

Submission on the Draft Macquarie Point Multipurpose Stadium report.

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I have a strong personal interest in this proposed stadium development as I was employed in the 1980s by the then VFL to develop plans for the VFL competition to become a national competition. This involved ground rationalisation in Melbourne, relocating the Swans to Sydney, planning for a team in Queensland and planning for the introduction of the independent Commission. I worked closely with VFL President Allen Aylett on these matters.

The proposed \$1 billion stadium at Macquarie Point would have an expected useful life of 40-70 years, depending on a range of factors. The world is currently undergoing massive change and it is essential to fully explore relevant changes for a proposal of this magnitude. Key long term success factors for the stadium would include:

1. Cost/design	The stadium cost was initially estimated to be \$715m. This was increased to \$755m and is now \$945m. Further increases will occur in the future. The final cost will most probably be closer to \$1.5 billion. The Tasmanian Government is liable for these increases. The AFL is contributing only 1% of the cost but is dictating the project design and location. The closed roof is currently estimated to cost over \$200m. The proposed 63,000 seat Brisbane Olympic stadium at Victoria Park is estimated to cost \$3.8 billion. This facility will <i>not</i> have a retractable/closed roof despite Queensland forecast to be the most impacted State in Australia from the effects of climate change in coming decades.																													
2. Use	The AFL plans to play only 7 AFL matches per year at the venue. This is a major problem. An average of one match per month in winter each year. Cricket Australia does not propose to play cricket matches at the venue due to the closed roof. Other events are not guaranteed or would attract relatively minor support (eg. AFLW matches). In contrast, the only current AFL stadium with a retractable roof is Marvel, which holds some 40+ AFL matches per year, 5-6 Big Bash matches, and an average of six music concerts per year. It is suggested that this usage at the planned Macquarie Point stadium does not justify the expenditure of some \$1+ billion dollars on the facility. It would be useful to independently assess the viability of: • The Macquarie Point stadium without the closed roof in its initial development. • Upgrading the existing Ninja facility with increased corporate/sponsor facilities (this would most probably be self-funding). • Other locations (including Launceston)																													
3. AFL future	Does the AFL have an assured long term future? Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) are an <i>existential threat</i> to collision sports around the world. Australian football is the source of more concussions than any other team sport in Australia, and the number is increasing (Source: AIHW). At the elite level, the AFL Player Association Insights/Impacts Reports (survey responses from all players) reveal the following data: <table><tr><th>Season</th><th>% AFL players concerned about long term impacts of concussion</th><th>% AFL players reporting concussion</th><th>% AFL players not reporting concussion</th><th>% all AFL players concussed*</th></tr><tr><td>2021</td><td>64</td><td>21</td><td>5</td><td>26</td></tr><tr><td>2022</td><td>70</td><td>23</td><td>9</td><td>32</td></tr><tr><td>2023</td><td>71</td><td>24</td><td>12</td><td>36</td></tr><tr><td>2024</td><td>76</td><td>22</td><td>14</td><td>36</td></tr></table>					Season	% AFL players concerned about long term impacts of concussion	% AFL players reporting concussion	% AFL players not reporting concussion	% all AFL players concussed*	2021	64	21	5	26	2022	70	23	9	32	2023	71	24	12	36	2024	76	22	14	36
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	*These numbers do not include concussed players not admitting concussion. In 1990 soccer and AFL had about the same number of participants in Australia. Now soccer has twice as many players as AFL and basketball has 50% more than AFL (AusPlay). Australian parents are voting with their feet. Many schools are following suit and moving out of collision sports. Keith Titmuss is the canary in the coalmine. The young NSW Rugby player died at 20 years of age in 2020. His parents donated his brain to the Australian Sports Brain Bank. Keith was diagnosed with CTE despite never being concussed or knocked out. He had no symptoms of CTE but had repeated head knocks in his junior playing days. There is no cure for CTE. CTE is virtually non-existent outside of collision sports. It is important to recognize that TBI is a preventable/discretionary disease. The Royal College of Pathologists of Australasia's (RCPA) ground-breaking Position Statement on CTE in November 2023 stated: "There is an urgent need for evidence-based strategies to prevent chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), particularly for children and adolescents. We are continuing to expose boys and girls, and young men and women, to lifelong devastating harm when we already have significant evidence as a community. The RCPA recommends that low or no contact versions of <u>sports</u> are played by those under the age of 14. This particularly applies to school sports'. Currently, CTE cannot be diagnosed in living people. But medical researchers are now predicting that within 5-8 years CTE will be able to be diagnosed in the living. Once <i>children</i> are diagnosed with CTE from participation in AFL or Rugby it will be a very different future for these sports. Children will stop playing these sports. Children need a brain for life. In 2023 a study by Macquarie University (NSW) researchers looked into the academic performance of thousands of students across the country who had been admitted to hospital with a concussion. They found 77% who sustain a severe head knock are less likely to finish Year 12. Professor Mark Cook (Director of Neurosciences, St Vincent's Hospital) has stated 'In future, some of our favourite sports will look very different. Children need to stop playing sports that involve banging heads together' Parkinsons Foundation USA: reported in 2020, this was a robust, case-controlled, 25-year retrospective study examining medical records from 1990-1991 to 2014-2015. It compared the health outcomes of 47,483 people (28,021 men and 19,462 women) who had suffered concussions with 139,030 (81,871 men and 57,159 women) healthy people (controls) matched by age, sex, socioeconomic status and geographical location. The study used several statistics models among other sensitivity models. <u>Results:</u> Regardless of age, sex, socioeconomic status and residence, having suffered a single concussion in one's lifetime increased the likelihood of later being diagnosed with: • Parkinson's disease by 57% • Dementia by 72% • ADHD (Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) by 39% • Mood and Anxiety Disorders (MADs) by 72% • Sustaining multiple concussions further increased the risk for developing both PD and dementia.
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	In the UK the Government recently also held an Inquiry into concussion in sport and recommended consistent national protocols, the development of a concussion passport and safer rules for juniors (eg. no heading in soccer). The Government has actioned these recommendations. In the USA, it was revealed 76 of the 79 deceased football players who donated their brains to research showed evidence of (CTE) chronic traumatic encephalopathy. While the NFL has gone to extraordinary lengths to contain the crisis, the link between football and brain trauma is now beyond dispute. It's not unlike the research into dementia pugilistica, once known as "punch-drunk syndrome," which undercut boxing's supply line and helped marginalize a sport that once commanded America's attention. As the scientific evidence mounts against football, it stands to reason that fewer parents will allow their children to play a sport that all but guarantees traumatic brain injury. They have continued to make adjustments but the game is still far too dangerous for children to play. High schools cannot continue to expose children to these risks. In the USA, participation in tackle football (NFL code) has dropped 60% since 2006 to 3.4 million people. In California, high schools are beginning to close their football programmes, because parents are no longer letting their kids play. Flag football (<i>non-contact</i> NFL) is now the fastest growing team sport in the USA with over 7 million players. Flag football is now the preferred 'NFL' game for players aged 4-17 as parents prefer their children to play the much safer sport. Tackle football has 23 times the number of high severity head impacts vs Flag. Almost all NFL players (5 years +) leave the sport with signs of CTE. <i>Outcome:</i> TBI is falling in the USA. US research has found every 2.6 years of playing tackle football (from juniors up) doubles the risk of CTE. The longer you play the greater the risk. Retired NFL players between 30-49 had a dementia-related diagnosis rate 19 times the national average. The NFL has successfully promoted the inclusion of Flag football as a sport in the 2028 Los Angeles Olympic Games. The AFL, with the largest PR/media team of any organization in Australia, has a shameful history of misrepresentation, delay and denial in relation to traumatic brain injury (TBI). <i>For more information on this matter please Google 'Dr Paul McCrory'</i>. It says player health and safety is paramount and it doing many things to achieve this.....as long as it does not change the fabric of the sport. The rivers of gold from media rights must not be threatened. Safety in sport in Australia is unregulated. Governments have allowed peak sporting bodies to self-regulate. The result is a public health crisis that sees Australian football and rugby with the highest rates of concussion of any team sports in the world. And the rates are increasing. Worse, most concussions in collision sports go unreported. Some five million Australians have participated in AFL or rugby since 2000. Medical researchers say anyone playing these sports for 5-10 years at any level is a candidate for CTE. The younger the starting age the bigger the problem. Australia has a significantly higher rate of TBI than the USA or England.
4. Climate Change	By 2050, it's estimated that almost one in four English football league grounds can expect flooding every year. Flooding, storms and heatwaves pose an increased threat to football grounds over the next 30 years, according to climate modelling by insurer Zurich UK. In Tasmania, according to the Planning Office, the climate is expected to become warmer and drier in coming decades, with more frequent extreme weather events and fewer frosts,

	and with projected sea level rises impacting most coastal communities. Hobart is 0 centimetres above sea level. Currently Melbourne has more overcast days in winter than Hobart. Melbourne is the cloudiest capital city in Australia. It also receives a higher annual rainfall than Hobart. The Macquarie Point submission from Hobart City Council states there is concern about the potential for flooding on adjacent land, which has not been fully addressed. Similarly, there are drainage issues from the stadium.
5. Support of stakeholders	Hobart City Council does not support the proposed stadium, and a majority of the public are also opposed. These are major problems.
6. Technology	For the moment, there really isn't anything like sitting in the stands with tens of thousands of fans as you cheer for your favourite team. However, in the future, things could be very different: it's the 2050 World Cup final. Three-time winners China are facing off against Germany in the newly renovated Wembley Stadium. Around the world, millions of fans sit in their homes wearing virtual reality (VR) headsets; they all have the best seat in the house, right on the half-way line for kick-off. As the first goal is scored, the VR viewpoint switches to that of the player and suddenly millions of people are seeing the goal as the striker saw it, then as the goalkeeper, then from behind the goal. Those that couldn't get to their VR headsets watch the replay projected as a 3D hologram by their smartphones. Yes, virtual reality (VR) technology has the potential to significantly impact how people watch sports, potentially leading to more people watching from home with an immersive, simulated experience. VR can offer a sense of presence and immersion that rivals or even surpasses attending live events, making it an attractive alternative for many fans.

Conclusion:

The proposal to build the Macquarie Point stadium has so far been a poorly managed and amateurish process whereby the end result has been known from the beginning and the various studies have tried to justify the result. Various options have not been fully investigated. There is an obvious problem with the Macquarie Point stadium proposal. The peak body for Australian football, the AFL, is contributing just over 1% of the \$1+ billion project cost but is stipulating conditions (eg. the roof, location) which destroy the viability of the project and have prevented an objective assessment of that viability to date. There is a clear need to re-negotiate the project Agreement with the AFL, based on an independent analysis of the viable options, otherwise there is a strong likelihood that the proposed stadium, if it is built, will become a white elephant in coming decades as the world undergoes transformational change.

In the current class action by over 100 past AFL players against the AFL in relation to brain damage, the AFL defence is that the players knew the risks involved in the sport and that the AFL cannot be held responsible. If the Macquarie Point stadium becomes a white elephant, with just seven AFL matches per year, it is the Tasmanian Government that will be held responsible, with citizens asking why it danced to the tune of the AFL. At this point in time, the AFL now needs Tasmania and it is time for Tasmania to take control of the process.

John Hennessy

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