

**Submission  
No 1**

## **INQUIRY INTO COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PRACTICES**

**Name:** Ms Dale Webster

**Date Received:** 15 April 2025

15 April 2025

Good afternoon,

Please find attached all stories to date on the Bendigo Showgrounds Redevelopment Project being managed by Development Victoria for Sport and Recreation Victoria.

[Bendigo Showgrounds - Development Victoria](#)

The main theme is lack of consultation. The articles also cover misuse of government funding but it is the poor consultation that has allowed this to happen.

This project is now underway. I am submitting these stories now in the hop some sort of stay might be put on the work until this inquiry finishes its investigations.

Regards,

Dale Webster

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

# How the Bendigo showgrounds project became a sports roort (without the sport)

By Dale Webster

The Regional, April 14 2025 - [How the Bendigo showgrounds project became a sports roort \(without the sport\)](#)



ABOVE: This year's Victorian Agricultural Shows Saddle Horse Championships at the Bendigo Showgrounds attracted more than 300 entries over the two-day show.

CONSULTATION for the 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan consisted of two workshops with the organisers of the project, a phone call about the Swap Meet, discussions with Energy Breakthrough and cycling clubs about potential future use and an online survey that attracted just 21 responses.

It was supposed to be an “extensive community consultation with diverse user groups so that the future vision (of the showgrounds) meets their needs”.

The Victorian Government, who coughed up more than \$73,000 to the City of Greater Bendigo for the project, should ask for its money back.

Until last week, no one outside a closed circle around the project had seen the master plan and all requests for access to it since the Bendigo Showgrounds Redevelopment Project was put out for public consultation in March had been fended off with great alacrity by the City of Greater Bendigo, Bendigo Agricultural Show Society, Development Victoria, Sport and Recreation Victoria and the State Government in general.

Criticism of the failure to hold a proper consultation process as part of Sport and Recreation Victoria project has been front and centre since it was revealed on March 18 that major works had already

been put out to tender without significant user groups knowing anything about what was being planned.

The news that there would be no opportunity to have a say on the key elements of the redevelopment was delivered just after they were shown to the public for the first time during a webinar being held as part of an official consultation round for the project.

Representatives from project manager Development Victoria looked visibly uncomfortable when told by participants representing key user groups that none of the work outlined had been run by them previously and that the proposed arena works would jeopardise the running of equestrian events.

Development Victoria's response then and since has been that the required consultation for the Clause 52.3 planning application that had already been started was held with the Bendigo Agricultural Show Society "as the venue operator and representative for their user groups".

This raised the question of whether appropriate consultation supported the development of the showgrounds master plan and whether it could be considered representative of the views of a "diverse range of user groups" as intended.

Last week, The Regional obtained a copy of the document and after reviewing its contents, it is understandable why it has been kept hidden from public view.

To understand the problem the master plan creates for the project, it is necessary to look at the whole process from start to finish.

### **The beginning**

In March 2019, the Minister for Regional Development Jaclyn Symes announced that the City of Greater Bendigo had been awarded a \$50,643 grant from the Stronger Regional Communities Plan to support the creation of a master plan and business case for the redevelopment of the Prince of Wales Showgrounds.

Ms Symes named the City of Greater Bendigo as the project leader and said both the council and Bendigo Agriculture Show Society would also contribute \$25,000 each towards the work.

"The grant will enable the City of Greater Bendigo to undertake extensive community consultation with diverse user groups, so that the future vision (of the showgrounds) meets their needs," Ms Symes said.

The City of Greater Bendigo was awarded another grant of \$22,500 in the next round of the Stronger Regional Communities Plan in 2019-2020 also for the master plan, bringing the total State Government contribution for the work council would undertake on the project to \$73,143.

The master plan and business case was completed by the end of 2019 but it has never been released to the public.

On August 16, 2022, Member for Northern Victoria Wendy Lovell, who had been shown the document, spoke about the Bendigo showgrounds in parliament, advocating for Regional Development funding for the first two stages of a nine-stage project outlined in the master plan.

She specifically mentioned the construction of a market pavilion incorporating an indoor market hall, a market event space, storage areas including cold storage, catering facilities and covered market stall spaces.

Ms Lovell's bid to secure the regional development funding was not successful but another opportunity to pay for works at the showgrounds had opened up in April when it was announced that Victoria had won the rights to host the 2026 Commonwealth Games.

Bendigo had been named as one of the regional hubs to host events under a regional delivery model and along with councils in Geelong, Ballarat and Gippsland had been asked by the State Government to consider "legacy" projects that could be funded as part of the Games but would continue to be of benefit to the community once they were over.

Bendigo's legacy plan was adopted at the September 26, 2022, council meeting.

In a report titled "2026 Commonwealth Games legacy and resourcing", then chief executive Craig Niemann told councillors the Games were "an opportunity to bring forward and implement ideas and plans that have been worked on with our community for many years".

"In most instances, the high-level planning and consultation has already been completed," he said.

"Careful engagement over many years has told us what our community needs and now is the time to act and accomplish our shared vision for the future of Greater Bendigo and the wider region.

"A number of community groups, sporting clubs and other organisations have requested to have projects included as legacy priorities ... it is deliberately intended for this document to focus on the outcomes that council would like to see achieved and some higher profile flagship projects, such as the Bendigo Art Gallery expansion, the Bendigo Low-Line safe transport connection and further expansion of the 100Gb network.

"Having an approved legacy plan ... decreases the risk of initiatives that are not priorities being funded."

Mr Neimann did not mention the showgrounds in his report but "funding for the development of the Bendigo Showgrounds" was listed in the legacy plan.

Further detail of what the showgrounds development would entail was revealed in City of Greater Bendigo's "Investment Prospectus: Priority Projects for government investment", which was adopted at the same meeting.

The prospectus highlighted two projects that were from the 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan:

- Proposed upgrades include a new \$6.5 million arena for junior and women's sport, in-ground irrigation and lighting upgrade, a multipurpose sports pavilion including player changerooms, function room, umpire rooms, toilets, kiosk/canteen and a covered terraced viewing area; and,
- The exhibition buildings and market precinct require a \$2.9 million investment in covered market stall spaces, solar conversion, kitchen and equipment upgrades, sealed surfaces, gardens and landscaping, toilets and storage.

In a busy night for councilors, they also approved the creation of an additional director-level position to lead Commonwealth Games coordination and preparations, a role that was to go to now City of Greater Bendigo chief executive Andrew Cooney.

At this point in time the intension – as outlined in the Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions' business case submitted to cabinet in March 2022 – had always been for Bendigo to host

basketball 3x3, lawn bowls, netball, shooting, squash and tennis, with cricket and cycling to be shared.

When the list was finalised in October 2022, squash, netball, lawn bowls, 3x3 basketball and track cycling had made the cut but there was one surprising addition – table tennis.

The announcement was accompanied by the news that Bendigo would get a new pavilion at the Bendigo Showgrounds.

Until then, no one knew Geelong, which had been allocated the event when the Games were announced in April, had lost hosting rights.

The president of the Bendigo and District Table Tennis Association, Gary Warnest, would later tell a senate inquiry into the Games handling and cancellation that the first he heard of the proposal was when he got a call from Mr Cooney inviting him to a photo opportunity to make the announcement.

Mr Warnest said he was away at a competition in Darwin with the president of Table Tennis Australia and the Geelong committee and that none of them were aware the change had been made or had been involved in any discussions.

He was embarrassed by the development and concerned that the Geelong association would think he had tried to undermine the opportunity for them to get a new venue.

The Bendigo and District Table Tennis Association has a very good purpose-built venue in Eaglehawk but Mr Warnest said he knew it would not be big enough to host the Commonwealth Games competition and had only put in an expression of interest for training events.

After returning from Darwin, Mr Warnest met Mr Cooney and was told a new “show court pavilion” would be built at the showgrounds.

“I expressed my concerns that the pavilion would be built more for its suitability for later use rather than being fit for purpose as a table tennis competition venue,” he told senators in Bendigo in August 2023.

“No building plans or documents had been sighted. I asked about legacy equipment following the games and I was told that no information was available or even being considered while efforts concentrating on the buildings were going ahead.

“As (of) 27 June this year not even the table tennis building site had been confirmed.

“It is evident that there was little, if any, sport consultation or communication happening in the lead-up to the event.”

The 2026 Commonwealth Games were cancelled on July 18, 2023, with the Premier Dan Andrews citing cost blowouts.

In a bid to save face, the State Government announced a \$2 billion package to ensure “every one of the permanent new and upgraded sporting infrastructure projects planned as part of the Games will still proceed”.

A new exhibition shed at the Bendigo showgrounds was among 17 “permanent sporting infrastructure projects” the Government said it would still fund across the state.

## Scope changes

This is where things start to get interesting.

The councils responsible for the 17 projects were permitted to “re-scope”, with no requirement to stick to the original proposals.

The City of Greater Geelong, for example, asked for the money to be re-directed to new Regional Indoor Sports and Events Centre it said “would provide better value for public money”, a request that was accepted.

At Ballarat, the passenger lifts at the railway station, which along with the Bendigo Showgrounds exhibition shed no longer had a sporting purpose due to the cancellation of the Games, ended up being move to another, more appropriate funding stream.

Discussions on “re-scoping” the Bendigo projects took place in late 2023.

According to a report presented to the City of Greater Bendigo council meeting on April 22, 2024, the council, Sport and Recreation Victoria and “key stakeholders of the venues” were involved.

Separate discussions also occurred between the City of Greater Bendigo, Sport and Recreation Victoria and Development Victoria at this time.

It was decided the new scope for the Bendigo Showgrounds Redevelopment Project that is now being rolled out would include the redevelopment of the arena, a new multipurpose pavilion and upgrades to all four entrances and perimeter fencing.

The work for this project and the 15 other remaining sporting legacy projects was to be funded by Sport and Recreation Victoria under the Regional Sports Infrastructure Program based on “previously established need”.

This is where it is important to remember that no-one except a select inner circle had ever viewed the 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan.

All the outside world knew was that it contained a pavilion that was capable of hosting a Commonwealth Games-sized table tennis competition – possibly the sports pavilion outlined in the investment prospectus.

What is known now is that the table tennis was instead to be staged in what was always planned to be a market pavilion, the same one Wendy Lovell was trying to secure Regional Development funding to build.

While in hindsight this may look a tad dodgy, there is no real issue with the City of Greater Bendigo trying to get its market shed as part of the Commonwealth Games funding, other than the ethics of pulling the rug out from under Geelong.

The State Government was actively encouraging councils to use the event to secure “legacy” infrastructure and at the time, there was a Commonwealth Games-related sporting use for the building, but that disappeared the moment the Games were cancelled.

As Gary Warnest told the senate inquiry, “We were never promised a facility. We never expected a facility ... the only thing I'd tried to organise was an expression of interest to gain a cut using our facility as a country training venue”.

At the re-scoping stage, the City of Greater Bendigo had a decision to make.

As flagged in its investment prospectus, there was a genuine sporting pavilion in the showgrounds master plan but, because the plan had never been publicly sighted, there was no clear understanding outside closed doors whether the pavilion being built for the table tennis was the same or different to the one referenced in the prospectus.

It is now known the sports pavilion is a different building to the market shed and its proposed location is on the other side of the arena in the equestrian precinct.

The pavilion would be enormous benefit to hundreds of mainly female equestrian sport participants who desperately need the upgraded shower and change facilities it would provide.

However, instead of changing the scope of the project to build the sports pavilion, which was part of the arena upgrade works in the master plan, the City of Greater Bendigo decided to continue to put forward the market pavilion that no longer had a sporting purpose as the Regional Sports Infrastructure Program project.

Whether council even paused to consider changing the scope to the more appropriate building works will probably never be known, but it had nothing to lose by maintaining its course to get the bigger and more expensive market shed under the guise of a “multi-purpose pavilion” using this pathway.

Any repercussions for using sports infrastructure funding for a building never intended to be used for sport was not their problem, with the report stating that Development Victoria would carry the risk in relation to scope sign-off.

With its market pavilion to gain and liability for the decision sitting with the State Government, council passed the motion to accept the approved scope of works and endorse the delivery model on April 22, 2024.

As part of the delivery model, consultation at a local level was again to be the job of the City of Greater Bendigo.

As evidenced by the reaction of stakeholders during the Development Victoria webinar however, the major works were put out to tender in September last year without any community consultation.

This brings us back to Development Victoria’s explanation that the show society represented the views of its user groups.

The master plan reveals whether this is truly the case, particularly in reference to one of its most important and longest-established user groups, the horse community.

### **Persona non grata**

There is good reason that the 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan and Business Case has never been released to the public.

It is a document that could prove highly embarrassing when read by stakeholders from equestrian user groups who would soon see that it had been written from the premise that horses have no place in the future vision the showgrounds.

Equestrian activities barely rate a mention across the 95 pages.



When future revenue options are being discussed, attracting more equestrian events is not considered as an option despite the document acknowledging the showground's competitive advantage of having more than twice the number of stables than its nearest rival.

In a matrix put together by authors Urban Enterprise, trade shows, exhibitions and the annual show are considered as the showgrounds' primary purpose, with equine, livestock and agriculture events only a secondary use.

Where the future sports pavilion in the equestrian precinct is discussed, equestrian competitors are not even acknowledged as potential users or beneficiaries.

The document confirms the show society is behind plans to reduce the size of the arena, with the committee telling Urban Enterprise that it wanted it to be "smaller and more functional".

The show society also wants to permanently remove the stables, with the plan suggesting the area be turned into a "gardens event precinct and sound shell" that could be hired out as a venue for activities including "wine and food picnic events", "circuses", "outdoor concerts" and "additional swap meet sites".

The plan justifies the removal of the stables by saying there are other facilities at Elmore and Tatura and equine events at the showgrounds are "limited".

It also says stabling is not required because camping at the showgrounds overnight is not permitted and that means horse shows are only day events (before going on to say that once the stables are gone the area can be used for overnight camping for non-equestrian event organisers and staff).

"How will this opportunity increase viability?" is a question posed by the plan's authors. "(By eliminating) any future stable maintenance and refurbishment or replacement costs".

The plan suggests using portable stables for any equine events that are still held at the grounds but does not state who would cover the cost of bringing them to Bendigo each time and where they could be set up after every square inch of the showgrounds is developed as a tourism and events complex.

### **The wash-up**

Through the Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan, the biggest and most active user group that sits hand-in-glove with the Bendigo Agricultural Show Society's primary reason for existence has been absolutely and unceremoniously shafted.

It is understandable now why no consideration at all has been given to the impacts of an arena re-design on horse events, or why equestrian users were not asked if they would prefer a sports pavilion and the stables replaced to a more costly shed in the market area.

After reading the master plan, Development Victoria can no longer maintain its position that the consultation necessary for the current planning process has been completed because the show society was representing its user groups.

The show society was instead actively undermining equestrian users, corrupting the consultation process with its own agenda.

What happens next comes down to just two points:

- Legacy project or not, grant funding should not be misappropriated for projects that don't qualify for the funding stream; and,
- A Clause 52.3 planning application cannot be approved without proof a genuine consultation before the major works were put out to tender.

The Bendigo Showgrounds Redevelopment planning process is legally unsound.

In the wash-up of this schemozzle, the three organisations that have put their name to the Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan – the Bendigo Agricultural Show Society, the City of Greater Bendigo and Development Victoria – need reminding what a showgrounds is for.

The Federal Government has put a lot of money into ensuring the survival of the Bendigo Agricultural Show through a funding program aimed at bridging the divide between country and city.

The show society will probably be looking for more funding from this source in the future.

An agricultural showgrounds that is no longer suitable for, or welcomes, horse events has lost its purpose.

Here's the master plan, it's time this dirty little secret saw the light of day.

The Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan and Business Case 2019.pdf

Download PDF • 22.69MB

## Plan confirms sports funding not being used for sports pavilion

By Dale Webster

The Regional - [Plan confirms sports funding not being used for sports pavilion](#)



ABOVE: From the 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan - the proposed sports pavilion in the equestrian precinct (circled top) and the market pavilion that is being built as part of the current Bendigo Showgrounds Redevelopment project (circled bottom).

STATE Government Sports infrastructure funding is being used to build a shed that was always intended to house produce stall holders and retail market activities at the Bendigo showgrounds, a planning document from 2019 has confirmed.

The market shed is being built instead of a proposed multi-purpose sports pavilion that was to include changerooms, a function room, umpire rooms, toilets and kiosk on the opposite side of the arena in the equestrian precinct.

"This news has left me speechless," Sue Foley, who ran the two-day Pony Club Victoria Team Championships involving more than 600 competitors and their families at the showgrounds for seven years, said.

"To think of all the years participants in our sport – predominantly women and girls – have been putting up with the shabby old toilet and shower block only to find out we could have finally had decent facilities but the sports money is being spent on non-sporting infrastructure.

"It's just plain wrong.

"How is this even allowed to happen?"

The details are included in the closely guarded 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan, which is not publicly available despite Development Victoria now running a major project for Sports and Recreation Victoria to redevelop the showgrounds.

The project has upset showgrounds stakeholders who only learnt of planned changes – including a significant reduction in the size of the main arena – during a consultation webinar on March 18.

At the same time, they were told all major works had already been put out to tender and were not up for negotiation.

The showgrounds redevelopment was among 16 projects the State Government allocated funding for under the Regional Sports Infrastructure Program in 2023.

There was no application process, with a State Government spokesman explaining that the projects were chosen on the basis of having been previously identified as priorities for regional Victoria.

In the case of the showgrounds project, the City of Greater Bendigo had presented the need for the work in its 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan.

The plan states the "new market/multi-purpose pavilion and fresh food hall would include an indoor market hall/market events space, storage, cold storage and catering facilities and covered market stall spaces".

It would also have "an enclosed area that can be used for arts and crafts display during the show".

The siting of the market shed in the 2019 plan is the same as the "multi-purpose pavilion" in the current redevelopment plans.

The sports pavilion is not part of the redevelopment project.

The Minister for Sport, Steve Dimopoulos, has been asked to explain why the Regional Sports Infrastructure Program funding is being used to build the market shed instead of the sports pavilion.

His response will be published once received.

\*

UPDATE (April 13): On April 10 a response to the question sent to The Minister for Sport Steve Dimopoulos was received from an advisor. It did not address the question and was to be attributed to a Victorian Government spokesperson. The advisor was told that unless the statement could be attributed to Mr Dimopoulos it would be reported that he had not responded. The advisor said he would seek advice. Nothing has been heard since.

# Open letter to Victorian Planning Minister: Bendigo showgrounds redevelopment

By Dale Webster

The Regional, April 4 2025 - [Open letter to Victorian Planning Minister: Bendigo showgrounds redevelopment](#)



ABOVE: Minister for Regional Development Jaclyn Symes gave the City of Greater Bendigo a \$50,000 grant in 2019 to develop a master plan for the Bendigo Showgrounds. The work was to include "extensive community consultation with diverse user groups".

To the Minister for Planning, Sonya Kilkenny

Submitted as part of the Engage Victoria community consultation – March-April 2025

Dear Ms Kilkenny,

I am a freelance journalist who in the course of covering the Bendigo Showgrounds Redevelopment has come across serious non-compliance issues in relation to the consultation process required for this project and the inappropriate use of sports infrastructure funding.

I believe these matters to be so significant they must warrant rejection of the planning application.

My research has shown that there is little doubt that the pavilion to be built as part of this project is the same as that proposed for the Commonwealth Games table tennis competition.

Evidence given to a senate inquiry in 2023 shows that no stakeholder consultation informed the decision to allocate sport and infrastructure funding for the building of the pavilion then. (Federal hansard: [ParlView](#) | [Video](#) )

A statement made by member for Northern Victoria Wendy Lovell in Victorian Parliament just a year before strongly indicates the pavilion's actual intended use was a market shed to be used by Sunday market traders, for which Ms Lovell was attempting to secure more appropriate Regional Development funding. (Victorian hansard: [Hansard search - Parliament of Victoria](#) )

I note that even Development Victoria's own planning documents refer to the new pavilion as having no sporting or active recreation purpose. ["Construction of a new modern, multipurpose pavilion that includes a market hall, event space, and storage facilities."](#)

While sports and infrastructure funding is being used to fund a pavilion with no sporting purpose, the sporting group users of the showgrounds will be disadvantaged by the planned works to the point where certain events will no longer be able to be held there.

The reduction in the size of the arena by removal of the sand track and placement of the fenceline approximately 6m inside its current position takes away vital usable space when hosting large equestrian events.

Additionally, a lure coursing representative told me their dogs would "break their necks" if they attempted to hold an official competition on the reduced area.

The decision to reduce the size of the arena was made with ZERO consultation with these major stakeholder groups.

They first learnt of the changes when turning up to this consultation process hoping to have a genuine say, only to be told by Development Victoria representatives that the work had already been put out to tender and planning process started.

The lack of transparency displayed to date is the reason I began investigating the project.

In the course of my reporting, I have encountered obstruction from all parties involved, from both the City of Greater Bendigo and the Bendigo Agricultural Society refusing to release a copy of the publicly funded Bendigo showgrounds master plan, to State Government departments fobbing off questions and ignoring emails put through as media inquiries.

Examples of questions that have been ignored range from simple matters about the planning process to more serious ones about the basis for the decision to allocate sports infrastructure to build a new pavilion, what sporting or active recreation group will be using the new pavilion and what percentage of the overall usage will the sporting activity comprise.

There has been no explanation as to why sports infrastructure funding is being used to build a market shed when actual sporting infrastructure at the grounds – stabling that is vital for equestrian events – is falling down around users' ears.

The line that keeps coming back from Development Victoria and Sport and Recreation Victoria is that the government consulted with the Bendigo Agricultural Show Society and the society represented all user groups.

The Bendigo Agricultural Show Society is listed as a project partner for the showgrounds redevelopment.



A planning project applicant consulting itself should not satisfy the consultation requirements of a clause 52.3 planning application unless the project partner demonstrates it has held a genuine consultation with stakeholders.

The feedback I have received from user groups indicates the show society did nothing more than spitball the idea to reduce the size of the arena around the 25 people sitting at its own board table.

The role of the City of Greater Bendigo in blocking access to the Bendigo Showgrounds Master Plan also needs to be highlighted.

In 2019, according to a media release from the Victorian Government quoting Regional Development Minister Jaclyn Symes, the City of Greater Bendigo was given \$50,000 in public money to lead a project to develop this document.

The money was for ["extensive community consultation with diverse user groups"](#).

Ms Lovell confirmed in parliament in 2022 that this work had been completed saying, *"in December 2019 the council released a detailed master plan and business case, which identified a nine-stage plan to improve and grow the showgrounds over an extended time frame"*.

Every request for a copy of the master plan – by community or media – has been deflected by council to the Bendigo Agricultural Show Society, with council saying it is not their project.

The show society, in turn, has refused to release the document or ignored requests for it.

As the only document that can substantiate whether any consultation outside the offices of the council or show society occurred, and a Freedom of Information will take months to complete, I submit that the planning process for the Bendigo Showgrounds redevelopment should be put on hold until the master plan is made publicly available.

If it turns out that the City of Greater Bendigo did not use the grant money it was given for community consultation, the whole project needs to be put back on the table.

As it stands, my research indicates that equestrian and lure coursing events with all the economic benefits they bring will be lost to Bendigo as a result of this project.

In summary, from what I have been able to ascertain, the lack of consultation that is a genuine substitute ["for notice, the consideration of objections, and the ability to appeal a decision at the Victorian Civil and Administrative Tribunal"](#) and the project not meeting the criteria for the program it has been funded under amount to legal obstacles that should prevent approval of this planning application.

All of the above has been reported in the following articles:

[Horse groups have grounds for complaint over planning schemozzle](#)

[Sporting group blows whistle on showgrounds consultation failure](#)

Regards,

Dale Webster

The Regional

# Sporting group blows whistle on showgrounds consultation failure

By Dale Webster

The Regional, March 27 2025 - [Sporting group blows whistle on showgrounds consultation failure](#)



ABOVE: An artist's impression of the new pavilion at the Bendigo Showgrounds.

WHO would have thought ping pong could get the Victorian Government into so much trouble.

Amid developing controversy over plans to redevelop the Prince of Wales Showgrounds at Bendigo, damning testimony has come to light from a 2023 Federal Senate inquiry into the cancellation of the 2026 Commonwealth Games that was to be hosted by regional Victoria.

Bendigo had been selected as the site for the table tennis competition and a new government-funded stadium was to be built at the showgrounds for the purpose, but the project was shelved when the games were called off.

A separate project to build a new pavilion – funded under the Regional Sports infrastructure Program with the proponents listed as Sport and Recreation Victoria, the City of Greater Bendigo and the Bendigo Agricultural Society – was announced last year.

This time there was no mention of table tennis, with the pavilion described simply as “multi-purpose”.

Plans for the pavilion and [an arena upgrade](#) have been travelling swiftly since the work was put out for tender in September last year.



Tenders have been shortlisted and the planning application process under Clause 52.3 started.

Things hit a snag last week however, when the issue of consultation was raised.

Showgrounds stakeholders attending an Engage Victoria webinar on the project on March 18 believed that was what they were there for but were told all major works were now set in stone and the consultation on these elements other than “tweaking and refinement” had already been completed.

No one asked us, said equestrian users.

It appears no one asked the ping pong people either.

At a Federal Senate inquiry following the cancellation of the games in August 2023, the president of the Bendigo and District Table Tennis Association Gary Warnest said the group had been blindsided by the news Bendigo was to not only host the Commonwealth Games table tennis, but get a new pavilion to house the competition as well.



The following is an extract from Commonwealth Hansard ([Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee, August 29, 2023](#)):

*CHAIRMAN SENATOR MATT CANAVAN: Mr Warnest, do you have an opening statement?*

*MR WARNEST: I do. Thank you for the invitation to attend. My response to you is about table tennis. When the 2026 Commonwealth Games were originally announced in 2022, table tennis was allocated to Geelong. I'm aware that the Geelong Table Tennis Association made an offer to sell their facility to help fund a new venue that would also be used for the Commonwealth Games. In May 2022 I submitted an expression of interest to the City of Greater Bendigo to use the Bendigo table tennis stadium as a country training venue as I knew from my experience that it was not large enough to host the Commonwealth Games table tennis itself. Nothing has come of that.*

*In October 2022 I was officiating at a national tournament in Darwin when I received a call from Andrew Cooney from the City of Greater Bendigo, inviting me to a photo opportunity to announce that Bendigo had been awarded the Commonwealth Games table tennis. The president of Table Tennis Australia was also at the Darwin event as well as the Geelong committee. None of us were aware of this change or had been involved in any discussions. I had to assure the Geelong committee that I had not sought to take the games table tennis away from Geelong. As president of Bendigo Table Tennis for 25 years, a national table tennis referee and an international table tennis umpire from the 2018 Commonwealth Games, I followed up with Andrew Cooney on return. He informed me that the table tennis venue would be at the Bendigo showgrounds and that the new show court pavilion would be built.*

*He informed me that an ITTF, International Table Tennis Federation, official from the Birmingham Commonwealth Games had visited and advised on facilities. I expressed my concerns that the pavilion would be built more for its suitability for later use rather than being fit for purpose as a table tennis competition venue. No building plans or documents had been sighted. I asked about legacy equipment following the games and I was told that no information was available or even being considered while efforts concentrating on the buildings were going ahead. As at 27 June this year not even the table tennis building site had been confirmed, let alone talk about legacy equipment.*

*It is evident that there was little, if any, sport consultation or communication happening in the lead-up to the event, and that interest appears to be bottom driven rather than planned and organised by the organisations charged with that responsibility.*

Senator Bridget McKenzie continued the questioning of Mr Warnest.

*MR WARNEST: We were never promised a facility. We never expected a facility. We were not given any opportunity to even consider what residual equipment may have been available.*

*The only thing I'd tried to organise was an expression of interest to gain a cut using our facility as a country training venue—and that's a missed opportunity. But the main thing that we are missing out on is the ability to showcase our sport and try and attract volunteers and incentivise our juniors to play the sport.*

*SENATOR MCKENZIE: So, Mr Warnest, you said you were invited to a press conference. Who else was at that press conference?*

*MR WARNEST: The City of Greater Bendigo. I didn't actually attend but I know that the City of Greater Bendigo and their Commonwealth Games manager were going to be there. But, as I understand it, so was the Premier.*

*SENATOR MCKENZIE: The Premier?*

*MR WARNEST: As I understand it—*

*SENATOR MCKENZIE: Dan Andrews?*

*MR WARNEST: Yes.*

*SENATOR MCKENZIE: Was the local member Jacinta Allan there?*

*MR WARNEST: To my knowledge, yes.*

*SENATOR McKENZIE: Right. So, for those who are playing along at home, the minister charged with actually rolling out the Commonwealth Games is also the local member for Bendigo East. Has Ms Allan personally contacted you as her local member?*

*MR WARNEST: I've had no contact with Ms Allan through this whole process.*

*SENATOR McKENZIE: Who made the decision around table tennis then? Mr Warnest, in your evidence in your opening statement it all sounded a bit odd. In country towns you often hear things that might not be in the newspaper. Do you have any idea who actually made the decision, given there seems to be an incredible lack of consultation?*

*MR WARNEST: You note my sensitivity about the fact that the decision was taken. Although the event was moved from Geelong to Bendigo, nobody in the table tennis environment in Geelong nor me were consulted beforehand. Everybody looked at it and said, 'How was this done?' And nobody had any answers whatsoever. It was not done within the table tennis environment.*

*SENATOR McKENZIE: You're not the only sport that's had this experience with this rollout. I mean rugby just doesn't know why they were being sent down to the Latrobe Valley. That's all very clear in their submission as well. There doesn't seem to be a very strategic approach to which sports were allocated where.*

*MR WARNEST: There was no background information that I'm aware of to find out the suitability of Bendigo of hosting it or anything like that.*

*SENATOR McKENZIE: So, ... do you .. Mr Warnest, have any idea how or where these decisions were made about which sport was allocated to which community?*

*MR WARNEST: The only contact that table tennis has had from the local council is Andrew Cooney. That's it. That's my complaint, effectively, that we've been totally left out of the loop.*

\*

Planning applications using the Clause 52.3 pathway must demonstrate community consultation has taken place due to there being no right to object to or appeal any decision.

Mr Warnest's evidence to the senate inquiry shows that in the case of the table tennis pavilion, community consultation did not inform the decision to allocate funding.

It would be an insult to the intelligence of any of the showgrounds users to suggest that the pavilion being proposed now is not the same as the one that had been planned for the Commonwealth Games.

Given that there was no application process for the Regional Sports Infrastructure Program funding and projects were chosen on the basis of having previously been identified as priorities for regional Victoria, the failure to consult with stakeholders the first time around leaves the State Government in a bit of a pickle now.

The State Government's explanation the Bendigo Agricultural Show Society was "fully engaged in the design process" should not satisfy Clause 52.3 requirements, as a project proponent consulting itself would, or should be, procedurally unacceptable.

If there was no community consultation for the table tennis pavilion, that only leaves the possibility that consultation on the pavilion and arena upgrade was conducted as part of the development of

the 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Masterplan, of which the City of Greater Bendigo has refused to release a copy.

A Freedom of Information request has been submitted for this.

\*

# Horse groups have grounds for complaint over planning schemozzle

By Dale Webster

The Regional, March 22, 2025 - [Horse groups have grounds for complaint over planning schemozzle](#)



ABOVE: The arena plan released this week showing where the new fence line will be.

THE Bendigo Showgrounds – home of the Victorian Agricultural Shows Saddle Horse Championships and many other state and national equestrian events – is to have the size of its arena cut significantly under a Victorian Government redevelopment of the site.

The project was opened for public consultation for what appears to be the first time on March 6 but stakeholders were told during a webinar run by Engage Victoria on Tuesday evening that the project had already been put out to tender, tenderers had been shortlisted and an application for planning approval under clause 52.3 of the Greater Bendigo Planning Scheme had already been submitted.

Asked during the webinar whether changes to the arena were up for negotiation, a project manager from Development Victoria replied, “no – the scope of works is currently set, which includes repositioning the fence”.

There is no right to object to or appeal under clause 52.3 so there are strict conditions around community consultation in the application process.

However, it was clear from comments made by stakeholders representing major user groups on Tuesday that this was the first time they had seen a consultation advertised.

“There hasn’t been, as far as I am aware, any consultation,” one stakeholder told the presenters.

“It’s probably why you are getting some of these questions here.”

The project proponents, which in this case is the Department of Sport and Recreation in partnership with the City of Greater Bendigo and the Bendigo Agricultural Society, are responsible for

undertaking consultation and submitting a consultation report as part of the planning application process.

The requirements of the clause 52.3 consultation process (explained [here](#)) closely resemble the process now being undertaken by Engage Victoria, but it was clear from comments made on Tuesday by Development Victoria project director Amanda Harris that the main consultation work was considered complete and this engagement was about "tweaking and refinement".

### **Sports infrastructure grant**

The showgrounds redevelopment was among 16 projects the State Government allocated funding for under the Regional Sports Infrastructure Program in 2023.

There was no application process, with a State Government spokesman explaining that the projects were chosen on the basis of having been previously identified as priorities for regional Victoria before 2023.

In the case of the showgrounds project, the City of Greater Bendigo had presented the need for the work in its 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Redevelopment Master Plan.

For this plan it received a \$50,000 State Government grant from the Minister for Regional Development, Jaclyn Symes, for work that included community consultation.

"The City of Greater Bendigo, which will lead the project, and the Bendigo Agriculture Show Society Inc will also contribute \$25,000 each towards the project," a media release announcing the funding said in March 2019.

"The grant will enable the City of Greater Bendigo to undertake extensive community consultation with diverse user groups, so that the future vision meets their needs."

The City of Greater Bendigo has this week refused to release a copy of the showgrounds master plan, which is not available on its website.

The Victorian Government was also asked for a copy, but directed the inquiry to the developer of the plan, the City of Greater Bendigo.

Without the document it is impossible to know what consultation has informed the allocation of the yet-undisclosed amount money the showgrounds redevelopment is costing and the work that will be undertaken.

The only information available online about the contents of the plan comes from Victorian Government Hansard when Member for Northern Victoria Wendy Lovell was lobbying just over two years ago for \$4 million of \$8.6 million in regional development funding for the first stages of the Bendigo Showgrounds redevelopment project, which included a "market shed".

The market shed was described as a multi-purpose pavilion "incorporating an indoor market hall, a market event space, storage areas and catering facilities".

The current Bendigo showgrounds redevelopment also includes a new "multi-purpose" pavilion but is being paid for by money that – according to Ms Harris – is for "community sport and active recreation infrastructure".

The State Government spokesman yesterday dodged a question on why the new pavilion is eligible for sports infrastructure funding.

He did say that “the Bendigo Agricultural Show Society, as the venue operator and representative for their user groups, has been fully engaged in the design process for the Bendigo Showgrounds upgrades”.

## Horses

As the main sporting user group of the showgrounds, the equestrian community has got the rough end of the stick.

Equestrian recreation is among 11 horse industry activities that the City of Greater Bendigo in conjunction with the Institute of Economic and Industry Research has identified as contributing \$52 million to Bendigo’s economy annually.

As well as reduction in the arena, which the Bendigo Agricultural Society boasts on its website as being the largest in the state including Melbourne, Development Victoria also confirmed during the webinar that upgrades to the ageing stables “do not form part of these scope of works”.

Under the plan, the arena fence line will be moved inside the current sand track used to warm up before events, marshalling and to access rings. The track area will be levelled and three quarters put under bitumen, with the main aim of increasing space for car parking.

When one of the spokeswomen suggested that this could “still be ridden on” she was quickly informed by stakeholders how dangerous this would be.



ABOVE: The sand track is the only spare space at many of the horse shows for warming up before a class.

While exhibitors have been coping with the dilapidated state of the stables for years, it is the reduction in the usable space available in the arena that will have the greatest impact and jeopardise the show society’s ability to attract and retain big events at the grounds.



“The sand track is currently used to access individual rings at events,” Sue Foley, a former pony club zone representative who has organised events at the showgrounds for more than 15 years, said.

“By bringing the fence in they are making the arena functionality less workable.

“There is no way we could run the (Pony Club Victoria) team championships there with reduced arena size.

“I want to know why they have left it this late to consult with horse people.”

The [Engage Victoria Bendigo Showgrounds Redevelopment consultation](#) will remain open until April 3 and submissions are invited.

There will be a drop-in session at the showgrounds on Sunday, March 23, at the exhibition building from 11am to 12.30pm.

“We’ve definitely open to getting feedback,” Ms Harris said.

“That’s why this community consultation is really important to ensure we are delivering something that is needed by the community.”

Further information on the project can be found on the [Development Victoria website](#).



ABOVE: The sand track being used as a marshalling area during a pony club championships event.

\*

UPDATE: A Freedom of Information request has been lodged with the City of Greater Bendigo for a copy of the 2019 Bendigo Showgrounds Masterplan, any documents related to its development, including but not limited to, any documents referencing/demonstrating community consultation on proposed works before the tender process for the Sport and Recreation Victoria-funded redevelopment started in September 2024.