

Waterfront Stadium fiasco

This brief essay is produced in response to a series of incidents in the latter part of 2006, during which there was a short, but highly charged public debate by Aucklanders, concerning the possibility that government might impose upon them the construction of an enormously expensive Stadium, on sensitive foreshore land, either on the Waitemata or Manukau harbours.

It is rather difficult to understand why this debate began.

New Zealand had been granted the rights to host the rugby world championships in 2011.

For quite some time nothing much seems to have happened.

It was expected by everybody that existing stadium capacity around the country would be reasonably sufficient and, if insufficient, then temporary seating would suffice at each of the various venues. It was assumed that there would be a need for some infrastructure upgrading, particularly in Auckland, the presumed main host. Such upgrading would cover improved transport to and from Eden Park, involving a railway upgrade and possibly an over bridge connection from Kingsland Station to Eden Park. Double tracking of the rail corridor commenced in good time and has subsequently extended out beyond Henderson.

There was clearly some need for an Eden Park upgrade, which the Eden Park trustees initially costed at less than \$100 million. At some point, either the trustees, or the government decided that it would be nice if the stadium could be given a few more bells and whistles. Costs rapidly escalated, to an estimated \$350m then to \$385m, but with no explanation given to the public, as to which new additional amenities were being provided and why costs had increased to such a level.

There were Resource Management Act implications and objections from neighbours over the later and more expensive "grand scheme" proposals. Minor panic may have been building up in government.

At this point somebody had the bright idea that it might be possible to build a brand new stadium on a "green field" site, for much the same price as the latest upgrade estimate. How this came about is still somewhat of a mystery. If it had been a serious consideration, then a number of possible green field sites should have been considered. To this writer's knowledge none of the several possible sites which might have been suitable, within the Auckland region were considered. There are at least four.

In the latter part of 2006 an architect produced a sketch, published by the New Zealand Herald, showing a possible new stadium located on the foreshore of the Manukau Harbour. It is unclear whether this was ever intended as a serious submission, for no specific site was suggested, nor was any reason given for the proposed location.

The sketch appears to have excited political interest.

The idea of a grand architectural statement on the waterfront is presumed to have been likened in some way with the Opera house on the Sydney waterfront. The decision appears to have been made overnight, to plant an enormous stadium, a stone's throw from Queen Street, on land over which neither the Government, nor the Rugby Union had any control, except that the government, by virtue of its Foreshore and Seabed Act, had taken over the seabed portion of the

proposed site, subject to consultation with local Iwi over any development proposals. It is not known that any such consultation was ever commenced.

How such a decision could possibly have been arrived at is another mystery which, for a time, would be the talk of the latte set. It is reminiscent of the stadium building frenzy by African and other so called "banana republics" during the 1950s and 1960s, to gain prestige and spend the largesse given to them, by one or other of the two superpowers.

In recent years stadium building on a rather more modest scale has been popular amongst politicians in the Auckland region. The Auckland City Council has its Vector stadium nearly complete, very late and over budget. In North shore city, the modern stadium at Albany would seem to have been running at a loss for several years. In Manukau city a covered stadium has been built near the northbound motorway off ramp and in Waitakere City a stadium has been recently completed on Central Park Drive. The idea that Auckland would need a new mega-stadium, which would be fully utilised perhaps once in five or 10 years is something which, somehow did not occur to local politicians.

As it happened, the proposed site inspired by government was one of supreme physical awkwardness. An initial building estimate was that it would cost about the same as the Eden Park upgrade. This was quickly increased to a somewhat more realistic \$500 million, excluding land procurement and other associated costs. Other quite realistic estimates were nearer to a billion dollars and yet others suggested far more.

The dollar size of the proposed white elephant became of immediate concern to the minister of finance. The small matter of who would pay arose. Attempts were made at a higher level to calm and restrain those of impetuous bent, who spoke of "decisions by lunchtime" and the "fast tracking" of any necessary legislative, regulatory and other hurdles.

In the end, common sense finally prevailed. Auckland City Council, basically supportive of the concept of a waterfront Stadium, voted inscrutably both yes and no at the same time. Auckland Regional Council, which happened by chance to be the owner of the bulk of the proposed site and which needed it in order to continue its Port operations, predictably voted against the proposal, as it could not make the site available, nor could it place at risk its future operations.

Very few decision-makers seem to have considered whether the basic concept might have been flawed, to the extent that public submissions should be called for over a relaxed time period, so that the pros and cons could be properly debated. The worst aspect of the debacle is the perceived lack of democracy involved, in attempting to shove through decisions and associated legislation, against the wishes of the majority, as evidenced by polls undertaken by the New Zealand Herald.

Civic Trust Auckland was concerned over a number of aspects of the matter and its president M L Graham produced an open letter for publication in the New Zealand Herald. For reasons unknown, the letter was never published, although portions of it were read out at a public meeting in Aotea Square and it has appeared in full in a blog. It is set out below and comprises a summary of the many concerns which **Civic Trust Auckland** held and still holds concerning that particular proposal.

17 November 2006

To Whom it May Concern

This open letter is intended for the following:

Honourable Helen Clark, Prime Minister
Honourable Trevor Mallard, Portfolios Minister
Michael Lee, Chair, Auckland Regional Council
Dick Hubbard, Mayor, Auckland City Council
Citizens of the Auckland region

Civic Trust Auckland wishes to object in the strongest possible terms to various current proposals for the possible development of a new rugby stadium in a waterfront location, whether to be on the Waitemata Harbour foreshore, at the Tank Farm, or in one of several locations proposed in the City wharves area, or on a site on the Manukau Harbour.

We consider that this type of development on the delicate foreshore interface between land and harbour is inappropriate, being out of scale in local terms, acting as a visual barrier, blocking views from both harbours to the City volcanic cones and protected views from the Waitemata Harbour to Auckland Museum.

A major stadium would be a physical barrier placed between the City and its foreshore at a time when there is enormous public demand for public access to be granted to foreshore sites, subject in the case of the Port Authority to its ability to continue its activities and retain an appropriate level of security.

We object particularly to the development of a major non-conforming land use on land currently used by the Port Authority, in so far as it will compromise current and future Port needs and expansion potential and therefore compromise the future of the Auckland economy. Furthermore, at least one of the possible sites will also compromise the ability of an expanding ferry service to achieve additional ferry berths.

We question the viability of getting 60,000 people to and from such a venue, located either on the Waitemata or Manukau foreshores.

We object strongly to the expenditure of an amount considered to be at least \$500 million and apparently costed reasonably reliably at a possible \$1 billion. \$1 billion will pay for 8 high schools.

This far exceeds the published cost of upgrading Eden Park (originally quoted in the vicinity of \$350 million). The only reason that a new stadium was proposed in the first place, was that it was (as recently as a few weeks ago) originally supposed to cost the same as the Eden Park upgrade.

Why is it that the Eden Park upgrade costs themselves have not been questioned, and why has the possibility of adding temporary accommodation at Eden Park, which can be removed after the event, not been properly canvassed, bearing in mind that the ongoing need for a stadium of 60,000, either in Auckland or elsewhere in New Zealand, has not yet been fully justified?

We note that under the new Act concerning the foreshore, it is necessary to consult with Iwi over land development. We recognise that Iwi rights are important and should be given careful consideration.

All waterfront locations represent a tsunami risk and there is further risk from rising sea levels as a result of global warming. Why have these factors been ignored?

We object to any attempt to fund a new stadium regardless of where it is constructed, or the Eden Park upgrade, from local or regional authority rates, from a poll tax on all tourists passing through the region, or a surcharge on airline fees and charges. No matter how important the Rugby Union is in this country, it surely has no right to impose on the region or on the country as a whole, ongoing charges extending through to future generations, merely to enjoy a three week long, once only sporting event.

We urge all parties to rethink before a planning and financial disaster is imposed upon this beautiful City and the people of the region.

Yours faithfully

M L Graham
President
Civic Trust Auckland