

Canberrans need more details on Manuka Oval proposal

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When Grocon and the GWS Giants publicly floated their unsolicited Manuka Oval redevelopment proposal on February 16 last month (a plan which includes a boutique hotel, 800-1000 residential dwellings and 20,600 square metres of commercial/retail space), many Canberrans immediately wondered where the apartments and shops would be built. Aside from the former Canberra Service Club site (identified by the Barr government some time previously as an ideal location for a hotel) vacant space in the precinct is not in plentiful supply.

Redevelopment of the soon-to-be-vacated Manuka Arts Centre looms a possibility, but heritage listing makes this a problematic site. In any event, the Giants have said their plans could accommodate the Arts Centre tenants "remaining either in their existing building or in another part of the site".

The Telopea Park School has already objected to any sale, swap or appropriation of its tennis courts on Manuka Circle, which leaves only the practice wicket area next to the Arts Centre as potentially suitable for sizeable redevelopment. Accommodating 900-1000 apartments on this relatively small plot looks unlikely, however. The other more logical scenario – particularly given that integration of the oval with the Kingston Foreshore appears to be a cornerstone of the proposal – is a series of smaller mixed-use developments up and down the Telopea Park Corridor. The partners aren't saying, although Grocon's quoting of a very specific gross floor area for the proposal of 140,000 square metres suggests it has quite definite plans in mind.

Andrew Barr has long aspired to transform Manuka Oval into a venue at which cricket Test matches and AFL games are regular fixtures, and to surround it with "appropriate" commercial activities and medium-density accommodation to generate a "vibrant" atmosphere. A proposal offering just that, at no "cost" to taxpayers, is unlikely, therefore, to be giving him heartburn.

However, in return for this largesse, the Giants and Grocon expect a sizeable financial return. It's unclear at this stage what that might amount to, but it's substantial. For Grocon, "Manuka Green" represents entry into a new market and a staged project generating development profit over the long term. The Giants hope that its share of the profits (either a cut of property sales or of hotel revenue) will underpin the club's future – which despite \$21.6 million in grants from the AFL last year seems precarious.

If the partners' vision for Manuka dovetails nicely (and conveniently) with that of the government, the question of whether it best serves the community interest remains to be determined. Should the Barr government entertain anointing middlemen to a process it's more than capable of driving itself? Should it give yet another sports organisation a financial free kick off the sale or redevelopment of community assets? And what of the likely impact of Manuka Green on the area's already scarce public space and parkland? These are issues that should be clarified before the Giants/Grocon push turns to shove.