

GWS Giants-led group unveils \$800 million Manuka Oval redevelopment plan

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An artist's impression of proposed Manuka Oval redevelopment. *Photo: Supplied*

A private consortium led by AFL club the Greater Western Sydney Giants has proposed an \$800 million redevelopment of the Manuka Oval and surrounding precinct.

The Giants have been backed by Australia's largest privately owned developer Grocon to make an unsolicited bid to the ACT government to redevelop the prized land package – part of which would include upgrading the sports stadium to an international-standard facility.

The deal, to be unveiled publicly on Wednesday, would include 4750 new permanent seats to replace temporary seating and standing areas at the Manuka Oval. New roofing would cover 80 per cent of seating and the development would include new hospitality, media and changeroom facilities.



The GWS Giants say the revamped venue could attract Test-match cricket as well as cement its place as an AFL venue. *Photo: Supplied*

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Meanwhile, the proposal would include a massive commercial and residential development on surrounding land, including a new hotel, serviced apartments, residential apartments, 140,000 square metres of retail and office space and 450 car parks.

The GWS Giants have a 10-year deal worth \$23 million with the ACT government to play three AFL matches at Manuka Oval every year.

Giants chairman Tony Shepherd says the 'Manuka Green' proposal sets the stage beyond the current deal with the government and will help attract Test-match cricket and the popular Big Bash Twenty20 to Canberra and secure Manuka's future as an AFL venue.

Mr Shepherd said his long association with Canberra – as a public servant, more recently as president of the National Commission of Audit and as chairman of the Giants – meant he knew the city well.

"We want to reinvigorate that part of Canberra and provide a new quarter to live work, and play – which is what the people want."

He said the consortium was "cognisant" of the heritage character and value of the land, which included the Heritage-listed Manuka Pool, and caretaker's cottage. He said these would remain in their current position.

The existing Jack Fingleton scoreboard, which dates back to 1901 and was relocated to Manuka in the 1980s from the Melbourne Cricket Ground, would be restored and moved closer to the pool.

The mixed-use precinct would also link Manuka Oval to the Manuka business district and Kingston Foreshore through a multimillion-dollar landscape upgrade including a new running track linking Manuka Oval to Telopea Park and the Kingston Foreshore.

The government has been pouring millions into Manuka Oval in recent years in a bid to keep it up to sporting industry standards, including installing state-of-the-art lights for day-night cricket and night-time AFL as well as improving amenities.

However, it still falls below the requirements needed for bigger matches, and Mr Shepherd is confident the proposed upgrade would change the face of Canberra sport forever.

Mr Shepherd predicted a Manuka Oval makeover would increase crowds immediately as well as boosting Canberra's chances of hosting regular Test cricket and sets it up for inclusion in the Big Bash League. He also floated the prospect of Manuka Oval being able to host concerts if the plan goes ahead.

"Manuka Oval is scratching to make the standard at the moment. We've passed through the era of the suburban football or cricket ground. To get mum and dad, and the kids to a stadium, they expect a high level of quality."

ACT Chief Minister Andrew Barr said "there is certainly potential for improvement at Manuka Oval to give spectators a higher level of amenity" and he noted the oval precinct could be better integrated with the Manuka business precinct and Telopea Park.

But he stressed the bid was unsolicited and had yet to go through formal approval processes.

"As part of the unsolicited proposal process, the government will consider this concept. There is a robust process to assess such bids and there will be ample opportunity for the community to have their say," Mr Barr said.

"Overall, it is a constructive proposal and there are a number of elements that I am impressed by. I will be interested to hear what Canberrans think about the ideas that have been put forward."

Mr Shepherd said the Giants had come up with the proposal and had put the idea out to the development sector before partnering with Grocon, which was behind the MCG Northern Stand Redevelopment and AAMI Park in Melbourne and landmark No.1 Martin Place and

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Liberty Place developments in Sydney.

He said it had been under active consideration for about a year but was "far from a fait accompli" in terms of being granted ACT government approval.

The proposal is, however, likely to alarm local residents and community groups which believe they have been stonewalled for more than two years in their attempts to seek information and consultation from the ACT government on its plans for a potential Manuka Oval redevelopment.

The Manuka Oval master plan was first unveiled in 2009 by Mr Barr, who proposed the area be opened up as "broad-based entertainment venue and business centre" with the area once occupied by the Canberra Services Club earmarked as a future hotel site.

But government moves 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 a public relations nightmare last year and were subsequently abandoned.

Mr Shepherd said the Giants would be seeking feedback from the local community and other key stakeholders about the proposal.

It also planned to hold a design competition, if the ACT government proceeded with the proposal, with a design brief that was "informed by the community's feedback".