

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS AND ESTIMATES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates

Melbourne – Tuesday 19 May 2026

MEMBERS

Sarah Connolly – Chair

John Pesutto – Deputy Chair

Jade Benham

Michael Galea

Mathew Hilakari

Lauren Kathage

Aiv Puglielli

Richard Riordan

Meng Heang Tak

WITNESSES

Steve Dimopoulos MP, Minister for Sport and Major Events; and

Matt Carrick, Secretary,

Georgina McCann, Deputy Secretary, Sport and Experience Economy,

Heather Ridley, Deputy Secretary, Corporate Services,

Luke Mason, Executive Director, Professional Sport and Tourism Infrastructure,

Belinda Kleverlaan, Executive Director, Tourism, Events and Entities,

Brendan McClements, Chief Executive Officer, Visit Victoria,

Sharn Enzinger, Executive Director, Outdoor Recreation, Combat Sports and Strategic Policy, and

Daniel Rodger, Chief Financial Officer, Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions.

The CHAIR: I declare open this hearing of the Public Accounts and Estimates Committee. I ask that mobile telephones please be turned to silent.

On behalf of the Parliament, the committee is conducting this Inquiry into the 2026–27 Budget Estimates. The committee's aim is to scrutinise public administration and finance to improve outcomes for the Victorian community.

I advise that all evidence taken by the committee is protected by parliamentary privilege. However, comments repeated outside of this hearing may not be protected by this privilege.

Witnesses will be provided with a proof version of the transcript to check. Verified transcripts, presentations and handouts will be placed on the committee's website.

I welcome the Minister for Sport and Major Events the Honourable Steve Dimopoulos, as well as officials from DJSIR. Minister, I invite you to make an opening statement of no more than 5 minutes, after which time committee members will ask you questions. Your time starts now.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Thank you, Chair. Thanks for the opportunity. I acknowledge again the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting, the Wurundjeri people, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Visual presentation.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Slide 2. Sport is fundamental to Victorians and generates significant benefit to our state's economy. The sport and active recreation sector provides at least \$9.2 billion in gross value add and supports over 71,000 jobs. Victoria is home to 32 national sporting organisations, the most in the country, and 52 professional sports teams. Over \$1.5 billion has been invested in upgrades to some of Victoria's international-standard stadia. Melbourne and Olympic parks, Marvel Stadium, the Home of the Matildas and the State Basketball Centre have all seen the benefit of Victorian government investment in recent years. Melbourne is the premier city for sports and is the only city to host a tennis grand slam and Formula One Grand Prix alongside now a regular season NFL match and the iconic Boxing Day test.

Slide 3. Victoria is brimming with exciting events, world-class food and drink venues, homegrown fashion designers and outstanding arts and cultural institutions. We have a major events calendar that contributes \$3.3 billion to the Victorian economy, supporting local businesses, communities and jobs. We have locked in key events for years: the Australian Open till 2046, the grand prix till 2037 and the grand final till 2059. We invest in major events because they are part of the DNA of Victoria. They help to attract thousands of travellers each year who come for the show, stay in the hotels, eat in our great restaurants and soak up the unique vibe in Melbourne.

Slide 4. The sports sector delivers significant economic benefits across Victoria. The \$15 million investment into the Hawthorn Football Club is one example. The new Kennedy Community Centre means all 10 Victorian-based AFL Women's teams have received funding from our government for improved facilities. This supports women's high-performance programs and the wider community at a grassroots level, because they allow community access. Our five state sporting entities collectively deliver \$2.6 billion in annual economic benefit and social benefit. Together these venues attract 11.5 million visitors annually while hosting more than 660 world-class music, entertainment and sporting events. Construction of sports venues continues through the regional sports infrastructure program, including 5000 new permanent seats at Mars Stadium, raising the seated capacity to 10,000, due for completion later this year. The Ballarat Major Events Precinct, with a new athletics track, is due for completion at the same time.

Next slide. Major events deliver a range of benefits, including broadcast, brand and marketing exposure, delivery of government priorities and social pride and cohesion. As the largest economic generator in Australian sport, the Australian Open has contributed \$3.46 billion to the Victorian economy over the past decade while driving tourism, showcasing Melbourne to the world. The Formula One Grand Prix 2026 attracted a record crowd of 483,934, beating the previous record crowd for the fifth year in a row. Later this year the first ever NFL regular season game will be played in Australia between the Los Angeles Rams and the San Francisco 49ers – the first of many.

Next slide. The 2026–27 budget reflects the Victorian government's continued commitment to support Victoria's sport and major events economy. \$13.4 million over two years will be invested in support operations and event attractions at the Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre, the biggest exhibition centre in Australia, and Nyaal Banyul in Geelong. \$7.4 million over two years has been provided for the Melbourne Convention Bureau, Business Events Fund and the Regional Events Fund to attract and deliver business events. We are providing \$48 million over two years to support the State Sports Centres Trust and \$23.5 million over two years to support the Kardinia Park Stadium Trust to continue operations in 2024–25 and 2025–26. I do not know why I rushed that, Chair.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We much appreciate catching up that time, Minister. The first 8 minutes is going to Mr Riordan.

Richard RIORDAN: Thanks, Chair. The recent decision not to renew the Phillip Island MotoGP has resulted in a loss of \$54.6 million in economic impact for the state, including \$29.4 million in direct local spending on the Bass Coast. Secretary, given that Phillip Island has already lost one major event, when is the current World Superbike Championship contract due to expire?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: I know you have asked the Secretary, but just quickly, there is no loss because we have got it for this year and we will fill the calendar for next year. So I do not accept the premise that there was a loss, because it has not gone yet, and we are going to fill it in 2027 with something else.

Richard RIORDAN: I am not sure that Bass Coast see that, but anyway.

Matt CARRICK: In a second I will ask the Deputy Secretary to expand on my answer, but what I can say is that both the department and also Visit Victoria are looking at ways to ensure that we can make sure that the Phillip Island economy is supported by attracting events and undertaking activities that will in fact help with the economics of the island. So that is something we are doing, but I might ask the Deputy –

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. I am actually just interested in the World Superbike Championship contract expiry.

Georgina McCANN: That current contract expires in 2027.

Richard RIORDAN: 2027. Okay. Thank you. What is the current status of negotiations for that contract? Is that actively underway at the moment?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Mr Riordan, if I could just intervene here, that is an arrangement that is directly between Dorna, the licence holder, and the Phillip Island landlord. The Victorian government is an investor in it, but the two separate parties are to negotiate that, so it is not the usual MotoGP example with that one.

Richard RIORDAN: Right. But as an investor you have got a vested interest presumably in supporting them. Have they come to you yet with any requests?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: I have a longstanding practice to protect Victorian taxpayer interests and not to delve into publicly to negotiations. But can I just say this for the Bass Coast community and for all of Victoria: our calendar is compelling because of its breadth and scope – regional and metro. I do not accept that for a moment. We let it go; we did not lose it. We let it go because we said we were not going to move it to Albert Park. That is what they wanted, and I want to be really clear about that. But it is really important because we were not going to turn our backs on Phillip Island. We were not going to do that. Our calendar is important and impressive because it covers all across Victoria, not just Melbourne. So we let it go; let us be really clear.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. You have let it go; it is now a done deal, and it has gone elsewhere. What was the state's financial contribution to the MotoGP Australian round, including any local investment in the Phillip Island community? What was our past commitment with that?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Again, Mr Riordan, because we are still in the contract, we have still got one in October 2026, so this October, which the grand prix corporation assures me, because they help run it, will be a big, big event – the biggest ever – to send them off after 30 years. I do not share what is important information so that any other state or any other country can seize on that.

Richard RIORDAN: It is all a bit irrelevant, really, now, isn't it? It is all done.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No, it is not actually, because other jurisdictions can make an approximation based on a price over here and what they offer over there – absolutely. But can I just say, when I had the –

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. So if you are having a big send-off, are you spending more this year than you would have ordinarily?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: The grand prix corporation will put on an excellent event, and –

Richard RIORDAN: You said a big bash. Is it a bigger than normal event, or is the contribution the same?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: You can actually make it bigger without spending more. For example, you might want to invite every past winner to do a lap. You know, you can make it quite compelling without spending money, but that is a matter for the grand prix corporation, who run it.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. Minister, your government has already failed to deliver for regional communities with the Commonwealth Games, with probably, arguably, the biggest broken promise in the history of regional Victoria. Can we really expect you to deliver on finding those replacements? The Secretary talked about that before, with no specifics, but made that pledge. How should regional Victorians, and particularly those on the Bass Coast, rate that promise?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: They should have faith in our 30-year history in running that event, and I am talking about both governments. They should have absolute faith in the best calendar. We are in a league of our own; there is no comparison. People talk about other comparisons in this country –

Richard RIORDAN: We are the only jurisdiction that spent \$500 million to pay for an international event in another city, in another country. That is true. We are certainly in a league of our own there.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: In terms of major events we are in a league of our own. To talk about regional Victoria – the UCI Gran Fondo World Championships, on the Great Ocean Road; we have got the Cadel Evans Great Ocean Road Race.

Richard RIORDAN: Yes, you do come down to my patch a bit, Minister. I accept that.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Yes, that is right. Rip Curl Pro Bells Beach – we do huge content, exclusive content, for the whole country. At Bendigo gallery –

Richard RIORDAN: My question was: you have made a commitment to Bass Coast about filling the gap –

Steve DIMOPOULOS: And we will meet it.

Richard RIORDAN: What, as early as next year?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: My aspiration is to announce well before this October's MotoGP what will replace it in 2027.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. Big commitment. I wonder if it is like the Commonwealth Games. The Melbourne Football Club are reviewing a move to Caulfield Racecourse. The negotiations are not progressing and there is a current stalemate. The move has been in the media, with the sudden dismissal of Paul Guerra. Did you meet with Labor-linked consultants FMRS regarding these negotiations to reignite the discussions to relocate Melbourne, and was there any discussion about Mr Guerra and the CEO of the club?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: So two things for the committee's information: one is that I do not recall meeting with that firm at all, and it would be in my diary if I did, but I cannot recall that at all on this matter; the second thing I would say is that it is absolutely incorrect that it has stalled. I have good confidence that they are on track. There is some work, obviously, that the environment portfolio, which I used to hold, is doing to ensure that they can work in tandem with racing and in tandem with Mount Scopus's move to that site. But I genuinely feel that Melbourne Football Club are looking good on that site.

Richard RIORDAN: So you are highly supportive of the move? There is no counter move to stop it happening?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No. I am very supportive.

Richard RIORDAN: Okay. On land forces, what was the reason that the government did not secure the land forces expo in 2026 or 2027?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Mr Riordan, I might disappoint you here, because that is not for me. That is for Minister Brooks.

Richard RIORDAN: Minister Brooks is covering that topic. Okay. Moving on, in terms of your commitment or no longer commitment with the Commonwealth Games, are there any further costs expected from the people of Victoria for the management of that shortly-to-be-held event? Has all cash been paid?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: I might ask –

Heather RIDLEY: I can take that, Minister.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Yes. Thank you.

Heather RIDLEY: No, there are no further costs associated with the wrap-up of the Commonwealth Games.

The CHAIR: Thank you. Okay. I am going to go to Mr Hilakari.

Mathew HILAKARI: Thank you, Minister, and thank you, officials, for your attendance this evening. Minister, I might take you to the 'Department Performance Statement' page 93, which highlights our government's strategic shift towards fewer and more high-profile events that deliver a greater return on the investment that the Victorian people make. Can you explain how these events are going to contribute to our economy this year and going forward?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Thank you, Mr Hilakari. Absolutely. We have purposefully gone for the higher return on investment events, and that is consistent with – and I sort of said to Mr Riordan we are in a league of our own. But I really think it is important that the committee hear this in a way that is sensible, because we get this kind of thing – okay, the Moto GP. We let it go and all of a sudden somehow we are on equal footing with another city in Australia. We are completely out of their league, like we are in another stratosphere. This community, this state, this city gets global events. In fact we get them more than cities that people talk about – LA and New York and London and Mumbai. We get global events and we get them consistently. Part of that is locking them in for a long period. There is a lot made of the city that has accepted to put the Moto GP in the

centre of the city. I love that city; I have got no problem with it. But it is slightly humorous when people compare that city to our city, as one example. What is 100 per cent occupancy rate on one given night in Adelaide is a very bad night in Melbourne at 25 per cent occupancy. We have got four times the hotel stock of that city – as beautiful as that city is, four times the hotel stock. We are the preferred overnight destination for the leisure market in this country by a country mile. There is absolutely no comparison. We saw \$5.9 billion spent in one year through 13 million nights booked through 3.5 million visitors as a preferred interstate destination in this country – well above Sydney, well above Adelaide, well above everybody else.

I just want to give a bit of sobering thought to some of the media commentators and others who think somehow us letting go of the Moto GP has an impact. I know, Mr Hilakari, you asked me a slightly tangential question, but if I can give you an example of the depth and the breadth of the calendar: British and Irish Lions versus the Wallabies last year, where 40,000 people came here from overseas; NBAxNBL series; the Gran Fondo World Championships Great Ocean Road; the NGV Summer exhibitions; Westwood–Kawakubo. From the Terracotta Warriors to the French Impressionists, other cities do not get this once in five years, let alone every year, twice a year. The Australian Open golf – we have got the President's Cup in 2028; we have got the Australian Open golf; Boxing Day Test with England in the last two years; the Australian Open tennis; the Cadel Evans road race; the Melbourne Fashion Festival; the Melbourne Food and Wine Festival; the FIFA series, the FIFA World Cup with the Socceroos; Rip Curl Pro Bells Beach; State of Origin rugby league. It just goes on – and the netball deal, secured the Super Netball grand final, international test matches, Constellation Cups – and I mean this sincerely, I have another 10 examples to give. We are in a league of our own, both in terms of the amount of visitors that come here and the amount of major events we have, and we are hungry for more. That is why the NFL matters. We are the only state in the country to have three of the biggest four sports in the US. We have had the NBA here, we have had the NHL, the hockey here, and now we have got the NFL. No other state or city in this country has that. And we have the NFL on a long-term deal.

Ms Benham has an affection for the NFL, and when Roger Goodell, the commissioner of the NFL, came here, one of the best sports administrators on the planet, he was asked at the MCG at a press conference, 'Why Melbourne? Did they just pay more?' He said, 'No, not at all'. He said that because this community, this government, this city, this state know how to do major events. They are important, Mr Hilakari, as you would know, because they give us international branding. They underpin an entire workforce of Victorians, and I am talking about normal Victorians who drive forklifts, who pull beers, who clean rooms in hotels, who set up event infrastructure, who pack it down, social media managers – an entire workforce. It is worth \$3.3 billion a year, and under our watch the visitor economy has grown to historic heights of almost \$48 billion, and we have aspirations to grow it more.

We are in very, very good hands. We are not complacent. Others can talk all they like, chest beating about how good they are, including international cities who may or may not have a sporting event called the Commonwealth Games; we are so far beyond that.

Mathew HILAKARI: I just want to go to that really specifically, the last year. Are we seeing visitor fatigue, or are people just coming over and over again? And expanding the reach of Victoria to the international community across the country for Melbournians and Victorians, are we seeing great numbers coming through those major events?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: We certainly are, 100 per cent. That is what is interesting about this, and I always get anxious about –

Mathew HILAKARI: You worry about it, right? There is a major event on every single weekend. Are we getting fatigue, or are we just dragging more people into our state to support the wonderful jobs and events so that everyone can see something?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Yes, it is the latter. In some sense I get a bit anxious about the next grand prix and the next Australian Open because we are so high on numbers already, and everybody has an expectation we will go that next step. And obviously the quality of the experience matters.

Mathew HILAKARI: I would get less fatigued if the Bombers made the grand final. I would be all for the grand final at that point.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: I would never be fatigued if Carlton made the finals – just the finals would be good. But it is an interesting point. The Premier talks about something special about this community. We have a community that shows up. Most of these events are underpinned by Victorians. We put them on for Victorians. Absolutely, there is a portion – a significant portion on occasion, depending on the event – that comes from interstate and overseas. But Victorians underpin these events. We have also got an extraordinary asset base that they can be conducted in, and I have got to thank John Cain, God rest his soul, for his visionary leadership in setting aside that entire precinct, Melbourne Park. The embellishments of the MCG – we have such a compelling proposition. For those reasons I think it is just easier to get here. I went to a couple of events at Homebush in Sydney. It is a train, a taxi, a packed lunch and a walk to get to it, and you are over it by the time you get to it.

But just specifically to your question, the Formula One Grand Prix: 483,000, the biggest crowd ever at Albert Park. Hotel occupancy hit 95.6 per cent. When I say hotel occupancy, I mean on the largest hotel stock in the country. To get to 95.6 per cent on the largest hotel stock in the country is harder than it is when you have got a quarter of that anywhere else. That is the other thing. We sold 650,000 more hotel room nights in 2025 than we did in 2024. Cities around the world cannot even sell 650,000 nights in a year. We sold 650,000 more than we did the year before. I am not saying there are no factors that may affect us – international factors, economic factors – but we seem to be doing extraordinarily well. The Australian Open was another enormous success: 1.1 million two years ago, 1.2 million last year and 1.368 million this year.

And the economic uplift of the Victorian community is extraordinary: \$565 million of economic uplift. It is exactly what you are talking about – jobs for Victorians. I had the pleasure of releasing the Melbourne Park – which is basically the centrepiece, Rod Laver, the whole Olympic Boulevard precinct – economic study. They did an economic study for literally just one calendar year. Leaving aside the tennis, taking it out of the equation, there were 445 events and \$1.53 billion of economic benefit, let alone the social pride, the sense of connection. They had 3.9 million people descend on that 750-metre stretch of road in Olympic Boulevard – Korean K-pop, Greek singers, Disney on Ice, NBL matches. It is extraordinary in terms of its ability to just attract people. There is a lot more I could say. I was going to get the Deputy Secretary to say something, but I was just too passionate about it.

Mathew HILAKARI: It all builds on itself. One of the points that I noticed in the budget was the dramatic – I think we are at 250 per cent – value of media coverage generated internationally. That is a pretty extraordinary generation and beats our expectation 2½ times over. Can you speak to that and what that means for Victoria?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Absolutely. If I give you one proof point, which might please the Member for Mildura, just on that exact point, when we made the announcement that we had secured the NFL – as one of many examples – we made it in New Orleans together with the NFL. We priced what the value of that announcement alone was in digital and papers right around the world for that. Melbourne and –

Jade BENHAM: What did it cost, though?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: This is just the announcement I am talking about – \$32 million, off memory, just to value if you were to place ads about Melbourne right across all those platforms just for the announcement. Then of course we have sold the MCG effectively 1½ times over – all the corporate suites. This will be one of the biggest returns on investment Victoria has seen.

The CHAIR: Thank you. We are going straight to Mr Puglielli.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Thank you, Chair. Good evening, Minister and officials. With the grand prix contracted until 2037, Minister, are you in a position to rule out any further permanent infrastructure being built in Albert Park over the estimates?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: Over the?

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Over the forward estimates.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: To be fair to you, Mr Puglielli, there are no plans that I have to do that.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Sorry, to build or to rule out?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: I am sorry, no plans that I am aware of or that I have to build permanent infrastructure on an estate run by Parks Victoria. They would have to obviously be agreeable to that. I am not saying no forever, because that would be inappropriate, but we are really conscious that that land is used by many people all year round. So I cannot rule it out, but I have no plans to at the moment.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: So no plans over the estimates. Over the duration of the contract to 2037?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: No, I can only see right now. I do not have any plans.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay.

Steve DIMOPOULOS: We set up a 50,000-seat stadium there every time and we pack it down.

Aiv PUGLIELLI: Okay. Minister, the government supports the AFL in a range of ways, for example, budget paper 3, page 67, around delivery of grand final events. We have seen reporting around integrity concerns around AFL umpires – you know, one holding a paid role with Sportsbet while continuing to officiate AFL matches. Now, I understand Sportsbet have changed their policies through public pressure. Minister, do you see the government having a role, given our investments in the AFL, in ensuring that there are conflict-of-interest rules prohibiting active officials from paid gambling industry roles?

Steve DIMOPOULOS: It is a good question, and I might see if the Deputy Secretary has anything further to add, but because of the nature of the activity, gambling, and the footprint of the AFL being national, I would say it is something of a national conversation. But what I would say is we do have a view about certain things and I do talk to the AFL about those things, but if I do not come out publicly with them, it is because I think the relationship is served best when I have those concerns and I express them privately. If I can share an example of that: I have done that when there have been some unacceptable comments in relation to Aboriginal players. I have done that when it came to, in the past – now I think they are in a better position – the lack of support for players that may be gay or queer. I do that on a range of fronts. We have a good relationship, and we share a range of things. I do not know any more on this particular issue, but I can come back to you if there is any more.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Mr Puglielli. Minister and officials, thank you very much for taking the time to appear before the committee tonight. The committee will follow up on any questions taken on notice in writing, and responses are required within five working days of the committee's request.

I would like to thank all ministers and officers who have given evidence to the committee today, as well as Hansard, the committee secretariat and parliamentary attendants. I would also like to thank the hospitality, security and cleaning staff who have looked after all of us today.

The committee will resume its consideration of the 2026–27 budget estimates on Wednesday 20 May at 8:30 am. I declare this hearing adjourned.

Committee adjourned.