

CORRECTED VERSION

SUB-COMMITTEE OF SELECT COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC LAND DEVELOPMENT

Caulfield — 13 February 2008

Members

Mr D. Davis
Ms S. Pennicuik
Mr E. Thornley

Other Committee Members Present

Mr E. O'Donohue

Chair: Mr D. Davis

Staff

Secretary: Mr R. Willis
Research Officer: Ms C. Williams

Witnesses

Mr D. Dunstan, president, and
Ms C. Forge, Glen Eira Community Association.

The CHAIR — I welcome Mr Don Dunstan and Ms Cheryl Forge from the Glen Eira Community Association. I invite you to briefly outline the points you wish to make, then we will ask you a few questions.

Mr DUNSTAN — I have written a short statement.

The CHAIR — Thank you again also for your assistance this morning in viewing the site.

Mr DUNSTAN — Thank you. I would like to thank you, Chair, and committee members for the opportunity to address the committee.

Firstly I would like to say my association is deeply concerned by the lack of public open space in the municipality of Glen Eira. This is a city which has the second-lowest amount of public open space per capita anywhere in Melbourne. Whilst this situation is shameful in itself, the real tragedy is that sitting on our doorstep here in Glen Eira is one of the largest reserved areas of land around. I refer of course to the Caulfield Racecourse land. This is a vast area — 59 hectares — of wastefully underutilised public land. Were this land better managed it could provide the central core to the recreational and educational precincts beyond compare.

Appropriate development of part of the racecourse public land is the essential key to any such development concept and must be part of a larger master plan for the whole area. Located near the central heart of Melbourne in the metropolitan area, the racecourse reserve has been estimated to be worth around \$1 billion or \$2 billion.

But public recreation land with astonishing prospects like this land is quite beyond simplistic monetary valuation. It is an incomparable public asset. Simply put, it is totally irreplaceable. Yet this vast area of land is administered by just 15 trustees appointed by the responsible minister. Unfortunately the trustees meet infrequently, sometimes once a year, and although required by the deed of trust to ensure the reserve land is used for three purposes — namely, racecourse, public recreation ground and public park at Caulfield — this simply does not happen. One of these uses, horse racing, has been splendidly provided for whilst the other two are almost totally neglected. This situation represents a grievous, manifest failure by the reserve trustees, a failure that has been evident for some 150 years.

What is the solution? The answer lies in history. History records that once, and only once, have the actual users of the racecourse been required to pay their way, and it required ministerial intervention to force them to do so.

In Dr Geulah Solomon's brilliant and penetrating history of Caulfield, published in 1990 and entitled *Caulfield's Heritage*, the racecourse problem featured again and again. At one point Dr Solomon explains the history of events around 1909 and 1910, noting at page 63, volume 4, that there had been angry public controversy and argument over the continuing failure to provide for non-racing uses.

Things came to a head, Dr Solomon tells us, when — and I quote from her book 'Caulfield council began discussions on the matter with the Crown lands department and finally the minister for lands ruled that the Victoria Amateur Turf Club should spend £500 per year for sporting facilities other than racing on the reserve'. Chair, £500 a year was a large sum of money in those days. It represented almost 15 per cent of the capital cost of a new grandstand which, in 1911, was 'nearly £3500'.

History also records, however, that this laudable public-spirited arrangement was, to use a horseracing term, effectively nobbled several years later. First the payment was reduced to £400 and then dropped altogether. Importantly however, the precedent for action by both the Caulfield council and by the minister had been established.

Accordingly, therefore, I call upon the City of Glen Eira Council, the Caulfield Racecourse Reserve Trustees, the Melbourne Racing Club and the responsible minister to demand that all three users of the racecourse reserve land are responsibly provided for and that the continuing de facto alienation of the public land known as the Caulfield racecourse reserve be stopped forthwith. Thank you, Chair.

The CHAIR — Thank you, you certainly have made an eloquent case. I do not have any specific questions other than to say that I think £500 a year would have been a large sum of money in those days and equivalent to an enormous sum now.

Mr DUNSTAN — I tried to equate it with the grandstand to get the cross-link.

The CHAIR — And there would obviously be a long list of useful facilities. I do not have any questions.

Ms FORGE — I would like to add a few words.

Ms PENNICUIK — Yes, please do.

Ms FORGE — Just to go back on some of the issues raised, and some other issues or findings: recently the City of Glen Eira Council did a major survey of the community in regard to recreation sporting facilities and open space. As a result of that survey which was carried out through their strategic research department it found that there was a need to improve recreation and sporting facilities as well as parks, and noted in that report that the overriding importance of wellbeing was for all age groups.

I must say that I applaud that passing by the council about the approval of \$33 million for an aquatic centre, but I would also like to support Mr Brohier on its placement. I think the return on revenue for the ratepayers would be far more beneficial if it was put in as a major activity centre and the racecourse reserve.

The CHAIR — With the transport nearby?

Ms FORGE — Yes, in particular. Having made that point, I would like now to go to the area that Mr Thornley brought up about the safety issues to the horses, and I realise that the MRC and the trainers are very sensitive to that. I agree that further inspection needs to take place as to what really works and what does not, what is myth and what is reality.

I am a member of the VRC and I wonder when you have got, say, 30 000 people milling around on Melbourne Cup Day or Derby Day around the parade ground, that the horses do not seem too skittish with that number of people around. The other thing too is that the roar of the crowd — 120 000 people — does not seem to have any effect on the racehorses at all. I see the sensitive area is at the starting gates.

However, this can be covered by mesh or some kind of screening for a certain distance, to negate that effect, if there are crowd effects or noise, that that can be covered. I think there are other reasons why horses get skittish, such as difficulty to get them into the gates, which we all know about and so forth. That has to be really looked into.

I might also add that at a recent public meeting called by the MRC at the Caulfield Racecourse Reserve it was open to the public, and around 80 to 90 people turned up. Our group members were all very disappointed that we were not allowed to ask any questions of the presenters. All they wanted to tell us was how successful their marketing program has been. There was a lot of heckling and a lot of disappointment; if the MRC calls that public consultation, I do not know what is. Thank you.

Ms PENNICUIK — Thank you, Cheryl and Don, for your presentations. I do not have questions but the points you raised were good. It occurs to me that there have been a lot of good ideas: the aquatic centre, beautification, gardens, pulling down the stables, opening up and putting in —it really needs a bit of goodwill from everybody.

It needs the trustees, the racing club, the council and the residents to all sit down, take a step back, it seems to me, and come up with a very ground-breaking plan and vision for this site so that we can see the public-recreation, public-park uses put back in, the focus on racing scaled down somewhat and the focus on the other aspects scaled up.

I even think that perhaps changing the name so that the words 'recreation park' appear in the name of the reserve might help to change thinking a little bit. I disagree with you a little bit on the pool. I think we can have both pools. That would be my view. I am loath to see a pool close anywhere.

Ms FORGE — I did not advocate closing of the pool. What the public requested was a replacement of the present pool, because it is in very poor condition, and they did not request an enormous amount of costing which is now going to be passed on to the ratepayers.

Ms PENNICUIK — Yes, but East Boundary Road, Bentleigh is a long way from here, so pools need to be accessible.

Ms FORGE — It is a long way from here where we live, too.

Ms PENNICUIK — Yes. The point really is that these are all really good ideas and there are probably even other ideas out there that we have not heard. The problem does seem to be that the ideas are not being heard.

The CHAIR — Your point, Sue, about an additional pool was a good idea.

Ms PENNICUIK — An additional pool is a good idea — an aquatic centre, which is different from a pool.

The CHAIR — Sorry, I am not using the right terminology.

Mr DUNSTAN — If I could just revert to the fence, I should point out for the benefit of the committee and everyone, that the fence which seems to be subject to a great deal of contention, complete with its corrugated iron and serrated top, has not always been there.

Ms FORGE — And barbed wire.

Mr DUNSTAN — And barbed wire, yes, I found that out. The fence was a temporary wartime measure brought in when the army requisitioned the racecourse. It did the same thing, it put a similar type of fence up at Grimwade House along the boundary with a serrated top. Shortly after the war, when Grimwade house was taken back for the school, the school people removed the fence and replaced it with a worthwhile fence. That did not happen in the Caulfield Racecourse, of course.

One thing that has made it worse is the barbed wire entanglement along the top. All of us think that a temporary wartime measure, which has lasted for 60 years after the end of the war, should have been long gone. It took us a long time to get rid of 6.00 o'clock closing, which was a temporary wartime measure, it took us a long time to get Albert Park back from the army — that was another temporary wartime measure — and let us hope this temporary wartime measure becomes a past tense very shortly.

The CHAIR — I can only agree about the fence, which I think even the most ardent racing enthusiasts would have to concede would have to be improved.

Mr DUNSTAN — Yes. I also have the precedent of, I think, Ronald Reagan saying, 'Let's pull this wall down, Mr Gorbachev'. I am going back a little bit.

The CHAIR — Thanks

Witnesses withdrew.