

TRANSCRIPT

SELECT COMMITTEE ON THE 2026 COMMONWEALTH GAMES BID

Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid

Bendigo – Tuesday 27 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

Andrew Cooney, Chief Executive Officer, Greater Bendigo City Council.

The CHAIR: Thank you for appearing today. We will now resume the committee's public hearings for the Inquiry into the 2026 Commonwealth Games Bid.

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

Andrew COONEY: Andrew Cooney, and I am here on behalf of the City of Greater Bendigo.

The CHAIR: Thank you. I will just briefly allow the committee members to introduce themselves. For the record, I am David Limbrick, Chair of the committee.

Michael GALEA: G'day. Michael Galea, South-Eastern Metropolitan Region.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Sarah Mansfield, Western Victoria Region.

Joe McCracken: Joe McCracken, Western Victoria Region.

Melina BATH: Melina Bath, Eastern Victoria Region.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Rikkie-Lee Tyrrell, Northern Victoria Region.

Tom McINTOSH: Tom McIntosh, Eastern Victoria Region.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Jacinta Ermacora, Western Victoria Region.

The CHAIR: Thank you, members. We welcome you making some opening comments, Mr Cooney, and ask that they be kept to around about 10 minutes. Thank you.

Andrew COONEY: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to be here. Today, as I stated earlier, I represent the City of Greater Bendigo, which was chosen as a host city for the Victorian 2026 Commonwealth Games. I am the CEO of the City of Greater Bendigo and previously held the position as director of Commonwealth Games.

To begin, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on today, the Dja Dja Wurrung people, and I pay my respects to the Djaara leaders and their elders past, present and future. The Djaara people had a really large part in our planning for the games as well.

The City of Greater Bendigo was very excited to be named as a co-host for the games when the announcement was made in April 2022, and our community was uniquely united behind the opportunity to be a part of sporting history and to be a host for the regional games. Recognising the importance of the opportunity and keen to capitalise on this, the City of Greater Bendigo sought approval from council to appoint a director with the sole responsibility of leading the preparations for the games and discussions with the Victorian government and the other stakeholders who had a role in the games delivery, and also to provide a key contact and conduit for the business and sporting communities of not just Bendigo but our whole region. As I mentioned earlier, following an advertised recruitment process, I was appointed into the position in 2022.

To articulate our vision for supporting the games, our council adopted a Commonwealth Games legacy document that outlined the lasting impacts that we sought for this event. These impacts included highlighting and celebrating our First Nations people, sharing the benefits of hosting the event with the broader Loddon Campaspe region, investing in housing and active transport, jobs creation, showcasing our UNESCO creative city and region of gastronomy and improving the condition of our community sporting and events infrastructure. At every opportunity we sought to promote the skills and talents of our local businesses, artists and volunteers so that we could spread the positive impact of the games throughout our community.

There was strong early engagement from a core team of staff appointed to deliver the Commonwealth Games on behalf of the Victorian government. There were also dedicated staff within government departments that were tasked with the infrastructure and legacy focus for the games. We worked very closely with these teams as well as the team from Development Victoria on the master planning for the athletes village site in Flora Hill. Whilst the immediate need was to design an athletes village, we were also keen to ensure that a vibrant community and place would be another positive legacy for the games. Local government needed to work with both arms servicing the games, and there were regular visits to the region to keep stakeholders informed as well as regular meetings online with key staff.

Naturally, the news that the games were being cancelled was met with a sense of shock and disappointment. However, we are a resilient community, and our focus quickly turned to the announcements that were made at the time of the cancellation, particularly the commitment to still fund a range of sports infrastructure and events infrastructure that we had been working on. For the City of Greater Bendigo, this included upgrades to the Bendigo bowls and croquet clubs, Bendigo showgrounds and Bendigo Stadium. Combined, these projects represent a significant investment into community sport and infrastructure within the town. And with an additional \$5 million potentially available for host cities, the city looks forward to investing this money to improve active transport connections, as we had originally outlined in our legacy document.

From a housing perspective, the city still sees an opportunity to progress the master planning and delivery of housing at the Flora Hill site where the athletes village was meant to be built. Early investigation works have taken place onsite, and this still represents a strategic piece of land and a valuable infill housing opportunity which could deliver medium-density housing close to existing public transport and school services. Any opportunity to progress this development would be very welcome and help address the critical housing shortage that we are currently experiencing across our state and within our region.

Any community member living in regional Victoria will attest that our regional communities are strong, vibrant and more than the sum of their parts. The Commonwealth Games presented a great opportunity for us to be able to demonstrate to the world how well we can work together, but it was never going to be the only defining feature of our host cities or our surrounding communities. In Greater Bendigo we are known as a fantastic event city; we have strengths in arts, culture, food and sport. Our broader region celebrates our natural environment and shares in our UNESCO city and region of gastronomy status. Our smaller shires take great pride in carving out their own niche experiences and service a valuable tourism sector.

We know that we would have put a wonderful show on for the world, but we are not dwelling on what we could have had. Instead we are looking forward to the delivery of valuable community infrastructure and commitments to housing. When this is achieved, and despite not hosting the games, we still hope that our intended legacy will be fulfilled. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Cooney. It sounds like a lot of work had gone into preparation and putting in submissions and that sort of thing. Do you have an estimate of the expenses incurred by the council as a result of preparations for the games?

Andrew COONEY: We have been working through the VAGO audit process –

The CHAIR: Yes, I thought that might be the case.

Andrew COONEY: and we have submitted our costings to VAGO, the best that we can. We estimate around \$300,000 was expended for our role in the games. However, most of that money was involved in developing the project briefs for the regional sports infrastructure and also the master planning for the housing. So whilst that money was expended, with the announcements around those infrastructure projects being delivered, we think that is money well spent. We only put one position on, so we had a number of staff that as

part of their jobs were being brought into meetings to share their expertise. We had plans to bring in more people to deliver this, but we were waiting for the next stage of the commitments before we invested in additional positions. So the number that we have got is around \$300,000.

The CHAIR: Thank you. So it sounds like you had \$300,000 approximately in direct expenditure and one FTE. Has that position gone now?

Andrew COONEY: Yes.

The CHAIR: I assume there would have been a reallocation of other resources, like you say, with people that are already existing council workers. Do you have estimates on the reallocation of the amount of time spent on it from other workers that were already employed by the council?

Andrew COONEY: Yes, that is covered in that \$300,000.

The CHAIR: Okay. So that is not necessarily direct expenditure. It could be reallocated expenditure, right?

Andrew COONEY: Yes, so there is one position, one FTE, and then the other money was an estimate of time. We did not have a huge team working on this. We had some staff in dedicated roles that had expertise around some of our venues, so we had a portion of time for a couple of staff involved in venues as well as some members of our strategic planning team who provided input into the master planning for the athletes village site. That is the way we have quantified those numbers.

The CHAIR: Thank you. It sounds like, from what you have said, some of that effort may be able to be salvaged because the work was on things that you may want to submit to the regional infrastructure build that the government is doing in place. Is that what you are actually intending on doing, using the plans that you have come up with and then submitting that as a proposal to the state government? Is that the intention?

Andrew COONEY: At the time of the announcement of the cancellation the government committed to those projects at the Bendigo bowls and croquet clubs, Bendigo Stadium and Bendigo showgrounds. What I was alluding to was that the time that was spent on most of our games planning was on those projects. We have seen commitments around the funding for those projects. So if we were taking the lead on those projects, we would still have to have staff working on the planning and the concept designs for those projects. What I was ensuring the committee knew was that it was not money wasted. That money and the staff time that had been invested will be realised once those projects get delivered.

The CHAIR: Thank you. You have had a commitment now that those projects will go ahead subsequent to the cancellation?

Andrew COONEY: They were committed to as part of the cancellation.

The CHAIR: As part of the cancellation?

Andrew COONEY: Yes, there were media releases that came out at the same time where the government committed to delivering those projects.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. At what point were you informed of the cancellation? I note that there was a lot of work going on right up to close to when it was cancelled. At what point were you notified, and how were you notified?

Andrew COONEY: We were expecting some announcements around budgets and projects to be able to move to the next stage of the delivery. At about 7 o'clock in the morning I received a heads-up that there was going to be a press conference that morning, but I did not know any information other than that, and I think as the morning then progressed what might have been discussed at that press conference became clear. I was informed about half an hour before the press conference around what the nature of the announcement was going to be.

The CHAIR: And what was the feeling amongst you and your staff when you heard that?

Andrew COONEY: I was fairly shocked.

The CHAIR: I think many of us were.

Andrew COONEY: We knew that the time was tight and that there was budget pressure – that had been explained to us – and so an announcement was not a surprise; the exact nature was a surprise.

The CHAIR: Okay. It sounds like up until that point you had heard that there were some concerns about budget pressure. But had you heard any indication or seen any evidence that there was going to be an announcement of cancellation, prior to you receiving a call?

Andrew COONEY: No.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you. I believe I am out of time. I will go to Mr McCracken.

Joe McCracken: Thank you very much, Mr Cooney. In terms of the preparation for the Commonwealth Games was council involved in any way in the preparation of the bid, the business case – those sorts of things?

Andrew COONEY: Not that I am aware, Mr McCracken. At that time I was a director of the city, albeit in a different role. We were not involved or consulted in any of the bid process. We came into it in that due diligence period. We were involved in some visits and some tours, but we were not involved in any of the site selection up until that point.

Joe McCracken: Did the government provide you with a copy of the business case at all?

Andrew COONEY: No.

Joe McCracken: Okay. Did the city of Bendigo make a contribution to the Shepparton bid at all?

Andrew COONEY: I believe we did. That was before my time, but yes, I believe we were involved in that bid.

Joe McCracken: Do you know how much it was?

Andrew COONEY: No.

Joe McCracken: Are you able to take it on notice and get us some information about that – like when, how much and that sort of thing?

Andrew COONEY: Yes.

Joe McCracken: That would be very, very handy. Thank you. Did council make a submission to the VAGO audit as well, which was on Comm Games?

Andrew COONEY: Yes, we did.

Joe McCracken: Can we have a copy of that too, if that is okay?

Andrew COONEY: Our submission? I will have to check that with VAGO. We answered VAGO's questions more than making a submission. We provided them a series of documents that they requested, but I would have to check that with VAGO.

Joe McCracken: Okay.

Andrew COONEY: But they will release a report for Parliament at some stage.

Joe McCracken: Yes. We are just interested in your input into that because we will not see that, we will just see the final report, so it would be great if you could provide that. I know that at council meetings councillors were provided with updates on Comm Games and the legacy projects. Is the committee able to get a copy of all the briefs that were provided on the games, including the legacy items as well, that council has given to councillors?

Andrew COONEY: There is a publicly available document called *Let the Games Begin*, which was the City of Greater Bendigo's legacy plan.

Joe McCRACKEN: I am talking about in briefings and those sorts of things. Are you able to provide anything that might assist the committee in its work?

Andrew COONEY: So what sort of information would you be asking for, Mr McCracken?

Joe McCRACKEN: Well, looking at any updates on legacy items, projects – those sorts of things.

Andrew COONEY: I will have a look. The information we provided to council was largely around the legacy projects, that legacy list that the council developed. The progress of those projects – there are lots of discussions and planning. We did not have a formal design for any of those projects yet or a delivery model, which were some of the announcements that we had been waiting for. I will have a look and see what we have provided to the council. We had not really provided too many formal progress updates around what was happening, but I will see what we have got.

Joe McCRACKEN: That is fine. We had some people in earlier, this morning, from the stadium, which is a council asset, and also the cycling club. They were not aware of any projects that were well advanced or near fruition in terms of the legacy projects. Do you know of any that are even halfway through or near completion or even in the early planning stages?

Andrew COONEY: Other than the announcements that the government made around the legacy projects, there were no projects commenced. So the government, when they cancelled the games, announced that they would be doing upgrades, as I mentioned earlier. None of those projects have started.

Joe McCRACKEN: Because that was, like, mid last year, and it has now been eight or nine months. Nothing has happened in that time?

Andrew COONEY: No. No projects have commenced.

Joe McCRACKEN: Okay. What about the former village site, the housing infill. I know you talked about that before. Has there been any contact about maybe ensuring that that site becomes useful, or more useful, rather than not?

Andrew COONEY: Contact from the council?

Joe McCRACKEN: From the government. You mentioned the regional housing package. Has there been any interaction there with the government about making sure that the site is infill or anything like that?

Andrew COONEY: We have written to the government to ask them to continue planning and continue to deliver the housing on that site.

Joe McCRACKEN: Can we get a copy of that as well if that is okay?

Andrew COONEY: I will follow up.

Joe McCRACKEN: I am asking you for a lot of copies of things, I know, but we just want to have on the record what has been said and what you have asked for. Did the government respond to any of the correspondence relating to the site?

Andrew COONEY: I would have to check that.

Joe McCRACKEN: Okay. That would be good, because obviously – is that my time?

The CHAIR: Yes.

Joe McCRACKEN: All right. I am out of time. Sorry.

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

Michael GALEA: Thank you, Chair. Thank you, Mr Cooney, for joining us today. In your opening remarks you referred to the council support package, the \$25 million package to all the host cities.

Andrew COONEY: Can I just correct that. It is \$5 million.

Michael GALEA: Yes, \$5 million for Bendigo; sorry. A \$25 million total package – but yes, \$5 million for Bendigo. You are correct. You mentioned, I believe, active transport as part of that. What specific project or projects does Greater Bendigo have in mind for the use of that \$5 million for Bendigo?

Andrew COONEY: Part of our vision for the city was to try and connect the village and the venues with an active transport link, and we had some projects that we thought would be really useful to do that. Part of that is what we call the Bendigo low-line project, and so that is a project that is an active off-road cycling link that we have been talking about for a number of years with the cycling community. That would give off-road access. We have got a lot of off-road access from Crusoe Reservoir out at Kangaroo Flat all the way through to White Hills, following the Bendigo Creek corridor, but there are a few parts to that. With some additional funding, we can actually provide a safer link for pedestrians and cyclists, so that would be our plan. We have got some work to do to finalise the design for that project, but that would be our ambition for the use of the investment of the \$5 million.

Michael GALEA: My impression of Bendigo, as with most regional Victorian towns and cities, is that it is quite car-dependent. Would that be a fair assessment?

Andrew COONEY: Yes, it would.

Michael GALEA: And what impact do you see a project such as this and the ones that you have referred to as having on addressing that?

Andrew COONEY: Well, it will give people another option, a safer option. You know, Bendigo is quite car dependent as a regional city. We are trying to shift the mode choice and really promote and publicise the opportunities of public transport and bikes and walking as well, and so to give a safe link through the city centre would give people another choice and another option to not use the car.

As part of our vision for the way the games were going to be connected, we knew that cars to the perimeter of the city were probably going to be an option, but once people got to the city, to be able to move around where venues were, cars were not going to be an option. So we were really hoping that we could give people a wonderful experience on buses and with active transport. During the games it would have made the city much less congested, but then post the games people could have seen what a great experience they had and then hopefully not take all their trips back in the car.

Michael GALEA: That lasting benefit, yes. I look forward to seeing where that leads to. I will leave that there – the council support package, the \$5 million. Separately to that, as you are probably aware, Tiny Towns is a separate pot of funding available now. That obviously will not apply to the city of Bendigo, but Greater Bendigo also has a lot of smaller towns in it, from Marong to Elmore to Axedale. Has council been involved with applications and supporting any of its towns in those projects?

Andrew COONEY: Yes. We have been. We have been looking through – again, you mentioned most of the towns we have got at the moment. We are looking through some of the township plans as well around what priorities we might have. We have also been looking at some of the flood impacts that have happened to a number of these towns recently and finding some projects that fit the criteria.

Michael GALEA: Terrific. Given your overview of the whole region and that you have been CEO of the city council, could you talk to me about the current trends in tourism that you are seeing in the Bendigo region?

Andrew COONEY: We are seeing a shift in tourism away from what used to be just around visiting family and friends, 10 years ago, to people actually coming to Bendigo and our region as a destination, and we have been able to build that on a number of fronts. We have got wonderful natural resources here, and we are seeing our First Nations people really take advantage and promote that. People come visit us for our natural features, people come for the arts and culture, people come for the art gallery, people come for our wonderful venues and people come because we are a UNESCO City of Gastronomy. We have hosted over the last few weeks AFL

teams for community camps. We have hosted one of Melbourne's strongest netball teams, the Melbourne Vixens. We hosted the Australian Boomers last Thursday night. We have got a really diverse range of tourism opportunities as well as direct flights to and from Sydney every day, so tourism for our city and our region is really booming.

Michael GALEA: I was just going to mention that. There are posters in the city – down in Pall Mall, I see – advertising those flights to Sydney as well. I know that was a few years ago. Have you seen an impact on tourism and the visitor economy through the reintroduction of those flights?

Andrew COONEY: Yes, they stayed strong through COVID even. Qantas recently, in about October last year, changed the scheduling so you can very feasibly get up and back to Sydney in a day, and our tourism and our business communities really take advantage of the opportunity.

Michael GALEA: Terrific. I think that is my time. Thank you.

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

Melina BATH: Thank you, Mr Cooney, for being here today. Two weeks ago we heard in Ballarat that the CEO was asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement with the Commonwealth Games organisation. Have you been asked to sign or was the previous CEO asked to sign a non-disclosure agreement by the government?

Andrew COONEY: I was not, but I was not the CEO at the time. My understanding is that our previous CEO did sign a confidentiality agreement.

Melina BATH: You may need to take these on notice. My question is: on what date was it signed, who asked the former CEO to sign it and can you please provide a copy of that? I think one of the things that we hear, and we heard it just previously from sporting organisations, is the need for transparency. I am not casting this at you, but this is a government that is asking a council to sign a non-disclosure form. Can you also provide any information about what limitations were placed on information between council and councillors? What limitations were placed between council and the Bendigo community? What did that entail? I guess that is key. What sorts of restrictions were they in terms of processes, infrastructure and all of those things?

The CHAIR: Can I clarify, Ms Bath: are you asking Mr Cooney to take that on notice?

Melina BATH: Correct. That is what I just said. Thank you. I am interested: you made a couple of comments and we heard about the bowls, the stadium and the showground. Labor made a commitment. They put out a media release. To date there has been nothing. It is not built. There is nothing happening. There is a big gap between a media release and the required infrastructure, the committed infrastructure. Have you seen any evidence? Is there any pipeline? Have you had any conversations? Is there any documentation that says that? At the end of the day, you want your piece of pie and you want your infrastructure. What can you tell this committee about how that is proceeding, or is it that you have heard nothing?

Andrew COONEY: No, it is not that we have heard nothing. We have had a number of discussions around the projects. We have got no cause to have any concern that projects are not going to proceed. We have been involved in some of the scoping discussions. Again, these are largely similar projects that we were working on pre the games withdrawal. Things obviously slowed down for a while there, but we have got no reason to believe they are not going to progress.

Melina BATH: It might be helpful for us. We are there to bat for you at the end of the day, this committee, I feel. Can you provide any scoping discussions or any time lines that you have seen so far? You may need to take that on notice as well.

Andrew COONEY: Yes.

Melina BATH: Thank you very much. The state budget in May 2022 detailed that the Victorian government was seeking a co-contribution of funding for hosting the games. Again, can you look at any dates or funding requests that the City of Bendigo was asked to provide? I think you mentioned a co-contribution – no, you did not; you actually mentioned the cost to the council. Could you provide that? You may need to take it on notice again. Did Bendigo provide written evidence to the government or the OC with regard to co-contribution, and if so, could you provide any relevant documents, letters, emails and notes?

Andrew COONEY: I do not need to take that on notice. We were never formally asked and never formally committed to providing any contribution. We heard that there was going to be an ask of local government, but that ask never came to fruition. We were pretty quick to push back in those conversations to say that we were never party to the bid, we never had money built into budgets and we had long-term financial plans which did not talk to the games. So whilst we were grateful and excited about the games, any notion of co-contribution was going to need more engagement than just 'You're going to have to pay some money.' We never saw a formal request, so I do not need to take that on notice.

Melina BATH: Okay. Thank you. We also heard from Geelong I think that they had actually stumped up a considerable amount of money in the preparation for that, but you are saying your cost leading up to it is only about \$300,000?

Andrew COONEY: Yes.

Melina BATH: Okay. Thank you. The other thing is – you spoke about a tight time line. You were aware of a tight time line and budget pressures pre the 18 July announcement. In what capacity were you informed of those tight time lines and budget pressures?

Andrew COONEY: When the games were announced, it was public knowledge that there was a much shorter run-in time than for any other games previously. Groups normally have seven or eight years to plan for this. The announcement was in 2022 for delivery in 2026. Right from the start everybody knew that it was going to be a tight time frame compared to other games. In terms of the budget, again the multicity delivery model was an amazing opportunity for regional Victoria, and it was also going to result in a duplication of cost and effort.

Melina BATH: I was under the impression that you felt that you were given evidence that there were budgetary pressures. You are just saying, organically from the feel of it?

Andrew COONEY: Absolutely.

Melina BATH: Thank you.

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

Jacinta ERMACORA: Thank you. Thank you for appearing, Andrew. I just want to look into housing a little bit. There is a \$2 billion housing package, but before I go to that I just want to understand some of the housing circumstances in Bendigo. Can you tell me what the dynamics of housing are for your city – rental vacancy rates and any other dynamics that we should understand?

Andrew COONEY: Thank you for the question. There are very low rental vacancy rates right now, in single digits – 1 to 2 per cent is the number that we hear regularly floated. Social housing waiting lists, rental properties coming off rentals – the rental pool of properties is actually getting smaller and the demand getting stronger. That pushes prices up. So there is an affordability and an availability issue that we have. The product that is getting developed is probably not meeting the market need either – and that is just housing in general. The biggest growth category of housing need is one- and two-bedroom; the biggest supply the market is delivering is three- and four-bedroom. Again, we are looking for a variety of housing stock to meet needs, which is what we were pushing through the master planning work that we were doing with Development Victoria on the athletes village. The nature of the village and the notion of having smaller dwellings, smaller blocks, the games also had a natural ability to deliver for the housing need that we see in Bendigo right now.

Jacinta ERMACORA: That is very interesting. I am from Warrnambool, and it is a very similar dynamic, Andrew – less than 1 per cent vacancy rate in rental stock and, yes, a mismatch between what the housing market wants to provide, maybe because of the profit point, which is that 600 square metres, four-bedroom, two living room scenario, and the actual household make-up in the community. So with the \$2 billion package now available post the games, I am just interested in a strategic alignment between the criteria for that package and the needs in Bendigo.

Andrew COONEY: There is an absolute need for it in Bendigo, which is why we have been advocating for the delivery of the village. It was a site that was ready to build on as a strategically located facility or block of

land. It is zoned appropriately. It is close to universities. It is close to public transport. It is close to the city centre. It is a wonderful opportunity to develop all sorts of housing for.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Last year the Minister for Regional Development Gayle Tierney opened applications for the \$150 million Regional Worker Accommodation Fund, and I know that quite a number of local governments are involved in being quite creative about how they are trying to provide key worker housing in their communities. The fund calls for partnering with councils and business to deliver affordable housing options for essential workers in regional areas. Is that a program that you would see as beneficial as well? And is there a specific demand around key worker shortage in Bendigo?

Andrew COONEY: It is a unique key worker shortage in Bendigo, and we have got demands across our whole region for this – into the north of the region around agricultural workers and to other parts of the region around factory workers. In Bendigo we have got needs around healthcare workers – so different demographics, potentially different disposable incomes, but they still need housing. So we have been making some connections between the opportunity for housing on that site with some employers that we know that are looking for housing to see if we can make a unique connection around a contribution to the infrastructure.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Andrew, I have just one last question. I am aware, and I have used this example before, that Moyne shire have used cabins – I have seen them actually; they are quite lovely – in their caravan parks as a way of housing key workers, and then when they are no longer needed, there is a longer-term use tourism-wise. The benefit has been there is no rezoning required and also the infrastructure is there – sewerage and power and water and so on. Is that something that your city has considered? It depends on whether or not you are running caravan parks. Not all local councils run caravan parks.

Andrew COONEY: Yes, and we are not. I know that there are other parts of our region that are very interested in that opportunity, and certainly during the games one of our challenges was going to be where we were going to accommodate everybody in the short term. That was an option that we were looking at around the regional outreach model, where we would invest in accommodation at caravan parks that were already set up for it and keep those bookings available for the lead-up to the games for not just the visitors but the contractors that would be coming to work on the games. So we are certainly looking at the model for the games. It is probably not as applicable for Bendigo for our workers, but certainly in other parts of our region that is a model that they are very interested in, and they are doing it already in some spots.

Jacinta ERMACORA: Fantastic. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Ermacora. Dr Mansfield.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. Thank you for appearing today. You have mentioned that you were quite actively involved from fairly early after the announcement, but I am wondering: did you have any engagement with government or other representatives of the Commonwealth Games prior to it being announced and provide any input about Bendigo potentially being a host city?

Andrew COONEY: Again, my CEO that was here had had some involvement, but it was very limited and not on the back of very much information. Our involvement really started in that due diligence period, where we had one of the first inbound delegations that were made up of government officials and Commonwealth Games Federation officials coming to visit the potential host cities. That was in the lead-up to any announcement through that due diligence period. We were involved from that period, and that was really around just showing some potential sites in the city that the state had already preselected. So we were not involved in the setting of the sites, but we were chaperone, tour guide and city ambassadors for the visit.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. So that was prior to it being formally announced publicly that –

Andrew COONEY: Yes. During that due diligence period I think it was publicly known that Victoria was bidding, but the actual games had not been awarded to Victoria at that stage, probably in that February 2022 period.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. Okay. And again, you said you were quite actively involved throughout the process from that point onwards, and you have acknowledged that you were aware from the get-go of tight time

lines and budgets, but was there any point where you became a bit concerned about the ability to meet those deadlines or deliver the games?

Andrew COONEY: The longer the delay until we got some firm decisions around budget and approvals to proceed, the tighter the time frame was going to be, and we knew that the tighter the time frame – we were confident we would get things delivered, but generally you have to invest in more resources, which puts cost pressure up. So the longer the delays, the more expensive we thought it was going to be to deliver some of this work. And the scale of this in regional Victoria. We have got some wonderful facilities here to play on and to get to in a normal environment, but then to put 4000 people at them and have all the wraparound services that go with them – our venues were never set up for that on a day-to-day basis, and they do not need to be either. But it was that temporary infrastructure that was going to be needed to be dropped into the facilities to make them spectator-ready and media-ready and stakeholder-ready, that was the part that we were largely unknown about and we were relying on the advice of the organising committee for, and we knew they were getting a bit concerned about the time frame.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. Okay. We have heard from at least one other council that the infrastructure that was proposed as part of the games did not necessarily align with the council's strategic priorities. How well does what you are going to receive as a result of the legacy funding align with your predetermined strategic priorities of the council?

Andrew COONEY: Certainly they are venues that are well used now by the community, and these investments will make them better for our community to use them but also much better set up to attract more events. I mentioned the Bendigo Stadium, and I am aware you had Bendigo Stadium here before. We had a sellout crowd to host the Australian Boomers last week. Additional court space at that facility and additional infrastructure is going to make that an even better facility for our day-to-day users but also events, and I would say the same with the Bendigo showgrounds. It is a wonderful community event space now, but the work that is going to go into that will make it even more usable for our community but also for other event users. So they are strategically aligned for community regular use as well as setting them up to attract more events.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Yes. And in terms of priorities, are there other things that perhaps have a higher priority that you would like to still see some investment in in Bendigo?

Andrew COONEY: We have got a long list of priorities that we would love to see some investment in in Bendigo, so yes. We will always have investment priorities for ourselves and other levels of government to keep investing in, but these projects are going to be really, really useful for our community.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Okay. And just on the housing, are you aware of what proportion of the previously committed housing was going to eventually become public housing?

Andrew COONEY: No. We are not. No. We never got to that point of involvement in the discussions around who the potential owners were going to be of these properties or even when they were going to hit the market or in what form they would hit the market, so no, I am not sure what percentage they were going to be. Our focus was really around, as I have spoken about before, ensuring that the village was built – whilst we knew there was a short-term priority – with the long term in mind, particularly given it is such a strategically important site for the City of Greater Bendigo.

Sarah MANSFIELD: Thank you. That is my time.

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

Tom McINTOSH: Hi. Thanks very much for attending today and a detailed – I do not know if report is the right word, but words you have put forward. I understand it might be before your time, but can you just talk a bit about the inflationary pressures that were being felt over recent years around construction, particularly from a council perspective? I know there are a number of councils in my region, my Eastern Victoria Region, who – you know, those inflationary pressures that have been felt around the world have definitely put additional cost pressures on the builds that council are involved in. Has that been experienced for yourself, particularly in the last probably 24 months, I suppose, for the council?

Andrew COONEY: Yes, it has, Mr McIntosh. We have seen, from a services cost but also from a construction industry cost – so the products that we use on a regular basis, like concrete and steel – over those past 24 months the prices escalated rapidly. The demand for labour and the shortage of labour in some of these areas put the cost of project delivery up as well. We have seen the product side of things stabilise, but we are certainly seeing labour costs still increase. I had a meeting with some contractors last week, and the demand is starting to come off now. We have got contractors looking for work again, so that may help ease some of the prices that we are seeing on labour. But we have certainly seen over the last two years coming out of COVID that the costs of our projects have gone up.

Tom McINTOSH: Given you are starting to see that reduction in that peak demand, particularly on the labour side of things, do you think the fact that there has been some time to assess – we have the \$2 billion regional grants package. The fact that they are now being rolled out in a more methodical manner with the increased time frame – other councils have mentioned this – just means we have not sort of jumped in on top of those inflationary pressures, and as you say, they are coming on board at the right time. It sounds like that is your council's experience as well.

Andrew COONEY: We were advocating all the way through this that we would love to see local labour, local ideas and local materials used. If our local contractors are looking for work, there is a bigger chance our local labour could be used. I think the other part of this is, whilst there would be deadlines on all of these projects and there would be deadlines on funding agreements to deliver, the deadline of the games is not looming over us as much. I know that there was some concern with some of our local firms. Whilst there was a real interest in being involved, they were a little bit cautious around 'What happens if we can't get things done in time for the games?' Knowing that the games were going to open on that day in 2026, there were some concerns around 'What happens if we can't deliver?' Whilst we will have deadlines and we will still want delivery, we do not have the games looming over us like we did previously.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes. We heard earlier from the hotel association that with a lot of blue-collar workers coming in it is great to continue to hear the story of regional workers, particularly blue collar, being able to work in their communities. I know when I first did my apprenticeship 20-odd years ago we were going off to Melbourne to try and find work. It was pretty hard to get work at home. It is going the other way now, so it is good that you have got workers at home. The other point I was just going to ask is, with those projects you were talking about with Ms Mansfield, can you just take us through some of those legacy projects? I think there were three of them. Is that right?

Andrew COONEY: That is right. As announced by the government, there was an expansion for the Bendigo Stadium, so some new courts at the Bendigo Stadium; there was a new exhibition facility at the Bendigo showgrounds; and a redevelopment of the Bendigo bowls and croquet club greens, as well as some works at the Bendigo Bowls clubhouse.

Tom McINTOSH: Yes. Just one last quick question: how many people do you employ through council?

Andrew COONEY: Around a thousand.

Tom McINTOSH: Okay. So it is a big employer, well connected in town. So you would be uniquely positioned to sort of connect into the community and whatnot. In your experience through the council and through your personal life has anyone around town in recent months mentioned the Commonwealth Games? Is it a conversation that is still being had?

Andrew COONEY: Around the games being cancelled?

Tom McINTOSH: Yes. People like to talk about the investment of the \$2 billion regional package, but is anybody referring to the games having been cancelled? Have you heard anyone talk about it?

Andrew COONEY: From time to time, yes.

Tom McINTOSH: But not in great –

Andrew COONEY: Bendigo was quite excited about having the games, as you could imagine.

Tom McINTOSH: Not in any great volume then by the sound of it?

Andrew COONEY: There was a general level of excitement and interest from all parts of the community in having the games. I think we are all grateful for the investment post the announcement, but we would all loved to have seen the games happen here in 2026.

Tom McINTOSH: No problem. Thanks for your time.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr McIntosh. I am unsure if Mr Davis is on the line.

David DAVIS: Absolutely he is here.

The CHAIR: Yes, Mr Davis. Please proceed.

David DAVIS: I have been listening patiently, and I want to thank our witness Mr Cooney. I am pleased you got here, Mr Cooney. I am pleased that you deigned to come, so that is a very welcome development. I want to step you through the time cycle here. Others have referred to this, but I just feel we have not quite got to it. In the pre period, before there was any announcement that they were even considering the games, was Bendigo city – or you for that matter – consulted at all?

Andrew COONEY: So what period are you talking about, Mr Davis?

David DAVIS: The period before there was any announcement. Not the due diligence period – we will come to that in a minute – but the pre period, before there was an announcement of any type made.

Andrew COONEY: Again, I was not the CEO at the time, so I was not consulted. I cannot talk to whether my CEO was consulted. We had been involved in that bid with Shepparton. We had been involved in that, but I cannot –

David DAVIS: What I would seek from you in that circumstance, and I understand you were not the CEO, is a time line of contacts with central government.

Andrew COONEY: From which period to which period?

David DAVIS: Well, pre, so the period from when the Shepparton announcement, or the Shepparton group, came to fruition through until there was a period of announced negotiating between the games and state government. That is what I call the pre period.

Andrew COONEY: Okay.

David DAVIS: What we need is to get to the bottom of exactly who spoke to whom when and the purpose of the conversations. Thank you. The second period is the due diligence period – what you have described as the due diligence period – after there was a debate or an engagement going on with the state government. You have indicated you were involved in that period, or the council was, but I gather that you were too.

Andrew COONEY: To clarify, we were asked to take the delegation to a few of the sites the state had drafted or selected for Bendigo potentially as a host city –

David DAVIS: Recommended?

Andrew COONEY: ‘Recommended’ is probably a better way of putting it. That was the extent of our involvement.

David DAVIS: All right, so just the details of the date, who was on that circuit and where they went. That would be helpful.

Andrew COONEY: I can tell you now, the date. It was in February. The exact date I can find for you.

David DAVIS: Thank you.

Andrew COONEY: We were involved with Visit Victoria, with Global Victoria, with Regional Development Victoria and the Commonwealth Games Federation representatives.

David DAVIS: The names of all the people involved in those would be very helpful – those that must have turned up at this. There must be emails or communications.

Andrew COONEY: I am not sure we are going to have the detail of the names.

David DAVIS: I am sure there are emails, and I am sure some of them were on the trip.

Andrew COONEY: We were invited to a host spot and we were given the list of venues at that spot, and we were asked to then accompany the tour. We were not involved in organising the tour.

David DAVIS: So you were sort of passive passengers, if I can describe it that way. Is that a fair description?

Andrew COONEY: Yes, and I was the only representative from the City of Greater Bendigo there at that point.

David DAVIS: Right. Thank you. The next period is after the games were announced, and you at this point became much more involved, as I understand it. You were specifically appointed as the head honcho of how we proceeded at that point, in Bendigo's terms.

Andrew COONEY: Well, in our terms we called it the director.

David DAVIS: The director. Again, what I need here is a list of the communications and meetings and contacts with the organising committee and state government. We need to understand what has gone on there.

Andrew COONEY: You want a list of all of my meetings that I had for 12 months?

David DAVIS: Correct. Thank you. That would be good.

Andrew COONEY: Is that a reasonable request?

David DAVIS: Yes.

The CHAIR: I will have to defer to the –

Secretariat: It is up to you how you answer questions on notice.

The CHAIR: Yes, it is your prerogative how you answer questions on notice.

David DAVIS: Truthfully is the requirement actually. The next point I would ask: did you meet with Mr Weimar during that period?

Andrew COONEY: Yes, I did.

David DAVIS: Yes. In that list of dates I would like to see the dates that you met with him. Did you talk to Jacinta Allan, who was the minister at the time, through that period?

Andrew COONEY: I am sure I would have.

David DAVIS: I would like the dates of those.

Michael GALEA: On a point of order, Chair, aside from a broad fishing exercise, is there anything of actual detail that Mr Davis is seeking?

David DAVIS: No, no. On the point of order, I am very interested to know exactly what involvement the council had and what the then minister drew out of the council. That then minister was Jacinta Allan, and she is now the Premier. I am actually very interested, Chair, to understand precisely what involvement she had in this process at a local level.

The CHAIR: On the point of order, Mr Cooney can answer the question truthfully as he sees fit. Thank you. Your time is up, Mr Davis.

David DAVIS: Just to get an answer on that question of meeting Ms Allan, you did meet Ms Allan on a number of occasions on this matter?

Andrew COONEY: We would meet with the Member for Bendigo East in her capacity as the Member for Bendigo East around a number of advocacy matters.

David DAVIS: And you discussed the Commonwealth Games and her involvement as minister?

Andrew COONEY: There would be projects that we would have been discussing, I am sure. I am happy to take that on notice.

David DAVIS: So she was intimately involved in this?

Jacinta ERMACORA: On a point of order, Chair, his time is up, and I think we need to keep moving.

The CHAIR: Yes. Mr Davis, your time is up. Ms Tyrrell.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Thank you, Chair. You mentioned earlier that in regard to the accommodation issues that you were having, you were working with other councils. What councils were those?

Andrew COONEY: We have regional councils in our area, the councils that neighbour us. Whilst Bendigo was the host city, we were keen to make sure that there was a chance that other councils around us had an opportunity to benefit from this as well. We were in regular conversations with Campaspe – Campaspe has quite a lot of accommodation. We were in conversations with Macedon Ranges, with Mount Alexander and with Loddon shire. We saw that Calder corridor as being a huge opportunity for people to be able to base themselves in it, visit and then attend the games as well in a relatively short commute.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. That is good to hear. In relation to the cancellation, you did state that you were shocked when you heard of the news. You were briefed prior to it, just very quickly. Did you also receive feedback from other councils, such as the ones you have just named, in regard to that, about how they felt about it as well?

Andrew COONEY: Look, I cannot recall. I think there was general surprise across lots of people that I spoke to that that was what the decision was.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Yes, right. Thank you. What is the latest with the land use at the Flora Hill site? How is that going? Can you please tell me about the progress of that?

Andrew COONEY: Look, you would have to talk to the state government about that. As I said earlier, we are keen to see it progress. We are keen to have that project developed and implemented, but it is not our project.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Did you receive a copy of the contamination reports for the land or anything?

Andrew COONEY: No, no, we did not. We are not the developer. We do not own the land.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. That is all right. So it is just sitting stagnant at the moment, is it?

Andrew COONEY: There is work happening in the background, I believe, around the master planning of it, but no, I cannot give you an update on progress.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. With the legacy projects that you mentioned before, how are they going, like the time frame on those? Have you seen any progress or anything? Have you been given any dates that you could see those come to fruition?

Andrew COONEY: Look, we have been working again on the continuation of the work, but we have not started them. The state has not announced formally anything further than what was announced as part of the withdrawal. We believe there are some announcements coming soon. We look forward to seeing those.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: So you are still sitting on the fence with your fingers crossed waiting and hoping for that promise to be fulfilled?

Andrew COONEY: Look, more than that – we are working with the venue operators, with the state department officials around how we could make this work. So there is work happening in the background, but we do not have the funding yet to be able to progress them. But when we do, we look forward to making it happen.

Rikkie-Lee TYRRELL: Okay. Thank you.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Ms Tyrrell. I believe Ms Bath has another question.

Melina BATH: That is great. Thank you. We heard from Mr McLoughlan from the motels association about the need for fast rail to Bendigo. It is a bit like the universal question this fast rail to anywhere. Does the council have a position? Does part of their strategic plan actually include faster rail to Bendigo?

Andrew COONEY: More connections, faster rail, more reliable services, wi-fi on the trains – there are lots of requests that we would have around continuing to connect Bendigo to Melbourne.

Melina BATH: How has that formally been lodged in those discussions with government?

Andrew COONEY: As part of the games, we were advocating for a train platform at the Bendigo showgrounds. That was our major transport legacy ask of government, knowing that, whilst we have got some advocacy priorities, the ability to have that fast rail delivered by 2026 was pretty unlikely. We were realistic in what our advocacy priorities were through the games. We have advocated to the state and federal governments previously around transport funding.

Melina BATH: In relation to that platform, is there no longer a need for that platform? What is the council's position?

Andrew COONEY: There is still a need for that platform, we think. That is outside of the scope of the announcement post the withdrawal from the Commonwealth Games, but we still think that would be in the future a key asset for that site. Again, we talked before around other forms of transport and being able to decrease our reliance on cars. A platform at that facility would make it even more accessible for people.

Melina BATH: Thank you. Following on from that, if it is available, I would really appreciate if you could provide to the committee some sort of council position or strategic plan in relation to your ask of government, whether it is inside what is on offer or into the future in terms of rail and increased transport. That would be helpful. That is a yes? Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay. Thank you, Ms Bath. Thank you, Mr Cooney, for appearing today. You will receive a copy of the transcript for review in about a week before it is subsequently published on our website. The committee will now take a break to reset for the next witness.

Witness withdrew.