

- Park lands community sports buildings lapsing leases problem prompts quiet city council administrator-led rescue plan
- Two elite private schools on the list.

## Public money likely to pay for select group of park lands sports clubs' building replacements

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An increasingly anxious push by a handful of park lands lessees using run-down park lands sports buildings has prompted city council administrators to propose a generous new approach. They've designed a taxpayer and city ratepayer funded model and plan to coordinate the upgrading and project management on behalf of a select group. Already the park lands facilities' council upgrade funding 'commitment' tally totals \$21.8m. However, although some lessees in this group represent relatively poor volunteer communities, two are wealthy, elite private schools: Wilderness School in the north park lands and Pulteney Grammar in the south park lands.

A council administrators' policy review commenced two years ago. Some of the sports groups' site leases have already lapsed, or will lapse soon.

Administrators and lessees support a bid to find additional funds and adopt the new model to deliver larger sports buildings in the park lands.

### The historical park lands context

Wealthy sports groups in the past have always had the capacity to pursue new park lands buildings and several since about 2010 have invested significant money to do this, but only if they were offered 21- to 42-year leases in return. The council delivered. This could be described as Phase 1 in a recent park lands sports pavilion saga. But poorer community groups have struggled and, without sufficient funding to replace their buildings, have had no leverage to negotiate long-term, refreshed or new lease agreements. As a November 2022 council report noted, they "continue to operate out of underperforming facilities, with no path towards change."<sup>1</sup> Council administrators wrote a new draft *Park Lands Community Buildings (Sport and*



Car parking in the Adelaide park lands has been expanding for some years, despite the threat of council fines. Special exemptions to fines can be offered by some lessees, with the council's agreement. In most cases the permit system is ignored by drivers, and not policed by council. Visitors to park lands sports events commonly park where convenient, often on open spaces not designed for car parking. Public feedback regarding the reports reviewed in this essay reflected major concerns about it, and on 5 March 2024 city councillors blocked progress on the sports buildings upgrade discussion until further car parking investigations occur. See more detail on page 4.

*Recreation) Policy* and then conducted a late 2023 survey to test stakeholder and other public views. The current pursuit by council administrators of new policies and discussion papers is thus Phase 2 of what has been a long-running, once-in-three-generations park lands lessees' buildings upgrade chapter. But this time it is focused on the pursuit of city money to plan for, manage and fund replacement park lands facilities only for a select group of lessees.



The 2019-built Adelaide Comets (soccer) sports building in Park 24, funded by the state government (\$3.5m). Its bulk and scale are now seen as the desirable design 'template' for future sports club or association bids for new facilities in the park lands. But in Park 24 there are minimal formal car parking spaces, so players and families ignore council restrictions signs and park randomly.

<sup>1</sup> Adelaide City Council: *Investing in Community Infrastructure – Sports and Recreation, Summary Report of Discussion Paper, November 2022*, page 1.



At west park lands Park 27B (Hellas West Adelaide Soccer Club) this photo shows the largest internal space in what is an old, cramped, and very run-down club building. This facility is on the council's 'list of seven', identified for replacement. A new architects' building concept has been created, illustrating a significantly expanded facility at this site. The template for replacement sports buildings in the park lands was set in the period 2010–20, when wealthy park lands lessees received permission to replace their old change rooms and then get new, long leases. One result is illustrated below, in a photo of 2012 facilities built by The University of Adelaide (Park 10, park lands near North Adelaide). This shows the ground floor. Clearly, a need for social event facilities has now overwhelmed the original requirement for updated change rooms, toilets, showers and disability compliant features. Lessees such as at the university use the term 'fit for purpose' as the upgrade rationale, but once facilities are completed, the contemporary new 'purpose' is exposed: social gatherings, sometimes featuring limited liquor licences for revenue collection purposes. The Hellas West Adelaide Soccer Club already has a state government commitment of \$2m, and a city council pledge of \$500,000, but already a sum of \$2.5m is seen as insufficient for the club's upgrade needs!



The University of Adelaide's Park 10 2012 sports building – ground floor hospitality features. A sports club – or a social club?

### **Nineteen detailed submissions received**

The council survey was held in late 2023. Nineteen respondents' survey submissions responded to council "performance criteria" questions regarding a draft *Park Lands Community Buildings (Sport and Recreation) Policy*. Eleven came from lessees and other parties supportive of co-funding, a term understood to mean public funding to top up club funding. Curiously, submissions from the two elite schools keen to upgrade facilities, Widerness School and Pulteney Grammar, were not published in the council's summary of survey results in the Adelaide Park Lands Authority's "consultation findings". The Authority implied that all 19 submissions supported and endorsed co-funding, as well as the concept of the council's new model (see text later in this essay), but this claim was not evident among at least six that contested various aspects.

### **Survey results skew the picture**

October/November 2023 YourSay public polling results reveal that 46% of respondents were unhappy with the new approach or the likely future sports buildings and facilities. Their responses arose from a sample of views by people with no lease 'skin in the game'. Comments focused on concerns about "lack of car parking [space planning] and/or conflicting criteria regarding low-scale built form, [or] fit-for-purpose [issues and] no net loss of park lands".<sup>2</sup> A desire for "no net loss" aligned with rejection of any expansion of club building size and facilities.

### **Results presentation gives misleading impression that all agree**

However, the views of some respondents who had a strong club self-interest in the outcome – including the lessees likely to benefit – flooded 'quick response' results with multiple pages of single-paragraph comments, creating a suggestion of widely shared, in-principle support.<sup>3</sup> The hundreds of comments were reproduced in a 'consultation findings' public agenda paper, but the source authors were not identified. Despite this, many comments were similar to the club lessees' submission comments. In this way, the YourSay result risked delivering a misleading picture for councillors to ponder. For example, of 125 "quick poll" responses, 89% were claimed to reflect high priority for

<sup>2</sup> Adelaide Park Lands Authority (APLA), 'Draft Park Lands Community Buildings (Sport and Recreation) Policy, Agenda, Item 6.2, 'Consultation findings', 22 February 2024, page 31.

<sup>3</sup> APLA, op cit., pages 48–75.

“designed to fulfil its purpose” view, and 88% who ranked “minimal building size and scale” as the lowest priority.<sup>4</sup> In other words, big park lands buildings were not seen as a problem by those seeking to benefit from top-up public funds.

### Select list of ageing buildings in the spotlight

The city council has ‘care and control’ of 118 park lands buildings, 63 relating to sport. The focus of the current council-driven funding bid relates to only seven council-owned facilities, tagged as “renewal priority projects”. Four are in the south park lands (Parks 20 (Pulteney); 21, 21West and 22). One is in north-east park lands (Park 6: Wilderness School). One is in the west park lands (Park 27B) and another is in the east park lands (Park 17). Leases for most of these have either lapsed, will lapse this year or, in Park 17’s case, will lapse in 2026.

### \$21.6m already tagged

Committed council monies regarding the select list total \$21.6m, but it’s already not enough. Moreover, some of that money relates to pledges in a future distant budget financial period. But the aim is to deliver funds sooner, not later. This could trigger a major councillor fight over the looming 2024–25 budget, as well as future budgets, whose forecasts hint at looming deficits. It may also trigger revolt among the city’s 26,000 ratepayers, many of whom are not sports club members, and prefer that lessees manage and pay for their own club facilities’ upgrades – as did most of the wealthier sports clubs and associations in Phase 1 (2010 to about 2020).

### Taxpayers also to pay

Several park lands lessees among the ‘list of seven’ also enjoy pledges of state government (taxpayer) money. In Park 21 West (south park lands), Adelaide Lutheran Sports and Recreation Association (ALSRA: head lessee), has a \$1.5m state government grant in the bag, and its members have raised \$2.5m but still need more money for an “overall park concept plan”.<sup>5</sup> In Park 27B, west park lands, the Hellas West Adelaide Soccer Club has already received a very generous \$2m Office of Recreation, Sport and Racing grant (in 2023 paid to the city council to manage). The council also pledged \$500,000 in 2023. At Park 6 (Wilderness School) the

council has already pledged \$150,000 in its 2024–25 budget, as well as \$3m in its 2025–26 budget, but much more is required. (The council report suggests tapping the generosity of Prospect or Walkerville ratepayers, or Blackfriars Priory School or the SANFL.) At Park 22 lessees are SA Uniting Church Netball Association, and Adelaide Hockey and Burnside Hockey Clubs. There, the council has already pledged \$150,000 in its 2024–25 budget and another \$4m in the 2025–26 budget, but those funds are insufficient to create a “multi-use building” (code for something much larger). At Park 17, works on a “public amenity building” will cost \$350,000 and a concept to replace two buildings with one big change room (code for something much bigger) has a council commitment of \$3.15m, but not until budget funds become available in several years’ time. At Park 20 (Pulteney) substantial funding is sought to replace ageing facilities with “two fit-for-purpose sports facilities” (code for larger facilities). Pulteney attempted a similar bid to build a large south park lands facility in 2018, identifying a large, two-storey sports pavilion concept and seeking a long-term lease. But a major public protest about bulk and scale and use of the park lands blocked full council approval. Pulteney’s current bid has prompted council budget pledges, but they are not due until the 2026–27 budget (\$200,000) and 2027-28 budget (\$4m). This is substantial public funding for a private school that in 2018 appeared to have sufficient funds.

### New 2022 sports building model proposed

The ‘Phase 2’ (post-2020) policy ‘pathway’ approach favoured by council administrators began with a discussion paper, titled *Investing in Community Infrastructure – Sports and Recreation, Summary Report of Discussion Paper, November 2022*. In it, a radical new procedural model was proposed that, if adopted, would make each lessee very happy. It was titled “How a new sports building could be delivered in the park lands” (page 9). It illustrated how the council could do all of the work on behalf of each of the community lessees. Steps would include: identify the need; engage with the community; plan the concept plan, scope the works, and “approve budget commitment” – allocating public funds. It also would develop the building design; secure co-funding; approve the designs and implementation plan; approve the lease agreement; and construct the project. No discussion appears about fairness or equity regarding existing park lands community lessees who have not enjoyed such a privileged approach in the past.

<sup>4</sup> APLA, op cit, page 31.

<sup>5</sup> Adelaide City Council: “Investing in Community Infrastructure – Sports and Recreation, Summary Report of Discussion Paper, November 2022”. Appendix B, assessment table, page 1.

## New flawed draft policy follows

The November 2023 council release of its draft *Park Lands Community Buildings (Sport and Recreation) Policy* featured four principles. Some are highly ambiguous; many read like ‘motherhood’ statements, but which are not practicably feasible; and some are factually misleading. For example:

- “not exceed the fit-for-purpose requirements” (when some of these requirements are, and always will be, contestable);
- “minimise the loss of park lands” (where ‘minimise’ is entirely subjective, and “loss” is contestable regarding car parking allowances and future fencing and other related grounds infrastructure);
- “provide shared facilities and common areas for multiple users” (where future leases will be always be focused only on one head lessee, whose priorities are not always shared with other sub-lessees or sub-licensees);
- “new buildings [will be] visually discrete ... minimal scale to complement the park lands context ...” (where a new, large, two-storey built form can never “complement” a green landscape context); and
- “car parking will not be permitted on the park lands” (where, across the park lands there are currently multiple, council-endorsed special exceptions to ‘no-parking’ warnings, and visitors to many sites simply park where they choose, in the absence of any rigorous council inspection or monitoring function). This almost certainly also relates to changes to the council’s *Community Land Management Plan*, and its new replacement version of October 2023.

## Councillors stall procedure

In March 2024 councillors stalled the administrators’ bid to fast-track endorsement of the draft *Park Lands Community Buildings (Sport and Recreation) Policy*, which had reached Community Services committee stage on 5 March 2024 (stage 2 of 3 of this funding model approvals procedure). Councillors continue to be wary about park lands car parking abuses, and resolved to review the draft policy once fresh information is provided on “... how much space as an area, or as a percentage, of the park lands is already assigned to car parking, how much is free and how often parking restrictions are enforced during the use.” Unfortunately, they didn’t seek to probe areas where there are no formal facilities for car parking, which are currently subject of regular and widespread car parking abuse. More particularly, they also didn’t

probe administrators’ interpretation of amendments to the *Community Land Management Plan (CLMP)* in which a large 2020 loophole to the city council’s park lands rules was embedded into its car parking policy.<sup>6</sup> At the time, the council replaced the ‘Framework’ with a new ‘Chapter 1’, and new car parking statement: “Provide car parking on land adjacent to the park lands only where there is a demonstrated need and there is no reasonable alternative...” (Part 10: ‘Park Lands Wide Statements’.)

The problem with this – at many of the sites identified in the ‘list of seven’ – was that all applicants could identify an easily demonstrated need, and a case could be put that there would be no reasonable alternative if large numbers of club members, spectators and other visitors are attracted to games and events that use the sports clubs’ new buildings and facilities.

The subsequent full revision of the CLMP, concluded in October 2023, delivered an updated perspective, in which car parking is now allowed, but the new policy wallows in ambiguity. In it, the ‘purpose for which the land is held’ policy refers to a range of park lands objectives, including provision of:

**“Public facilities, furniture and amenities** *Including but not limited to: public toilets, dog parks, play spaces, courts, pitches, fields, skate park infrastructure, lighting, benches, shelters, bike racks, BBQs, drinking fountains, signage, exercise equipment, fencing, car parking that supports the use of the Adelaide Park Lands.*”

Under the council’s November 2023 draft *Park Lands Community Buildings (Sport and Recreation) Policy*, the statement “car parking will not be permitted on the park lands” can’t be applied, because the new CLMP now endorses park lands car parking, albeit in a most ambiguous way.

\* **John Bridgland is a journalist and a ratepayer of the City of Adelaide.** Disclosure: Bridgland contributed to the council’s 2023 survey with an eight-page submission. It is summarised in an Adelaide Park Lands Authority (APLA) agenda, ‘Draft Park Lands Community Buildings (Sport and Recreation) Policy, Agenda, Item 6.2, ‘Consultation findings’, 22 February 2024, at pages 116–24. An appendix to Bridgland’s paper also comprises a five-page critique of the council’s controversially revised *Park Lands Lease and Licence Policy*.

<sup>6</sup> Adelaide City Council, Agenda, ‘Draft Community Land Management Plan: General Provisions’, Item 10.11, 15 December 2020.