challenges navigating the area.

She said she tries to be as independent as possible, learning how to safely walk different routes with her guide dog Flash, but when construction sees footpaths temporarily blocked off there isn't a lot either of them can do.

"My guide dog, as smart as he is, he's not very good at reading signs," Ms Hou said.

"He definitely can't tell me what he's just seen on the sign.

"Quite often I will have to rely on some wonderful pedestrian to help me, if there's anyone around.

"Sometimes I just call out and say, 'Is anyone around to give me a hand?', but that's not very good because I just like to be able to get around quite independently without needing extra help."

Ms Hou attends the Canberra Blind Society and group activities at Eyes For Life Canberra in the city centre, which is already obstacle-filled for people with vision impairment.

But with significant construction in the London Circuit area, she's begun avoiding the city.

"In the city there's ... obstacles like A-frame [signs] from the shops [which] they quite often like to stick right in the middle of the footpath, scooters that have been left over the footpath, tables from the coffee shops, and then [there's] the construction zones," she said.

"I know for a fact that a lot of other people with blindness or other disabilities, they just stay home because [it's] just too stressful for them to try to overcome these challenges.

"So all those things are a challenge for someone like me, and it's also for people [who use] wheelchairs, mums or dads with strollers with young kids, so quite often they can't get around those obstacles."

Footpath closure safety 'a constant problem across the territory'

The loss of pedestrian access has also angered commuter groups, who are pushing for the ACT to follow the lead of other Australian cities by introducing alternative solutions that prioritise maintaining public access.

According to Canberra By Bike Design Company founder Paris Lord, people are regularly having to walk on ACT roads because a construction site has cut off footpath access.

"Yes, there are signs saying, 'Use alternative footpath', but ... to have to turn around and go another 500 metres when the footpath could be kept open, it just creates unnecessary conflict," Mr Lord said.

"And more than that, it's dangerous. This is all preventable, these footpaths being closed.

"Other jurisdictions, they don't do this. They keep footpaths open during construction, and we're curious as to why that sort of skill is bereft of the ACT government."

He said it was "a constant problem across the territory".

"We're finding in the inner north, in Belconnen, in the far south, in Civic, usually by default when a construction project happens the footpath is the first thing to go," Mr Lord said.

"We don't want to hear of instances where there's a coronial inquiry or a parliamentary inquiry [looking into] how did this person pushing a pram, or this person pulling a suitcase, come to be injured?"

"We can stop all this from happening, we can prevent it from happening. Other jurisdictions can, and we think the territory deserves the same."

The ACT government paid more than \$1.7 million in personal injury claims associated with community paths last financial year.

It has led to calls for the ACT to follow other states and use shipping containers, including from Mr Lord.

"The city of Adelaide, for example, when they have construction sites happening on King William Street — which also features a light rail — they use shipping containers, and people use that to go through," he said.

"The territory has plenty of shipping containers, they're about to be no longer used at the Woden bus interchange, we could repurpose them to make sure public footpath access is maintained.

"We can fix it now, we know how to do it, the engineering solutions are there, it's just now a matter of political will."

Balancing development and community access

The government has said the shipping container solution is something it could use, but it's not a one-size-fits-all fix.

Deputy Director-General for the ACT City and Environment Directorate, Bruce Fitzgerald, said the temporary traffic management methods are "never set and forget".

"[It's about finding] the right balance between the efficiency of the development plus also making sure the community can get through as easily as possible," Mr Fitzgerald said.

"We understand that disruption in the city has consequence for everyone, so we're happy to work with them, we're always keen to hear different ways of doing things. There is no one fix-it.

"[But] if we put too many more restrictions on development that comes through in higher unit prices as the cost of actually doing business increases as well."

Mr Fitzgerald said the government has also begun consultations on a new fee structure with developers, to incentivise them to limit the number of roads and footpaths their developments close.

"The fee structure as proposed looks at a per-day basis for closures, and that includes footpaths, roads and associated infrastructure," he said.

"For a development, say on Northbourne, where you are proposing closing a major arterial road, the cost differentiation may be into the thousands, to potentially the hundreds of thousands.

"So that gives the developer pause to think about, 'How best can we do that? How can we limit the disruption on the network?' and make sure that they're putting in other solutions that maybe they hadn't thought about previously."