

Manuka Oval's growing momentum is being held back by its size

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Editorial

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Andrew Barr, who was at Manuka Oval on Wednesday to watch the Australia-India one-day international, would have come away at the end of the evening well pleased. Not just with the result – Australia won and cemented their domination of the series – but because the crowd of 10,992 was a sell-out. Nothing vindicates the Chief Minister's efforts to position Manuka as the territory's premier sports venue – one where AFL matches, international cricket fixtures, and even Test matches are regular occurrences – than bumper crowds.

Mr Barr's aspirations for Manuka Oval extend well beyond ensuring its suitability to host top-drawer sporting contests, however (Canberra Stadium, with its rectangular pitch, is the government's preferred major venue for rugby league and soccer matches).

The Manuka Oval master plan first proposed by him in 2009 envisions the ground as a "broad-based entertainment venue and business centre", and to that end, millions of dollars have been invested in improving the playing surface, erecting lights to allow day-night matches, redeveloping existing amenities and building new facilities.

The land around the oval itself is destined for "renewal" too, with the strong possibility that a hotel will be built on the site once occupied by the Canberra Services Club.

The master plan's implementation has not been wrinkle-free. The government's attempt to lay claim to the Services club block by relocating the organisation to the Manuka Occasional Daycare centre and in turn moving MOCCA to a site at Telopea Park school proved highly controversial.

The floodlights, praised in some quarters and reviled in others, elicited many complaints of intrusion from nearby residents when they first installed. The lack of parking has proved problematic – both for spectators and nearby residents alike, although the provision of extra buses on big match days has helped ease congestion somewhat. And there is still some grousing from around the neighbourhood about the loud music and pyrotechnics that now considered essential to the watching of limited-overs cricket.

Manuka Oval was and remains a picturesque ground, and the government's upgrades have ensured that its facilities now match its amenity. But capacity, or rather the lack of it, threatens to hold it back. In order to interest the broadcasters and the sports administrators who decide where the big games are to be hosted, Manuka probably needs to seat about 20,000 spectators.

Building that capacity would be straightforward were the money to be available. It's not unfortunately – or not in the quantity required; which is

estimated to be about \$35 million. So the Barr government has been exploring whether the AFL, flush with cash from the sale of TV broadcast rights, can stump up some money.

With a cheque unlikely to be forthcoming, Mr Barr needs Canberra's sports fans to keep the momentum going. If they continue to attend the big matches in numbers, and to do so consistently, then the big matches will find their way here, perhaps even permanently, although competition from other venues will always exist.