

Homeless project gets major funding boost

By Graham Downie

A project to accommodate homeless people in Canberra received a major boost yesterday with a commitment of \$500,000 from the Snow Foundation.

Common Ground, a not-for-profit company, aims to build up to 60 units for a mix of people who are homeless or on low incomes. Specialists in mental health, social work and employment support would help residents.

Common Ground chairman Stephen Bartos said a feasibility study had confirmed the proposed project was suitable for the ACT. The ACT government gave \$150,000 last year for the feasibility study and this year's budget included \$130,000 for further design and planning.

Mr Bartos said the \$500,000 commitment by the Snow Foundation would go toward capital and running costs. For the project to succeed, about \$10 million was needed from the ACT government which would own the accommodation.

Three sites had been identified as suitable for from 40 to 60 units. One is on Anglican

Church land at Reid; the other two are government land at Hackett and the site of the former police station at Belconnen.

Mr Bartos said the main hurdle was obtaining the capital funding.

"We need to persuade government to fund it. We all know money is tight."

A key to Common Ground working was at least half the tenants having some community connection – people who were good role models to help build a viable community.

Though the accommodation was permanent, experience from Common Ground projects elsewhere had shown the reality was that people could get their lives together and move on.

Common Ground communities required more management than traditional housing. But it was vastly cheaper than people ending up in prison or psychiatric wards. The model worked because it helped people who otherwise found it impossible to maintain themselves in housing. Common Ground housing had been established in Adelaide and Melbourne and was being developed in NSW, Tasmania, Western Australia and Brisbane.