



15 August 2006

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Standing Committee on Public Works
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Dear Sir/Madam

I refer to the letter received from Kevin Greene MP dated 12 July 2006 with respect to an Inquiry into Sportsground Management in New South Wales and hereby submit the attached report on behalf of the NSW Rugby Union.

Please do not hesitate to contact me if you require clarification or any further information.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Fraser Neill".

Fraser Neill
Chief Executive Officer



NEW SOUTH WALES RUGBY UNION
SUBMISSION TO NSW LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC
WORKS INQUIRY INTO SPORTS GROUND MANAGEMENT IN NSW

Introduction

1. In Sydney and its surrounding areas including the Central Coast and the Illawarra, Rugby Union is currently played on a week to week basis by approximately 28,000 school age children and by approximately 12,000 adults. The season typically starts in mid February with training activities that lead into competitions commencing in March and concluding in the August – September period depending on age / grade and whether teams make the playoffs.
2. Traditionally, Rugby has been seen by many as a private school game for boys and at adult level, an extension of this. Both of these perceptions are historical rather than factual in that women's rugby is available and growing, and NSW Rugby union is very active in looking to take rugby to the wider community in the South and West of Sydney, and to the Central Coast and Illawarra – areas geographically and socio-economically separate from the traditional image. Pacific Islands and Aboriginal communities feature strongly in rugby and there are ongoing activities that seek to further engage these groups with the sport.
3. As with many other outdoor sports in Sydney and its surrounds, access to playing fields for training and games is developing into the most significant issue that Rugby confronts.

Key Issues

4. Rugby Union in Sydney and surrounding regions is under pressure from two directions:
 - a. **Supply:** The availability of playing fields is limited resulting in:
 - i. Many clubs are under pressure from councils to retain current levels of access to those time slots and fields that they already have.
 - ii. Clubs unable to access additional time slots and fields to accommodate growth
 - iii. Where new clubs and activities are planned, there is an inability to achieve access to playing areas and training timeslots.
 - b. **Demand:** The growth in rugby, which although not as great as some other winter sports, is continuing and with a number of the initiatives being put in place, is expected to become stronger across the next 2 – 5 years. This is particularly relevant to Western Sydney, the Inner West and the Central Coast where major initiatives are under way, but also to other areas where there are significant numbers of children, but little provision for their sporting requirements.
5. The condition of many grounds provided to rugby (and other sports) is poor. Whilst some councils do an excellent job in maintaining a suitable playing surface, and take an active part in maintaining the surrounds including dressing rooms, storage facilities, scoreboards and fencing, there are a significant number that find this level of support beyond their means, or beyond their interest in community sport.

Adequacy of provision of quality sports grounds to meet community needs across NSW.

6. As indicated under the previous heading, there is currently inadequate provision of quality sports grounds. In fact, this can be broken down into two separate elements:
 - a. An inadequate provision of sports grounds, and
 - b. A lack of quality in much of what is provided.

Inadequate Provision of Sports Grounds

7. Rugby in NSW is struggling with retaining access to existing grounds with clubs in a number of areas reporting efforts by councils to remove them completely, to reduce and rearrange their access, or advising that their access would be reviewed.
8. It is understood that some of these Council activities reflect overtures from other outdoor sports including offers of financial consideration, and potentially the personal preferences of council staff in regard to the sports they like to support. In one case this year on the North Shore, a club which had a long standing tenancy and had spent tens of thousands of dollars of its own money in upgrading grounds and providing game standard night lighting was subject to proposed eviction.
9. In early 2006, NSW Rugby Union looked at introducing a junior competition to the Inner West - an area which at one time had a number of clubs. Demographic changes had caused the decline of these clubs across the eighties and nineties, however the cyclical nature of population age change and local interest has again indicated that there was a demand for junior Rugby – albeit on a Friday night.
10. Whilst finding the children to participate in an Inner West Rugby competition was not a problem, finding a suitable venue became problematic – not because suitably lit venues did not exist, but because councils, for various reasons, would not allow them to be used.
11. Inner Sydney policies of urban consolidation has led to greater population density with the result that whatever playing fields were provided (and have been retained), are now insufficient. This has resulted in significant demand being displaced from central Sydney with its now inadequate provision of grounds, and those Councils that surround the city having to accommodate this displaced demand for sporting fields and amenities – without the liberty of the rates these people pay to their own local council.
12. The Central Coast area is significantly impacted by a systemic failure across the last 20 – 30 years to plan sporting grounds into the urban development of the region. This is currently limiting the growth of Rugby in the area and even with significant cooperation between the three major winter football codes (Soccer, Rugby League and Rugby Union), all three are suffering the same limitation as they seek to look after a community that wants its children to participate in healthy outdoor sport. Similarly, in the Hills district in Sydney, the only sporting grounds are found on school premises with a predictable impact on the ability of sporting clubs to access them on terms consistent with their needs.
13. NSW Rugby Union has commenced a major project to take Rugby to Western Sydney. Through this project, access to grounds again becomes an issue. It would appear that in a number of the major urban developments designed in the eighties and nineties,

little attention was paid to providing the quantity of playing fields necessary to meet the needs of the planned populations.

14. Looking further ahead, it is imperative that the planning authorities rectify the errors of the past by making effective use of the areas on the fringe of the developments provided in the eighties and nineties - while they still can. Additionally, it is important to ensure that the same errors are not repeated in the new growth areas that include North of Penrith (the old ADI site), the Bringelly release and the areas to the South of Liverpool.

Quality of Sports Grounds

15. Whilst some sports grounds are presented with a good playing surface and well maintained amenities, it remains that more are not.
16. The playing surface needs adequate sub-surface provisions including suitable drainage, appropriate soils and contouring. In addition to this, the surface needs ongoing attention including provision of adequate watering. These together provide a safe surface to play on - one that does not produce unnecessary injuries due to its harshness or hardness.
17. During the period of drought, many councils have not been able to provide an adequate supply of water to their grounds, often because they have made no provision to store or make use of grey water. This has resulted in hard barren surfaces (especially in Western Sydney) that result in elevated levels of contact injuries when players land awkwardly on these surfaces. More significantly, it influences some parents away from sport generally and particularly for those sports where ground contact is a regular feature of the game.
18. The problems of surface condition are further affected by the wear patterns associated with some winter sports. Whilst Rugby League and Rugby Union generate some identifiable wear at the centre of the half way and the centre of the 20/22 meter lines, there are other sports that, across a season, turn whole areas into barren areas devoid of grass cover. This is a significant issue in the management of and in some cases the preference for multi use grounds.
19. Whilst not suggesting that multi use of grounds is bad, and on the contrary it is supported strongly to include a recommendation that multi-use goal posts be provided on a number of soccer grounds, it may be beneficial to allow other sports with different wear patterns to use these grounds periodically to allow them some recovery.
20. Ground amenities continue to be an ongoing issue. Needs for toilets, dressing rooms, storage space for equipment, and canteen operations are all important to the successful function of the sporting clubs that use the grounds. Whilst toilets are typically provided at most if not all grounds, storage facilities tend to be poor or non-existent with many clubs resorting to the use of temporary measures such as second hand ISO containers where councils will permit.
21. Scoreboards, fences and surrounds are often maintained at a minimalist level, and in some cases not at all.
22. To summarise the issues associated with quality of grounds, it is apparent that many Councils are satisfied to provide a bare minimum, some Councils even less, and the overwhelming sense is that support to community sport is not a key priority for Councils

or their paid employees. Certainly, the quality of grounds and their amenities is far from satisfactory in a significant number of local government areas.

23. However, in fairness it must also be recognized that under current arrangements Councils have limited opportunity to increase Council rates, they receive limited external funding, and as a result the degradation and lack of priority on sports grounds is a wider symptom that also extends to other areas that have traditionally been a Council responsibility.

Semi Professional Sports Venues

24. Whilst Sydney and its surrounding areas have a number of venues that provide for crowds in the range of twenty to forty thousand, these same venues provide little atmosphere for semi professional sports played on a rectangular arena and draw crowds in the range of one to five thousand.
25. Sydney Premier Rugby has crowds that fit this attendance range and finds that it has clubs operating in venues that, like regional Rugby League and soccer below A League, vary considerably:
 - a. Venues that seat in excess of twenty thousand (no atmosphere)
 - b. Venues that seat a few hundred in conditions that are somewhat primitive.
 - c. Venues that have large oval grounds that separate the spectator from the event.
26. With the movement of professional and semi professional soccer, rugby league and rugby union away from the traditional winter time slots to now span much / most of the year, there is a demand for small but more specialized rectangular arenas that could be shared by these sports.
27. With reasonable / good amenities and a capacity of four to five thousand people, this type of venue has appeal to local communities and would assist the semi professional sports clubs in all three codes to operate on a more viable basis than at present. Additionally, such venues would also provide a venue for many of the local "non-sporting" activities that currently take place in parks and other open spaces where access control is problematic and amenities are essentially sub standard.

Cost and revenue arrangements including capital upgrades.

28. The cost of grounds hire is variable from Council to Council across the Sydney and surrounding region. These costs vary based on a number of factors but the common thread is the continuing upward pressures that, with insurance costs, continue to threaten the financial viability of many of the smaller clubs and particularly junior clubs.
29. Capital upgrades in many locations can not be achieved unless the clubs provide significant funding of their own as a co-contribution. Often this is in partnership with local Council, State Government, and/or Federal Government, but even so, for organizations that do not own large clubs with significant number of poker machines, this is a difficult task.
30. Perhaps more alarming from a Rugby Union perspective, those sports with greater financial resources are seeking to purchase access to grounds by offering councils higher leasing fees and greater contribution to capital upgrades as part of a strategy to displace traditional, but none the less poorer custodians/ tenants.

31. The other cost related issue that needs to be addressed under this heading is the extent to which Councils are able to, and are actually maintaining their capital stock of facilities at sports grounds. The observation of the rugby Community is that whilst there are exceptions, in the broad across recent years there has been a progressive run down of facilities and that this needs to be arrested and turned around.
32. In summary, the upgrade of grounds to provide grey water irrigation, night lighting to allow more competition time per ground, and improved facilities are all things that needs both state and federal support to an extent well beyond what is currently provided.

Environmental concerns associated with sports ground management.

33. The major environmental concern relating to sports ground management in the current climate is the issue of water supply for irrigation. As outlined in previous sections above, irrigation is an imperative to providing good/ safe surfaces for players and especially in times of drought, access to grey water provides a means by which this can be achieved at no environmental cost.
34. Other environmental concerns that relate to community amenity relate to noise, light and traffic. Whilst these are issues for close neighbours to sports grounds, and they do have disproportionate effects on local government politics, well planned venues, good quality inclusions in capital works and effective liaison with key community protagonists generally allow a common sense approach to prevail in most cases.
35. Rugby Union prides itself on the attitude, outlook and behaviour of the people associated with its game, and whilst we acknowledge that not everyone is well behaved all of the time, we would argue that the local impact of rugby on a venue is perhaps less than with some other sports, and far less than the impact of youths and others hanging around unlit parks, street corners and local shops.

Effectiveness of current administration of sports grounds by various providers including councils, state government (including schools) and private operators.

Councils

36. The current administration of sports grounds by Councils is variable with significant differences in usage policies, cost recovery/ hire charges, booking arrangements, repair and maintenance practices and approaches to capital improvements. For many sporting bodies this is unhelpful at a state or regional level, and at individual club level much administrative time is spent in ensuring that the needs of local Council are met – regardless of what ever they are – to ensure that grounds access is not denied in the current of future years.
37. From the other perspective, where a club is blessed with a financial local Council that is interested in sport and fosters cooperation across the various sports, the current arrangement is excellent and it is hard to imagine a more effective or more productive arrangement.
38. Local interest and local knowledge is hard to find in large centralized bureaucracies, so the preference from a Rugby Union perspective is probably towards a model where policy and funding is more centralized with local level decision making. Under this model, the state level sporting body would take on a more representative role and could even facilitate a more centralized approach to collating and prioritizing sports ground booking and allocation for their sport.

State Government - Schools

39. Access to State Government sports grounds for Rugby Union is predominantly the issue of school green space. Many state schools are blessed with open green space – some configured as sports grounds and others not.
40. Currently, Rugby union does not make significant use of this space, partly by tradition and partly because until now, the availability of sports grounds has not been a critical issue for the sport. Our inquiries in the direction of accessing school grounds have suggested that either the Department, or Rugby (or both) are not currently configured to address this issue effectively. Whilst our initial inquiries have been informal, we have not been referred to a central location that was comfortable dealing with this issue, and at school level, the reaction was dependent on the outlook of the principal including their perceptions of entrepreneurial opportunity, insurance issues and departmental policy.
41. Regardless of the present administrative situation, it remains that the state school system has a valuable green space resource that could be utilized more effectively on a whole of community basis. This needs to be explored energetically on the basis of benefit to the school and benefit to the wider community including state level sporting organizations and the sports clubs that fall under them.

Impact on health outcomes and social cohesion, particularly in disadvantaged communities

42. In the wider sense, active sports provide a number of benefits to participants and to their communities. These benefits are both short and long term, covering not just health but also a range of areas associated with social capital generation and accumulation.
43. The Rugby Union experience is that engaging disadvantaged communities in sport has significant beneficial outcomes and particularly where that engagement is with the primary and secondary school age children. Active contact sport seems to provide a more socially acceptable avenue for discharging frustrations and physical energy whilst allowing the participants to build self esteem as they operate in an environment where boundaries are clear, compliance is expected and where consequences are a direct and predictable result of non-compliance. Additionally, application and discipline are rewarded by results on field and through the team social structure.
44. For those communities where social structure is limited to little beyond the schools that the children attend, organized club sport activity for children also tends to engage those care giving adults who have the capacity to contribute to the welfare of the children in their community. This is of itself valuable for the individual involved, but it also provides example role models (male and female) that are often in short supply in these communities.
45. Taking a much wider view, the current concerns over child obesity and the resulting down stream health impact should suggest that the provision of sports grounds and other outdoor recreational space is imperative to the future of our communities.
46. As Generations Y and Z regularly switch between interests and follow their fads, the availability of sporting clubs with local grounds becomes of great significance as we seek to provide them with the opportunity to engage in healthy outdoor activities, and

especially those that contribute to an understanding of teamwork and the physical and social discipline that goes with it.

Traffic, noise, and other direct impacts on residential amenity

47. As indicated above, these are real issues that are best managed in the design stage of urban land release. At a latter stage, good design and appropriate investment in the quality of the provisions becomes the next level of managing this issue and finally, investment in the relationship with those that live in the near vicinity.
48. As an issue of fundamental culture, we need to ensure that the people of NSW recognize that:
 - a. We can not afford to do anything other than make optimum use of community sporting facilities, and the facilities imbedded in our state schools.
 - b. It is a privilege to live close to these scarce sporting facilities and enjoy the benefits of not having to travel to access them.
 - c. These facilities are used often, including at night, and that there are light, noise and traffic implications that follow from this,
 - d. Their local council can mitigate some of these effects by proper design and mitigation strategies rather than by prohibiting use.
 - e. If they elect to live near these sporting facilities, they properly understand the implications of their decision in terms of the negative impacts of noise, light and traffic.

Affect of litigation and insurance costs on financial viability

49. From a sporting body perspective and more particularly from a Rugby Union perspective, the impact of insurance costs across sport and venue hiring is an ongoing issue from which there appears to be little relief.
50. As identified in a previous section, hiring costs and insurance costs are placing significant strains on the financial wellbeing of many smaller rugby clubs and particularly junior clubs. It is assumed that a significant proportion of the increased hiring costs come as a result of increasing insurance costs, noting that it would be disappointing if Councils were using insurance as a mask to pass on increasing levels of other costs under a more aggressive "user pays" policy.

Access to open space for active and passive recreational users

51. Whilst passive recreation is to be encouraged, the social value of organized sport has been devalued by many across the last generation or so and has resulted in a failure to invest in the volume of sports grounds and associated facilities necessary to support a healthy and socially cohesive society.
52. The availability of sports grounds for active organized sporting activities deserves a high priority because of its contribution to building social capital. Whilst passive outdoor activity is pleasurable for those who participate, it is more a personal consumption good than an investment in building social capital.
53. Consequently, it is argued that provision must be made for passive and active recreational space, but also that if there is a requirement to allocate this scarce

resource between the two, the priority must overwhelmingly favour the usage that generates and accumulates social capital – organized sporting activities.

Conclusion

54. Rugby Union, like other sporting bodies, is concerned that the quantity and availability of sporting fields in Sydney and the surrounding areas (to include the Central Coast and the Illawarra) are insufficient to meet existing and future demands.
55. Unless urgent action is taken, sporting ground availability will become the limiting factor on a range of social programs that revolve around an active sporting community that has health and social cohesion as their cornerstones.
56. The quality of the existing sporting grounds is variable with many failing to provide a suitable playing surface or adequate facilities. The most pressing is the need to provide access to and storage of grey water for irrigation.
57. Provision of lighting to allow more effective use of the grounds is also critical, and to a lesser extent, the provision of proper storage space for equipment, and improvement to change rooms, fencing and score boards. Additional to this, a more coordinated and committed approach to facilities maintenance would allow better realization against existing facilities.
58. The ongoing transfer of grounds related costs to sporting groups is becoming a significant issue as under funded Councils seek greater cost recovery and in some cases, new revenue sources. This approach is poor public policy as it fails to recognize the “public good” dimension of sport in the community and the pre-existing financial stresses on sporting clubs.
59. Greater consistency in policy and a more coordinated approach to grounds allocation would make for significant improvement, noting that this is not a suggestion for a fully centralized model dealing with the detailed day to day issues. It is more a suggestion that interaction between state level sporting bodies and a State government led Coordination Group / Reference Group or similar may result in a better short term and long term outcome than is currently achieved.
60. In conclusion, this inquiry is welcomed by NSW Rugby Union and it is hoped that a range of improved policy and practical outcomes will follow from it.
61. The NSW Rugby Union point of contact on this issue is General Manager – Projects & Youth Rugby (pcolquhoun@nswrugby.com.au), and he will be able to provide further information should it be requested.