

# **T R A N S C R I P T**

## **SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE 2026 COMMONWEALTH GAMES BID**

### **Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid**

Ballarat – Wednesday 14 February 2024

#### **MEMBERS**

David Limbrick – Chair

Joe McCracken – Deputy Chair

Melina Bath

David Davis

Jacinta Ermacora

Michael Galea

Sarah Mansfield

Tom McIntosh

Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell

**WITNESS**

Evan King, Chief Executive Officer, Ballarat City Council.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the committee's public hearings for the Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid. Please ensure that mobile phones have been switched to silent and that background noise is minimised. I welcome any members of the public in the gallery, and I remind those in the room to be respectful of the proceedings and to remain silent at all times.

All evidence taken is protected by parliamentary privilege as provided by the *Constitution Act 1975* and provisions of the Legislative Council standing orders. Therefore the information you provide during the hearing is protected by law. You are protected against any action for what you say during this hearing, but if you go elsewhere and repeat the same things, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. Any deliberately false evidence or misleading of the committee may be considered a contempt of Parliament.

All evidence is being recorded, and you will be provided with a proof version of the transcript following the hearing. Transcripts will ultimately be made public and posted on the committee's website.

For the Hansard record, could you please state your name and the organisation that you are appearing on behalf of.

**Evan KING:** Evan King. I am the CEO of the City of Ballarat.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I will just invite the committee to briefly introduce themselves. I am David Limbrick, the Chair and a Member for South-East Metro.

**Michael GALEA:** G'day. Michael Galea, a Member for South-Eastern Metropolitan as well.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Hello, Evan. Jacinta Ermacora, Member for Western Victoria Region.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Tom McIntosh, Eastern Victoria Region.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria.

**Joe McCracken:** Joe McCracken, Western Victoria.

**Melina BATH:** Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region. Hello.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Member for Northern Victoria Region.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I welcome you to make some opening comments, if you like, and I ask that they be kept to a maximum of around 10 minutes. Please proceed.

**Evan KING:** No worries. Thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to present at the hearing today. I have got a reasonably short introduction, basically to optimise your opportunity to ask some questions.

The Commonwealth Games were poised to be the biggest sporting event in Ballarat's history, delivering more than \$200 million in critical infrastructure, boosting our visitor economy and putting our athletes on the world stage. As the CEO of the City of Ballarat I worked tirelessly to advocate for my community to ensure the games delivered a legacy beyond the sporting event itself. That was my focus from day one.

It is important to understand local government's role in the Commonwealth Games. We were a delivery partner. Local government works closely with both state and federal governments, either as a delivery partner for their projects, events and initiatives or as the funded entity to deliver projects, events and initiatives under funding agreements. So were we disappointed to hear that the games had been cancelled? Yes, we were. However, despite the cancellation, Ballarat is set to benefit from one of the biggest investments by any government in our city, resulting in generational investment into sporting and transport infrastructure. Specifically, we are getting upgrades to the Ballarat railway stations to make it fully DDA compliant, including passenger lifts on both platforms and a connecting pedestrian overpass – fully budgeted in the 2022–23 state budget; 5000 new permanent seats at Eureka Stadium, as well as a new regional athletics track and supporting

infrastructure; a new community sporting facility at Miners Rest; and improvements at the Ballarat Sports and Events Centre, including accessibility works and upgrades to the show court.

As CEO of the City of Ballarat I took a very proactive role in advocating for the right legacy infrastructure for our community. I believed that if the Commonwealth Games could fast-track existing priorities of council, we would be assured that the legacy outcomes delivered for our community would be lasting and significant. An additional 5000 permanent seats at Eureka Stadium will enhance our capability to attract bigger, more diverse events to Ballarat. This investment complements and builds on the existing investment and infrastructure at this stadium. Local and regional football fans are already anticipating the AFL and AFLW games scheduled for 2024. DDA compliance at our train station will mean everybody, people of all abilities, can access train services. Council has been advocating for this investment for many years. The investment into sporting facilities in Miners Rest is much-needed investment into a community that is growing and will continue to grow. It will provide a facility that facilitates and encourages our community to be active. Finally, the investment into the Ballarat sports and events centre will only further enhance one of our most important sporting facilities, ensuring everybody has access to this great facility. These are huge wins for our community and will enable us to grow our reputation for holding local, national and international events across the sporting and cultural spectrum. We are also working hard to ensure we get our fair share of the Commonwealth Games-related legacy funding from the \$2 billion regional sports support package and regional tourism events fund.

Ballarat does events well. Each year tens of thousands of visitors come to our city to attend major events. While they are here they boost the local economy by spending on accommodation and food and through a bit of retail therapy. Local businesses profit too and are involved in setting up and supplying events. The City of Ballarat has a proud history of attracting, hosting and running major events, predating the 1956 Olympic rowing, kayaking and canoe events, which we are deservedly well known for. The City of Ballarat continues to have an incredibly full calendar of events covering sport, music, performance, arts, culture and community events. In recent months we hosted Spilt Milk for the third time, with an amazing line-up of artists including an international headline act, attracting more than 40,000 music lovers to Ballarat. People come from around the state and from around the country to make a weekend of it. Accommodation was at capacity, and hospitality sectors boomed. We are still to receive this year's numbers; however, the 2022 Spilt Milk contributed an estimated \$5 million into the economy.

The road national cycling event was held in January, attracting international and national television audiences as well as the thousands of spectators who attend this event in person. The Ballarat International Foto Biennale, held over two months in the last quarter of 2023, welcomed more than 30,000 visitors, many of whom stayed in Ballarat for multiple nights. The Art Gallery of Ballarat hosts over 30 exhibitions and 150 programs and events annually, including international exhibitions. With 10,500-plus artworks, the Art Gallery of Ballarat's collection is one of the top five in the country and the best in regional Australia. In 2024 Ballarat will host the Begonia festival, the Ballarat Marathon and White Night. Events bring people to Ballarat, who choose to stay, eat and spend locally. It is great for our economy.

To reiterate, we have not seen any impact on this sector as a result of cancellation of the games. The King's caveat has been removed from the former saleyard site. This is a significant milestone and has advanced our ability to plan for this site for many years. We continue to work with Development Victoria to determine how the site will be used in the future. I am confident the decontamination works will be delivered and a precinct structure plan developed to ensure this key site is developed in a way that brings maximum benefit to the people of Ballarat. This is a significant outcome for our community that will enable us to unlock the potential of this well-positioned site.

I continue to strongly advocate for Ballarat's fair share of the \$1 billion Regional Housing Fund. It has the very real potential to reduce the rate of homelessness and address the growing waiting lists for social housing and private rentals in Ballarat. We have had a number of positive meetings with Homes Victoria, and we continue to push for the best outcomes for our community, with a particular interest in infill development.

With all this in mind, I can categorically say that the Commonwealth Games will provide an unparalleled investment in Ballarat despite its cancellation. The hours put into planning, negotiating and collaborating with our government partner have proven to be time well spent so far, with once-in-a-lifetime investment being made in Ballarat. As CEO I will continue to leverage this investment to ensure the best outcomes for my community. Would I have liked the games to have gone ahead? Of course. However, I can also appreciate that

sometimes governments need to make difficult decisions, and from Ballarat's perspective there is no doubt our city will reap substantial benefits for years to come. I am proud to be able to tell your committee that all of the infrastructure that will be built in Ballarat as a consequence of this process is consistent with the long-term vision, plans and priorities of council as opposed to infrastructure for infrastructure's sake. I could work for another decade and not see this level of targeted investment in the Ballarat community.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much. I would like to start with a couple of questions around the interaction with the state government. We have heard from other councils about when the government was discussing the games early on and that later they entered into confidentiality agreements. Firstly, did your council enter into these confidentiality agreements with the government?

**Evan KING:** There were a number of council officers who were involved in working groups and hub delivery meetings that signed non-disclosure agreements.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. And what was the nature of those agreements?

**Evan KING:** Pretty general agreements, in the end, which basically said any information that was gained or generated out of being involved in these processes was not to be publicly released.

**The CHAIR:** Understood. Early on, after the games were announced, what sort of contact did you have from the government regarding gaining information about sites, estimates, data on housing and those sorts of things that would have been required for them to later on firm up their estimates? We have heard already in the committee that the initial cost estimates were just wrong, basically, and they firmed it up later. What sort of evidence was provided from the council to government from your area that might have helped them firm up those estimates?

**Evan KING:** We certainly did not provide information for them to use to cost the games. My involvement and my organisation's involvement was predominantly around advocating for the right legacy to be delivered in Ballarat. So our involvement was providing those on-ground insights into Ballarat and where the best opportunities for that legacy investment would be. We did not provide information. That was a state government activity to, I suppose, take all of that information and cost that.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Okay. It sounds like you were not providing them with figures and things that they could have fed into those estimates, so they must have come up with them another way.

**Evan KING:** Yes.

**The CHAIR:** Understood. You mentioned in your introduction – and I know it has been the subject of discussion – the saleyards contamination. You expressed just earlier that you are confident that that decontamination will proceed. Have you got cost estimates and time estimates on how long that will take?

**Evan KING:** I do not have time estimates or cost estimates other than that we are continuing to work with Development Victoria to ensure the best outcome for that site.

**The CHAIR:** Right. And in your view, if the games had gone ahead, would that site have been actually suitable for the purposes that it was intended for – for the proposed games?

**Evan KING:** It is a good question. The Commonwealth Games Federation has very clear guidelines around what is required for an athletes village. The state government, as I understand it, looked at a whole range of sites and ultimately chose the saleyards site as the site for the athletes village, and work was progressing to determine how that could be best delivered.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. What sorts of inspections happened on that site from the government?

**Evan KING:** I understand there were a whole range of activities undertaken on that site to prepare it as the potential athletes village site. I am not across every activity they undertook. That really was not our role in the athletes village preparation. I would assume there would be all of the standard activities that you would do whenever you are going to build on a site.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I will pass to Mr McCracken.

**Joe McCracken:** Hello, Evan. How are you?

**Evan King:** Very well, thank you.

**Joe McCracken:** That is good. I am just going to go through a few questions. I want to follow on from David about the non-disclosure agreements. I feel a bit sorry for you because I feel like you have been forced into a corner on these, because there are some things that you should have been able to disclose that probably you have not been able to. Were you asked to sign one of these agreements?

**Evan King:** Yes, I was.

**Joe McCracken:** When was that?

**Evan King:** Good question. I think it was in September of 2022 –

**Joe McCracken:** Okay.

**Evan King:** but I am happy to check that and provide that information.

**Joe McCracken:** If you want to take it on notice and provide the date and all that, that is fine.

**Evan King:** Yes. I am certainly happy to do that.

**Joe McCracken:** You said also before that some of your officers had been asked to sign them.

**Evan King:** Yes.

**Joe McCracken:** How many?

**Evan King:** I would have to take that on notice, but basically anyone that was working in the working groups was asked to sign –

**Joe McCracken:** If you are happy to provide a list of who and when they were asked, that is fine.

**Evan King:** Yes.

**Joe McCracken:** Did you or any of the officers express any concern about having to sign these agreements?

**Evan King:** It is not uncommon in large, complex projects for organisations to be required to sign non-disclosure agreements. There was significant money involved in the Commonwealth Games. There was commercial in confidence, because ultimately all of the infrastructure was going to be tendered out. Local government was not the spokesperson of the Commonwealth Games, and I tried to make that really clear in my opening statement. We were a delivery partner with the government. It was not for us to be the spokesperson. When you have got a complex project with multiple stakeholders and significant money involved, it is not uncommon for that to be required.

It happens in different ways in local government. So where we are a delivery partner it is not uncommon for that form of document to be used. When we are delivering things under funding agreements it is not uncommon for the funding agreement to have conditions of confidentiality in it as well. What it does is ensure that there is one singular voice to the community around a project rather than everyone having different views and comments on it.

**Joe McCracken:** Can you provide us with a copy of your agreement or one of the agreements?

**Evan King:** I would certainly be happy to check whether I am able to do that.

**Joe McCracken:** Whether you are able to? Okay. Privilege covers and trumps all those sort of agreements –

**Evan King:** I understand.

**Joe McCracken:** so if you can, that is good. So the main reason why you signed it is because of the need for one person to be a spokesman. Do you know why you had to sign it? What did the government say to you as the reason why?

**Evan King:** Really, because of the complexity of the project, the dollar value of the project, it is proper, good governance from a probity perspective that we are not actually out there talking about the project before it is actually made public.

**Joe McCracken:** Yes, that is fair. Who was it that asked you to sign it?

**Evan King:** It would have come through DJSIR.

**Joe McCracken:** Do you have any particular name of a person that asked you?

**Evan King:** I would have to take that on notice.

**Joe McCracken:** If you are happy to take that on notice, that is fine. What limitations were placed on you in your ability to inform councillors about what was going on with the Commonwealth Games?

**Evan King:** I do not believe it impeded my ability to inform my councillors. As you would know from your local government experience, we have confidential briefings. I was able to inform my councillors of progress and what was happening, and then I also invited a range of guests to come in and speak to council to keep them up to speed on what was happening.

**Joe McCracken:** Would you say that you were able to fully disclose everything that was going on?

**Evan King:** I believe that I was able to.

**Joe McCracken:** Okay. Some councils have said that these agreements have limited the ability of the CEO to disclose a lot of things. You would say that that is not true?

**Evan King:** I believed in confidential briefings I was able to be open and transparent about my activities involved in the Commonwealth Games.

**Joe McCracken:** Okay. I want to talk a little bit about the saleyards as well. I noticed in an article from the Ballarat *Courier* on 29 August last year that Michael Poulton, who as you well know is the Committee for Ballarat chair, said:

The decision around the athletes' village, to move to the sale yards, was not one supported by any developer or anyone with any understanding of the housing situation in Ballarat.

He went on to say:

That was of concern to us in the initial stages, and it was not consistent with the strategies that we had developed through the city over a number of years.

I know you talked about the King's caveat and that sort of thing before. Was it a case of getting it off your books because it is difficult site? And it is a difficult site, I understand that.

**Evan King:** It certainly does not get it off our books. It is Crown land. It is the state government's land. It obviously had a complex legal structure around it. The removal of the King's caveat has certainly created the opportunity now to do some proper precinct planning around what might be the best way forward for that site. I can understand the Committee for Ballarat's view of where the best site might be for the athletes village, and I am sure Committee for Ballarat would have been advocating for an infill opportunity. You also have got to cross-reference that with some very clear guidelines from the Commonwealth Games Federation around the requirements of an athletes village.

**Joe McCracken:** We know from the state government that the EPA were asked to look at that site only, not other sites in Ballarat. Is that something that you supported at the time?

**Evan KING:** I provided a whole range of opportunities for potential athletes villages to the state government in my role as the CEO. I was not privy to the analysis of those sites and the determination of which would be the best site.

**Joe McCracken:** What other sites did you offer? Sorry, I will leave that as my last one.

**Melina BATH:** Can you provide those other sites to the committee, please?

**Evan KING:** I can check whether I am able to provide that.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr McCracken. Mr Galea.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you, Chair. Good morning, Mr King. Thank you for joining us today. In your opening remarks you talked about various tourism events that have been going on in Ballarat and the broader visitor economy. You mentioned things such as the Spilt Milk festival and the begonia festival. I also note there was the recent Foto Biennale, which my colleague Juliana Addison was most enthusiastic about promoting to all the rest of us in Parliament as well. You also said that there has been no negative impact on this sector as a result of the Commonwealth Games cancellation. Can I just ask you to talk to the broader trends that you are seeing? We had very positive reports yesterday in Geelong about the things that are happening in the Barwon region. Is that your experience here in the Central Highlands too? Would you say that things are going well and the visitor economy is growing?

**Evan KING:** Yes. We are certainly seeing significant uplift in attendance at events post COVID. I think particularly just after COVID there was a real demand for people to travel but travel more locally than they might have previously. At our first begonia festival after COVID we had in excess of 50,000 people turn up, which is a really, really significant volume of people. Tourism events have a far greater impact than just the event itself. When you find people that relocate to regional Victoria, quite often that idea of relocating is created by coming to visit an event and then saying, 'Isn't that a stunning place to visit. Wouldn't it be a great idea to relocate?' I think the changes in the ways that people are working these days – you know, the ability to live in regional Victoria and still retain your job – are far more enhanced. We are still seeing 2 per cent-plus growth in our population in Ballarat, and a lot of that is the result of flexibility in ways of working these days. It allows people to have a semirural lifestyle but be an hour to Melbourne, an hour to the beach and an hour to the mountains, which is a great opportunity for us. We continue to see an appetite for events. We continue to see event organisers approaching us around new opportunities. One of our great challenges at the moment is trying to find free weekends that we can actually fit events into, which is a lovely problem to have.

**Michael GALEA:** A good problem to have, absolutely.

**Evan KING:** We put on events for our community, and we put on events to attract people to our city.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you. Actually only about two weeks ago I came to visit Ballarat and arrived by train, and I have got to say that station of yours is a beautiful way to arrive, in that gorgeous old train shed. It was a very nice welcome to the City of Ballarat, I have to say. You mentioned in your opening remarks too about the state's investment in partnering with council to upgrade Ballarat station. As pretty as it was, I could see some of the DDA issues and a little bit tired. Can you talk to me a bit more about that project and what a difference that will make, both for residents and workers in Ballarat but also of course, as you say, people that come here to visit?

**Evan KING:** It is a \$50 million investment into our train station. It is more often than not the first point that people come into in the city. At the moment it is very difficult for people with mobility issues to be able to move from platform to platform. It is a beautiful, historic train station, but it needs investment to allow it to be accessible for everybody. As I mentioned before, our proximity to Melbourne and our proximity to other areas means that it is a very busy train station. Allowing people better access to public transport is beneficial on a whole range of fronts. It takes traffic off our roads, it allows people to connect with family and community – a whole range of opportunities there. It has been an item that the City of Ballarat has been advocating for for some time, and a great outcome out of the Commonwealth Games.

**Michael GALEA:** Great to hear. I do still have a little bit of time. The accommodation – you actually mentioned I think that at one of those festivals all the rooms were booked out in the city. What sort of

accommodation challenges are you facing? Again, good problems to have. But what are those problems that you are facing with growing your availability of beds?

**Evan KING:** Look, it certainly is a challenge for us. If we have a junior basketball tournament, our accommodation all books out at the moment. There are a range of events during the year where our accommodation books out. It was one of the outcomes of the announcement around the Commonwealth Games. We had a number of planning applications come in for new motels to be built in the city. Now, whether they eventuate now or not will be interesting, but it is certainly something that we are working on as a council to try and facilitate the development of additional beds in the city. But I suppose what it also means is that does create opportunities for our surrounding councils to also benefit from people coming to the City of Ballarat, and if we take the wider accommodation view, that certainly helps spill out into other councils.

**Michael GALEA:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr Galea. Ms Bath.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Thank you very much for attending today. I say thank you to your emergency first responders who are doing it tough at the moment, and I am sure supporting all of those people at Pomonal and the rest. I am interested to understand if the Victorian government gave you a copy of the business case for the Commonwealth Games, the proposed business case.

**Evan KING:** I am not aware of receiving a copy of the business case.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. If you do a check. All of my questions might be taken on notice, if you please.

**Evan KING:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you, Mr King. The Victorian Auditor-General has just conducted an audit on government departments and the like. Were you asked to make a submission to that or did you provide content or be interviewed by the VAGO audit?

**Evan KING:** Yes. I was interviewed and also provided content to the audit.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. Hopefully we are going to see his report shortly, but we would appreciate if you could provide that to our committee as well.

**Evan KING:** I am happy to check with the Victorian Auditor-General if that is possible.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. Yesterday we heard from the Geelong council that it expended upwards of \$8 million. What did the Ballarat council outlay in planning for the Commonwealth Games?

**Evan KING:** It is a good question. We incurred no direct cost as a result of the Commonwealth Games. We did not employ additional staff. We took it on as business as usual and used existing staff to be able to do that work required. We did not keep time sheets and we do not run activity-based accounting systems, so I am not able to give you an auditable number around what it cost, but we certainly invested human capital into working with the state government on the delivery of the Commonwealth Games.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I note that the mayor, Mr Hudson, spoke in the paper about hundreds of thousands of hours. I would just like to see if you could quantify that in some way – it might be a request for homework – in terms of activity, staff, community engagement, you know, that sort of amount, because there has been an allocation in planning for something that is now not going to be delivered. It would just be useful for our committee to understand that, if you can. Thank you very much.

Did Ballarat make a financial contribution to the Shepparton council for the early original scoping study for a regional Commonwealth Games?

**Evan KING:** I understand we did.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. If so, how much and when were the payments made?

**Evan KING:** I would need to take that one on notice, yes.



**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I appreciate that. That is all right. It is most helpful. Just going back to the non-disclosure form, councillors were trusted with the full information that you provided through briefings, but in effect the current state government could not trust your staff. It effectively made them sign non-disclosures. My question is: do all your staff sign non-disclosure forms for other government-funded projects?

**Evan KING:** It will depend on the type of project, the size of the project and the complexity of the project, but as I stated previously, there have been instances over the years where staff have been required to sign confidentiality agreements when they have been involved in working groups on projects or through funding agreements when we are the direct delivery agent of state and federal government projects.

**Melina BATH:** As a local government, you must understand that there needs to be a balance between, as you say, good governance and transparency for ratepayers – and not only ratepayers but taxpayer funds. I would like your opinion – whether you can give it or not is another thing – on those disclosure statements. There should still be a level of transparency around government operations for community infrastructure.

**Evan KING:** Look, it is not for me to make an opinion on that.

**Melina BATH:** Okay. Thank you. The 2022–23 state budget in May details how the Victorian government were seeking a co-contribution for funding the games. Can you provide the dates of the funding requests to the City of Ballarat as asked by the Victorian government and any relevant documents, letters or emails associated with those requests?

**Evan KING:** We never, ever received a request from the state government to make a contribution. My council was very clear that we were not going to make a capital contribution to the infrastructure investment. It was not in our 10-year financial plan, and for us to insert other investment priorities would mean something else would need to drop out. The opportunity that existed was if we wanted to invest to enhance that infrastructure further beyond the requirements of the Commonwealth Games, and that was an item that was still being discussed at the point in time of the cancellation.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. It must have been quite a frenetic time for you, the announcement. You were having to gear up et cetera. I am interested to understand what ministers you met in your role as CEO but also any dates of those meetings and minutes of those meetings. If you could provide them, that would be helpful. Again, it might be a question on notice.

**Evan KING:** On notice, yes.

**Melina BATH:** Is that okay?

**Evan KING:** Yes.

**Melina BATH:** Thank you. I will leave it there for a minute, Chair, and I can come back. I am sure my time is about 2 seconds away from finishing.

**The CHAIR:** Yes. Thank you, Ms Bath. Ms Ermacora.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Thank you. Thank you, Evan. I appreciate you presenting here today. I am just interested in the sport infrastructure upgrades and the fund. I know in my time at Warrnambool City Council lots of projects had multiple contributors. You can call them partners. You know, you have federal government money, state government money and local government money. Quite often with sporting infrastructure you get the relevant clubs contributing, and then sometimes in some communities they are lucky enough to have philanthropic trusts also. Part of the purpose of that is to show just how broadly a particular project might be supported too – or catalyst money. With the state government \$2 billion regional Victoria fund delivering upgraded sporting infrastructure as a result, what are the projects that you are hoping to apply for? There is due process, there is an application and there will be independent assessment of course, as we always do, but what are the projects that you are hoping to apply for?

**Evan KING:** Out of the \$2 billion fund – obviously \$1 billion of that is for housing and the other \$1 billion is for a range of funding opportunities – there are the projects that have been committed to by the state government already, as I mentioned. There are the 5000 new permanent seats at Mars Stadium, which will take the seating capacity of Mars Stadium up to 10,000, which will allow us to be able to attract bigger and more

diverse events there. There is a new regional athletics facility that will be built next to Eureka stadium, which is a fantastic opportunity for the City of Ballarat. The existing athletics facility is at the end of its life. It is surrounded by residential houses, has limited parking and has light-spill and dust issues, so it will be a fantastic opportunity to add athletics to our sporting and events precinct. There is a significant investment into sporting facilities in Miners Rest. Miners Rest is a community that is growing rapidly and will continue to grow with our northern growth zone. So there is investment into sporting facilities there and further investment into our major basketball stadium as well. They are as-of-right sporting investments as a result of the cancellation.

The council support package was one of the funding sources in that suite of funding, and we have submitted a funding application there for some additional sporting infrastructure in our major sporting and events precinct. We are in the process of putting together a funding application at the moment to the Regional Tourism Infrastructure Fund for some very important planning and design development of a significant arts project in Ballarat. So as those funding opportunities come out – some are out and active at the moment and some are still to obviously have the guidelines prepared and come out – we will continue to put in applications to deliver great outcomes for our community. As you would know, from a local government perspective there is never a shortage of projects. We have a long, long list of projects on our books at the moment which we are looking for opportunities to fund and to deliver.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Fantastic. Thank you. It is really good that the commitments are going to follow through on the 5000 extra seats at the Mars Stadium – that is very exciting – and also the regional athletics facility. That is in the Eureka precinct, I think.

**Evan KING:** Yes.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** And then what specifically at Miners Rest?

**Evan KING:** Council bought some land in Miners Rest a couple of years ago, which was really a land-banking exercise as Miners Rest was growing, to ensure that we had land availability for sporting and recreational facilities. It is in its planning phase at the moment, but it is certainly looking at a grassed oval, a community facility and a range of contributory infrastructure in that to provide those much-needed recreational sporting facilities for Miners Rest.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** Would you describe Miners Rest as a growth area?

**Evan KING:** Yes, and it is linked. So it is right adjacent to our new northern growth zone, which has recently been rezoned to urban growth zone. We are working with the VPA at the moment on developing the precinct structure plan, so it will be Ballarat's next growth area, with 6000-plus lots developed there.

**Jacinta ERMACORA:** That is fantastic, thank you. I think my time is up.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Ermacora. Ms Tyrrell.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. I am just curious: how did you find out about the cancellation of the games?

**Evan KING:** I listened to the media event on TV.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** So you were not given the courtesy from the government –

**Evan KING:** I understand the mayor was informed by the government prior to the announcement.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Was that via email or phone?

**Evan KING:** I understand it was via phone call.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Lovely. On the day, did you also receive feedback from other councils across the state about the cancellation? Were there any communications?

**Evan KING:** I think there were probably text messages and lots of conversation going on both from a community perspective and from a local government perspective around the cancellation.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** So what was the overall mood with regard to that?

**Evan KING:** As I mentioned, I think there was disappointment that the games were not going ahead. If you think of the time, we had come out of COVID. I think everyone was very excited around what the Commonwealth Games would deliver from an event perspective and from a tourism, from a hospitality and from a marketing perspective.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. Yesterday we heard from Geelong's business representatives that the government liked to make exciting promises that they released in communication with the government that due to limited planning and business engagement, and I will quote this:

... the majority of business owners were simply never convinced the event would go ahead.

And it became apparent in January to March 2023 that there were problems. Did you feel the same? Did you have that same feeling here in Ballarat?

**Evan KING:** I genuinely believed the games would be delivered. I was working incredibly hard to play my role as an advocate for my community to ensure that the best legacy would be delivered for the Ballarat community.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Were the councillors sharing the same views as you?

**Evan KING:** You would need to ask the councillors that; I do not speak on behalf of them.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** That is okay. I just thought you might have your finger on their pulse as the CEO. We have heard throughout this committee that many legacy items promised are not coming to fruition within acceptable time frames. Do you have any legacy projects which the government has outlined where you are seeing that the timing has been delayed?

**Evan KING:** We continue to work very closely with the government to deliver those legacy items that I have mentioned today, and they are continuing to progress at an appropriate rate. I am very confident that they will be delivered for the Ballarat community.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** What are the time frames exactly on certain projects? Can you pinpoint a few?

**Evan KING:** I am unable to. That would be a question of the government you would need to ask.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay, thank you. Tourism Midwest Victoria has stated that, and I will quote again:

The cancellation of the games is a massive blow, adding to the challenges our industry is already experiencing ... with visitor economy benefits now at risk. Do you agree with the Tourism Midwest Victoria statement?

**Evan KING:** I think it is an incredibly difficult economic time at the moment for business. Cost-of-living pressures are certainly curbing spending. Cost escalations are creating a difficult environment. As a local government, I continue to focus on attracting and delivering events that continue to support our small business.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** How much investment does the City of Ballarat estimate is now required to compensate for visitor economy benefits that have now been lost to the region?

**Evan KING:** The \$2 billion package that the government announced is providing a whole range of grant opportunities – \$25 million for the council support package, obviously a billion dollars for regional housing, \$150 million for a Regional Worker Accommodation Fund, \$150 million for a regional tourism and events fund. That funding will certainly provide significant support to all of those entities that were going to benefit out of the Commonwealth Games.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Thank you. One of the things we have heard along the way during this committee is the impact on our reputation. Do you think that it has impacted Ballarat's reputation for tourism?

**Evan KING:** As I included in my opening statement, the City of Ballarat has an incredibly proud history of delivering major events, whether that be national road cycling, whether that be AFL, AFLW, whether that be Spilt Milk, whether that be the upcoming White Night. I still see significant interest from event organisers to

want to hold events in Ballarat, and the investment in sporting and event infrastructure will only enhance our reputation as the regional Victoria events capital.

**Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL:** Okay. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Ms Tyrrell. Mr McIntosh.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Hi, Evan. Thanks very much for being here. There are a few different things I wanted to ask you about. Just by way of background, I grew up in Ballarat; I had family arrested at Eureka, for what it is worth, so I go back a fair way. I am always amazed when I return to Ballarat about the growth of the city, the town, and just how it has changed over time. Listening to you talk about events, you know, it used to be basically the show and the local grand finals were probably the big events, and now you are talking about the influx of tourists and also what that means for the local regions. I grew up about half an hour out, and obviously when I was growing up, with train services being ripped out and droughts and all that sort of stuff, it was pretty tough. So it is just interesting to hear that over the last couple of decades the investment in the town. What do you think have been the key things that have supported it? As you said, this year a 2 per cent growth in population at Miners Rest, 6000 lots – this is all pretty big compared to what I perhaps grew up with and experienced. Could you just talk us through perhaps the last couple of decades? Then I might come to looking forward. What sort of investments have helped shape Ballarat today?

**Evan KING:** Yes. I certainly can. I am a long-term Ballarat person myself, so I have seen Ballarat grow over my time here. Certainly the western growth area of Ballarat has really been our growth area over the last probably 15 years. Continued investment into schools and kindergartens, continued investment into transport, the City of Ballarat's significant investment into its infrastructure – we are delivering \$129 million worth of capital works this year as a council. That is our biggest investment into infrastructure ever, and many of those projects are not business-as-usual projects, they are transformational projects. Whether it is the redevelopment of our library, whether it is redevelopment of the Bridge Mall, redevelopment of Her Majesty's Theatre, extension of the runway at the airport, Ballarat is growing because of the vision that has been provided from multiple governments, multiple councils over the years that has made Ballarat an incredibly attractive place for people to live. We talk about cost-of-living challenges. You know, Ballarat is still a reasonably affordable place to live, to buy a house, for a family to prosper. It makes Ballarat an incredibly attractive place.

What has changed over the years? Ballarat has really transformed from a bit of a country town to an incredibly diverse community. It was not that long ago that if you tried to go out for a meal on a Thursday night, probably a parma at the pub was the best opportunity you had. Now the diversity of our hospitality industry is amazing, and every week another restaurant pops up. As I said before, our proximity makes us an incredibly attractive place. We are lucky that our forebears created incredibly wide boulevards that ensured that places like Vic Park were protected and were not developed and now have become the breathing heart of our city. Our natural beauty, in having a lake in the centre of the city and our botanical gardens, is just amazing, and as you would understand, being a local, sometimes we take those things for granted and you forget the beauty of the city and the attraction. It has been the ability of the city to work with multiple governments over a long period of time, both state and federal, to get the investment to ensure that as Ballarat grows it maintains its livability at the same time.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Yes. If I get time, I will come to infill, because I think that is an interesting point you raised earlier. There is definitely nothing wrong with a pot and a parma, but it is nice one or two nights a week not to have to have a parma and to have other things, and that central life is quite incredible. Not having been here for quite a number of years, my finger is off the pulse. I will come to the \$2 billion regional package, but in your interactions and meetings, say, after the first month after the Commonwealth Games announcement, that it would not continue, have people raised the Commonwealth Games – excluding the package, have people raised the games post?

**Evan KING:** I think most people moved on pretty quickly in the end. I am not involved in the decision-making in the end, but sometimes there comes a point where you have got to have the discussion on the cost versus the return on investment. Sometimes that return on investment does not justify the spend and governments need to make decisions. Sometimes they are very hard decisions, and my role as CEO is to try and leverage the best benefit for my community. State and federal governments will make decisions from time to time, and I have got to try and navigate my way through that to try and deliver the best outcome for my

community. I think most people have a whole range of other things on their mind at the moment – the cost of living is challenging, housing affordability is challenging.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Just a very last quick question, because I have got 15 seconds left: if that decision had not been made, additionally to the costs of the event, do you think that would have added extra inflationary pressures to the town, to local job ability and whatnot?

**Evan KING:** We have got a significant investment happening in Ballarat at the moment. Whether it is the redevelopment of Grampians Health, whether it is an additional significant investment into St John's or whether it is our \$130 million a year, there is a lot of investment happening in Ballarat at the moment. When you add in further investment it can certainly impact the cost of delivering those projects, and as a local government we have certainly seen a lot of our projects increase in value. We are certainly having to manage that to ensure that we ensure our financial sustainability.

**Tom McINTOSH:** Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you, Mr McIntosh. Dr Mansfield.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Thank you. And thank you for appearing today. One of the things in the original business case that was suggested by the authors of that business case was that to reduce the risk of cost blowouts the state government should secure co-funding agreements with entities like local governments prior to announcing the games. I know you said that at no point during the planning stages were you asked for a co-contribution, but in the development of the business case or the preparation of the bid, were there any discussions about co-contributions from council?

**Evan KING:** We were not involved in those activities.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. All right. So you were not approached at all, even to have a discussion about that – and no other involvement in the preparation of the bid –

**Evan KING:** No.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** or the business case? Okay. During the planning stages of the games, at any stage did you have any concerns about progress or were there issues that you were worried about in terms of the ability to deliver the games based on what you were seeing rolled out?

**Evan KING:** It is worth understanding the opportunity to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games came as a result of South Africa pulling out and Birmingham going early. The Commonwealth Games was having some fairly significant challenges around its own sustainability and the ability for countries to be able to host the Commonwealth Games. This was a new model and probably a last-ditch effort to try and find a model that created sustainability for the Commonwealth Games. A multihub model had not been done before, so there was no precedence on how you went about delivering a multihub model. I imagine the thinking process around that was really if you could have a multihub model in a country, why could you not then host a multicountry model at some stage, so certainly looking at opportunities around how the longevity of the Commonwealth Games could be extended. Without a blueprint around how you go about it, government had to develop this program of a multihub model, which created challenges.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** I guess just to bring it back to the question, though, we heard from some other witnesses that they had some concerns, particularly given the tight time frames, in their locations; the lack of, for example, progress on infrastructure projects; the lack of decent transport plans. I mean, you had quite substantial events here – how were people going to get to and from Ballarat? Accommodation for everyone, including the participants as well as spectators. Did you have concerns about any of those aspects prior to the cancellation?

**Evan KING:** They were certainly all items that were on the agenda that we were working through. It depends on how you want to look at it in the end. Were they challenges or were they opportunities? There are opportunities to look at how we might invest into our transport infrastructure to make the city far more accessible internally and externally. No major multisport event is simple. There will always be challenges. My view is if you get eight years to do something, you take eight years. If you have got four years to do something,

then you do it in four years. You get more efficient, you actually get more focused and you make sure that you deliver it on time.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** I guess in the end some of those challenges were insurmountable, though. The other thing that I was interested in understanding was how much of the legacy infrastructure aligns with your council's priorities and strategic planning. What is the degree of that alignment? Are those projects at the top of your list or have you had to do some rearranging?

**Evan KING:** I think that is a really important point to make. My view of all this was if I could use the Commonwealth Games to deliver existing priority projects of council, I would get the right legacy. If you build infrastructure for infrastructure's sake, then that is when you run the risk of actually getting legacy infrastructure that is not required. I think there are great examples around the world, when you look at Olympics and Commonwealth Games, where that has not been done appropriately.

If you look at the infrastructure that is being delivered, another 5000 permanent seats at Mars Stadium is on top of the existing investment in Mars Stadium, which increases its capacity and creates a very nice niche stadium. Ten thousand seats plus another 15,000 standing room gives us that opportunity to attract events that might not be big enough for Kardinia Park, might not be big enough for the Melbourne sports and events precinct. It gives us a niche stadium to be able to attract a whole range of events. Our athletics track is at an end of life. This is a great opportunity to replace that with a more accessible, visible athletics precinct.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. So in Ballarat it aligns quite well.

**Evan KING:** It is perfectly aligned.

**Sarah MANSFIELD:** Okay. Just on to the housing –

**The CHAIR:** Dr Mansfield, I think we are out of time. I think there was one follow-up question from Mr McCracken in the brief time we have got.

**Joe McCracken:** Yes, just quickly. I know you said before that you had not employed any staff to do the Comm Games.

**Evan KING:** Yes.

**Joe McCracken:** I am just looking at an article from the *Ballarat Times* from May 2023. It says 'City gets Comm Games tourism chief'. I will quote from the article. It says:

The City of Ballarat has appointed a director for a newly-established role aimed at maximising tourism during the Commonwealth Games.

The new role, titled director of economy, experience and Commonwealth Games, has been filled by tourism professional Martin Darcy who'll start in June.

**Evan KING:** 'You cannot believe everything you read' would be my first port of call. This was a directorship role that I had been planning to put on for some time, and if you read the title, it covers economic development, it covers tourism, it covers events –

**Joe McCracken:** And the Commonwealth Games.

**Evan KING:** If I can finish, that would be much appreciated. It covers a whole range of existing activities that existed in the organisation that were filtered across other directorates. I took the opportunity to bring a range of services together under a portfolio and also included the Commonwealth Games in that. That role started a couple of weeks before the cancellation, so it never really got the opportunity to get involved in the Commonwealth Games. The Commonwealth Games was only a part of that portfolio because my view was once the infrastructure had been determined, once it had been planned and once it commenced delivering, the Commonwealth Games would turn into an event, and that directorship, obviously having economic development, tourism, marketing and events, would have the ability to bring those services together to ensure that we leveraged the best benefits out of the Commonwealth Games. With the Commonwealth Games cancellation, that directorship continues because it has a whole range of existing services sitting underneath it.

**Joe McCracken:** So is that article false?

**Evan KING:** Well, I think I have answered the question.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you. I think we have run out of time, unfortunately. Thank you for appearing today. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript for review in about a week, before it is published on our website. The committee will now reset and reconvene shortly.

**Witness withdrew.**