

Submission into NSW Legislative Assembly Standing Committee on Public Works Inquiry into Sportsground Management in NSW

Lake Macquarie City Council

1. Overview of Lake Macquarie City

The City of Lake Macquarie with its estimated population of 190,000 is the largest City in the Lower Hunter, and the fourth most populous City in New South Wales. Flanked by beautiful beaches, mountains and the ocean, the City is strategically positioned one and half hours driving time north of central Sydney, 20 minutes from Newcastle and 40 minutes from Hunter Wine Country and the Central Coast.

From its beginnings as a natural resource base in the mid 1800s, Lake Macquarie has developed into a major hub for the small to medium business sector, dominating employment growth in the Lower Hunter over the past 15 years. The City currently accommodates in excess of 11,000 businesses, houses a workforce of 90,000 people, and provides over 70,000 jobs.

The City of Lake Macquarie is approximately 750km², of which 110km² is Lake. The area is serviced by an extensive road system, public and private bus networks, and a rail corridor that runs the length of the West Lakes area to Newcastle CBD.

The City of Lake Macquarie offers:

- Quality lifestyle;
- Industrial, commercial and residential property values with sound capital growth potential;
- 750,000 customers within 45 minutes drive;
- Commutable ease (both air and road);
- Proximity to Sydney metropolitan area;
- Proactive planning controls allowing up to three employees in a home business;
- A sound infrastructure of roads, rail, air, electricity, gas, water and sewerage;
- Accessible global technology;
- Wide range of business and community support services;
- Extensive small business assistance infrastructure including the Lake Macquarie Small Business Incubator;
- Cost benefits in terms of access to Australia's major markets;
- Further education opportunities for employees including a University, private University College, several campus of the Hunter Institute of Technology as well as private business schools;
- Commercial and industrial Council rates lower than surrounding Councils; and
- A variety of lifestyle opportunities.

Council provides over 700 community and sporting facilities in the City ranging from small assets such as picnic shelters to large multi-purpose community Centres. The types of facilities Council provides are community and youth centres, multipurpose and neighbourhood centres, senior citizen centres, libraries, childcare centres, and a range of indoor and recreation facilities such as sporting fields, swimming pools, skate parks, playgrounds, walking paths, jetties, and boat ramps. The age characteristics (typically more than 20 years old) of the infrastructure, and the environment in which they operate, combine to pose an increasing demand for maintenance and capital renewal that will continue to escalate into the future.

The bulk of Council's inventory of some 700 community and sporting facilities, do not comply with current standards. Typically, many older facilities are deficient in access for people with disabilities, and this leaves Council open to the possibility of legal action under the Disability Discrimination Act 1992. Most older facilities also fail to comply with the Australia New Zealand Food Standards Code.

Lake Macquarie City Council currently offers a wide range of recreation facilities as detailed below.

- 145 sportsfields and 8 roo-ball fields
- 158 informal parks and 182 parks with facilities
- 11 multi-purpose courts
- 6 skateparks
- 2 BMX facilities
- 57 cricket wickets
- 50 cricket practice nets
- 81 tennis courts
- 109 netball courts
- 12 petanque pistes
- 4 patrolled beaches
- 5 swimming centres
- 29 public jetties
- 31 public boat ramps
- 30 dog exercise areas
- extensive shared pathway network

Most of Council's sportsgrounds and community buildings are managed under delegated authority by Community Operating Committees or incorporated associations. These committees are authorised by Council to collect fees for the hire of facilities and then use these fees to maintain and improve the facilities. This model empowers groups to self manage their facilities according to the community needs and relies heavily on the commitment of volunteers.

Attachment 1 at the end of this document provides statistics on sports participation within Lake Macquarie compared with national rates.

Social research indicates:

- Lake Macquarie has a slightly older population than the State average;
- The area is experiencing a "premature ageing" of its population.
- The residents of the area have slightly higher levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, including lower incomes, lower levels of postgraduate educational attainment and higher levels of unemployment; and

- Lake Macquarie has relative ethnic and cultural homogeneity compared to other metropolitan areas in NSW.

Beginning in 1997, Council embarked on the *Lifestyle 2020 Project*. This project established the strategies necessary to manage the population and employment growth expected to occur in the City up to the year 2020, and ensure that future development within the City is sensitive to the physical, social, and economic environment as well as to local and regional issues and conditions

Key platforms of *Lifestyle 2020* are:

- The protection and enhancement of the physical, social and environmental setting of the City;
- A balance achieved between population and employment growth, community, commercial and investor aspirations, and environmental management, that ensures more efficient use of existing land and infrastructure;
- A well-designed, liveable City, including recognising and reinforcing the character and attributes that provide opportunities for diverse urban and rural living, working and recreational opportunities;
- Maintenance and enhancement of the City's economic base and provision of opportunities for sustainable economic growth that recognises and responds to emerging trends; and
- The integration of land use and travel systems so that residents and visitors can travel safely, economically and conveniently throughout the City by a range of transport modes.

Discussion surrounding the proposed *Metropolitan Strategy* indicates that the Lower Hunter Region is expected to accommodate some of Sydney's growth over the next 30 years. The presence of substantial greenfield urban development sites in the South East and West Lakes areas is expected to be a drawcard for young families and older people seeking affordable homes in an attractive location just 2 hours north of Sydney. The presence of a rail corridor to Sydney will be attractive for commuters. This expected growth will place huge pressure on infrastructure including recreational facilities.

One of the most pressing issues facing Council in the medium to long term will be the ageing population. In terms of sheer numbers (numerical ageing), Lake Macquarie local government area (LGA) has the second highest number of people aged 65 and over in NSW (behind Gosford LGA). Research undertaken by the Local Government and Shires Association indicates that Lake Macquarie is prematurely ageing. This typically occurs with the migration-related loss of young working age people and/or a gain of older people. Any population increase of older retirees coupled with a continued exodus of younger, work-force aged residents will have significant social and economic impacts on the City.

In addition, there will be an increasing need to modify sporting, recreation and entertainment facilities, and modify household waste collection due to frailty and mobility issues. Furthermore, such a population creates a need for qualitatively different library and cultural facilities (collections, technologies, programs). There will be a need to increase accessible active recreation space that promotes active ageing, and quality passive recreation space that creatively deals with potential conflicts between users (for example, young people and older people).

Council's recreation facilities are currently geared towards active recreation areas such as sporting ovals and skateboard parks. With the expected influx of an aging population, Council will need to provide a more balanced mix of active and passive recreation facilities. Accessible walking paths in parks, bush land and foreshore

areas will need to be provided to encourage healthy ageing. At present, playgrounds throughout the City are designed mainly for primary school aged children. With young families moving to the area, there will be a need to provide playground equipment and a variance of play surfaces suitable for the very young (0-5 yrs). Population increases will generate a demand for additional swimming centres in the West and North Lakes areas. Currently, two public swimming pools, one of which is unheated, serve these areas. The provision of heated swimming pools is important for an ageing population to maintain their regular exercise programs, for those requiring rehabilitation, and for pregnant women. These swimming pools provide year round recreation and fitness maintenance for a growing community.

2. Lake Macquarie City Council's Response to Inquiry Issues

2.1 Adequacy of provision of quality sportsgrounds to meet community needs across NSW

Provision of quality sporting grounds in Lake Macquarie is a function of changing demographic patterns and recreational needs in the City; coupled with available funding for construction, management, and maintenance.

Generally, the provision of sportsgrounds within Lake Macquarie is sufficient to meet the existing needs of the sporting community however in specific locations there is localised over demand on grounds and in other areas there are grounds that are under utilised. Council is planning for future growth in the LGA with additional sporting facilities planned for Northlakes, Southlakes and Eastlakes. All future sportsground facilities will be designed as district facilities to better provide for the expanding population and be more efficiently managed and maintained.

As all grounds are managed by either Community Operating Committees or incorporated associations, the quality of the grounds is dependent on their requirements and resources and highly variable between facilities. Council provides a basic level of maintenance and the sporting groups will then provide additional maintenance as their resources permit. It is noted that the quality of sportsground expected by the community has increased in excess of the resources available to meet this level of service.

The facility management committee is also responsible for collecting statistics on each facility and forwarding this data to Council for consideration in future planning.

Council recently undertook an assessment of all sporting facilities (playing fields, buildings, lighting fencing etc) which highlighted the variability of grounds and also identified an overall poor and ageing quality of facility. To address this Council is currently developing a 10-year plan to prioritise required capital works for existing and planned facilities. Other than this 10-year plan, there is no overall planning document that comprehensively plans for the existing and future demand of sporting groups with Lake Macquarie. The cost of upgrading existing facilities will far exceed expected available funds (discussed in detail in section 2.2).

2.2 Cost and revenue arrangements including capital upgrades

Funding streams for sportsgrounds include section 94 funds, grants, Council capital works budget, grants and sporting groups.

There is a large backlog of section 94 funds and associated capital works which are being considered in the development of a 10-year capital works plan. This plan will also include Council funds that are allocated to identified and prioritised projects.

Grants are regularly accessed by the sporting community and Council for capital works and upgrades however the majority of these are under \$10,000 which whilst helpful, are inadequate to address the high cost projects such as ground renovation, amenity upgrade and sportsground lighting. Larger grant programs such as the Regional Facilities Program are highly contested and not open to local or district sporting grounds that are struggling to upgrade their facilities to meet the demands of a growing population. It also noted that shared pathways are extremely popular facilities and are, accordingly, receiving the the bulk of available recreation grant funding.

As detailed above, Council delegates authority to sporting groups to manage specific facilities. This authority also allows them to collect hire fees to be used in the maintenance and upgrade of the facility. Council has recently developed a new Operating Manual and associated fee structure to formalise the management and operation of the facilities. This process will ensure that fees are collected on a per player basis and that collected fees will go to the facility rather than Council's general fund. Sporting groups have historically raised significant funds for the maintenance and capital improvement of sporting facilities.

Another potential funding stream would be to introduce an extraordinary rate rise to inject additional capital funds however this is yet to be considered by Council.

2.3 Environmental concerns associated with sportsground management

Lake Macquarie, with an area of 110 km² lies at the heart of the City and as such has a significant influence on the environment of the City. There has been significant planning and expenditure over the last decade to address water quality and ecological issues associated with the lake.

Council funds a ground improvement program that focuses on maximising the growth of turf by undertaking soil analysis and developing a specialised improvement program. This program has proven successful but available funding prevents it from reaching its full potential.

Water consumption at sportsgrounds is an increasingly important issue across the state and whilst this region is not yet under water restrictions, we need improve the way we use water. This includes stormwater harvesting, controlled irrigation, groundwater availability, retrofitting existing facilities and better planning of future facilities. Community water grants are an excellent funding opportunity for projects meeting this challenge.

The new Operating Manual for Community Operating Committees provides guidance for groups to protect and enhance environment by considering the environment in all operations. Council also promotes environmental awareness via the sporting groups newsletter.

There exists an opportunity for State Govt and/or Councils to develop guidelines for sustainable facility management to build on the volunteer's increased level of environmental awareness.

The increased awareness of environmental issues in general is commendable but also makes it more difficult for Council to find suitable land for development as a sportsground and therefore difficult to meet future demand for sporting facilities.

2.4 Effectiveness of current administration of sportsgrounds by various providers including councils, state government (including schools) and private operators

Council is committed to working with community volunteers to manage our facilities with most facilities currently managed by Community Operating Committees or incorporated associations. The newly created operating manual comprehensively details the various responsibilities of both the volunteers and Council and provides assistance and processes to meet these responsibilities. It also addresses issues relating to the management of occupational health and safety and environmental management. This system does give ownership of the facilities to the community but relies heavily on the willingness of volunteers to take on the delegated authority. Council is aware of the ever increasing burden on the sporting volunteer.

The Hunter Regional Sports Centre (incorporating athletics track and gymnasium) is externally managed although it is a Council facility.

Council does not manage the allocation of sportsgrounds so does not liaise directly with schools regarding the use of school facilities, however sporting groups make use of these facilities as required and deal directly with the relevant school.

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

Lake Macquarie itself provides a major physical barrier in the region and necessitates a large number of smaller local facilities which makes it hard to develop larger regional facilities that are easily accessible. The lake presents difficulties for public transport and impacts on families that are not readily mobile. Sports such as Hockey and Netball utilise major regional facilities which are not easily accessible and will affect participation in the lower socio-economic areas.

The Community management model provides a heightened sense of ownership of the facilities for the community and improves social cohesion as long as these volunteer groups are sufficiently supported by Council and State Government.

The ageing population of the LGA has seen increased demand for more passive sports such as petanque and croquet which are well represented in Lake Macquarie. Council has also developed a Disabilities Access Plan however limited funding prevents quick action on the identified works. New facilities are designed and constructed to ensure accessibility to all and also located near transport hubs.

Whilst not undertaking specific recreation programs, Council considers the provision of recreation facilities as essential for promoting a healthy lifestyle and dealing with current health issues such as obesity and diabetes.

Council is aware of gender issues and plans for the growth of all sports as appropriate. This is largely dependent on the user groups and exemplified by recent Council decision to change tennis courts into netball courts to meet the needs of the sporting group by utilising a facility that was greatly under used.

2.6 Traffic, noise and other direct impacts on residential amenity

Parking is an issue at many of our older facilities which did not consider population growth and the increase in vehicle ownership when designing the facility. Similarly, the increasing density of residential areas has raised conflict with properties around sportsgrounds that may be constructed closer to these facilities and suffer the impacts of growing sporting clubs such as noise and traffic movement.

For new facilities, the concerns of nearby residents are considered during the development approval process and dealt with as appropriate. Council continually deals with issues relating to neighbouring properties as they arise according to Council policy.

The increased demand for sportsground lighting and requirement for greater lux levels through the Australian Standard is an issue for neighbouring properties but is also considered through the development approval process.

2.7 Affect of litigation and insurance costs on financial viability

Council provides Public Liability Insurance and Volunteer Insurance to all groups delegated to manage Council facilities. These groups and other ground hirers are also required to have their own Public Liability Insurance if hiring the sportsground or facility. The newly developed Operating Manual aims to greatly reduce the likelihood of litigation by clearly setting out responsibilities and occupational health and safety management.

Council has been involved in litigation in the past however this is not considered excessive.

2.8 Access to open space for active and passive recreational users

The positioning of the Lake within the centre of the City is a geographic obstacle for people to move easily around the LGA to access different recreational facilities. There is however, a good spread of local facilities across the LGA all of which are open for community use.

New sporting groups requiring facilities are usually accommodated by the Community Operating Committees although Council does facilitate and coordinate instances where there is no obvious solution. For example Council liaised with a cricket facility to partner with a croquet club. This reduced the load on the cricket club and gave the croquet club a home where they currently maintain the best outfield in the city.

3. Summary of Key Points.

- Lake Macquarie City is a large LGA with a large and growing population.
- The population growth in the city has put pressure on facilities and increased the impact on nearby residents.
- The lake itself offers great recreational opportunities but also impacts on accessibility and maintenance efficiency.
- The majority of sportsgrounds are managed under a volunteer community model which Council has recently reviewed and applied additional resources to. This gives ownership to the community and builds social cohesion but is heavily reliant on volunteers.
- Hire fees collected go directly back into each facility.
- There is a good spread of sportsground facilities across the area but they are ageing and require extensive upgrading and/or expansion to meet the existing and future demands of the sporting community.

- The cost to bring facilities up to a modern standards exceed available funds. Grant opportunities for most facilities are inadequate.
- Community expectations for sportsgrounds has increased and is difficult to meet with limited funds and ageing facilities.
- New facilities are planned for high growth areas however there it is increasingly difficult to identify suitable land parcels for development as district level facilities.

Attachment 1

Sporting groups research 21/12/04

Participation in selected organised sports (a)

Sport	Lake Macquarie		Australia (a)	
	Number of registered players (b)	%	Number of registered players (b)	%
Soccer	6,629	38.0	693,200	28.8
Netball	4,225 +	24.2	624,600	26.0
Cricket	3,453	19.8	452,200	18.8
Rugby League	2,389	13.7	151,000	6.3
AFL	587 +	3.4	379,700	15.8
Rugby Union	148 +	0.8	102,100	4.2
TOTAL	17,431	100.0	2,402,800	100.0

(a) Figures for Lake Macquarie are from 2004, while Australian figures are from the 2002 National Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey.

(b) Lake Macquarie data is for all ages. Australian data is for people aged 15 years of over.

+ Some associations did not reply to the request for data, so numbers will be under-represented.

- Lake Macquarie has significantly more soccer and rugby league players, and significantly less AFL and rugby union players than the Australian average. Some of this discrepancy could be accounted for by the number of children under 15 years of age.

Changing Patterns in Lake Macquarie

	2002	2003	2004
Soccer	6,392	7,192	6,629
Netball	3,565+	3,814+	4,225+
Cricket	3,386	3,543	3,453
Rugby League	1,798	1,877	2,389
Australian rules	n/a	n/a	587
Rugby Union	172+	217+	148+

n/a – ring John Janczuk 0417465770 (emailed 22/12)

- Soccer by far the most popular organised sport in Lake Macquarie
- Netball second-most popular and increasing

- Rugby league and AFL also increasing

Study of Barriers to Sport and Physical Activity in Children

- More than 25% of parents of active children 5-12 years discourage or prevent their children from playing a particular sport because of injury or safety concerns.
- Rugby league (23.2%), rugby union (7.5%), and Australian Rules football (2.8%) were the most frequently discouraged.