

26<sup>th</sup> April 2023

Committee Secretary  
Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport  
Department of the Senate  
PO Box 6100  
Parliament House  
CANBERRA ACT 2600  
AUSTRALIA

A Submission to the Senate Standing Committee re:

*“Australia’s preparedness to host Commonwealth, Olympic and Paralympic Games.”*

My name is Peter Wear. I’m a retired television and print journalist. I don’t work for, own shares in, or receive funding from any company or organisation that would benefit from this submission.

I’ve lived in Redland City for 17 years. My submission addresses the proposed construction in Redland City of a major venue for the 2032 Brisbane Olympic Games. It argues the proposal is ill-conceived and should be abandoned before even more time and public money is wasted.

### Background

For nearly two years, the Redland City Council has been strenuously campaigning to host the canoe slalom events at the 2032 Brisbane Olympics. To this end, Council is proposing that a major whitewater course be built on acreage it owns in the suburb of Birkdale. The site currently appears on official Olympic communications as the canoe slalom venue for the Brisbane Games.

The cost of constructing an Olympic white-water course can easily exceed \$100 million dollars.<sup>1</sup> At the Paris Olympics next year 82 paddlers will line up for the canoe slalom. The Brisbane Games, on those figures, would have to commit over a million dollars *per competitor* to hosting a sport with fewer Olympic participants than handball, fencing, or skateboarding.<sup>2</sup>

The International Olympic Committee has already moved decisively against such extravagance. The Brisbane Games is contractually bound to comply with the IOC’s direction that new Olympic infrastructure not be built if an existing facility is a practicable alternative. This contract will benchmark sustainability, and cost constraint. In my view, the Birkdale proposal conspicuously fails both tests.

Moreover, an Olympic-standard venue already exists in New South Wales. The Penrith Whitewater Centre was built for the Sydney Games in 2000. As the IOC is well aware, the PWC is ready, willing and able to host the Olympic canoe slalom, again, in 2032.

I hope my submission will convince Senators to recommend the Brisbane 2032 Organising Committee switches the canoe slalom site to the world class facility in Penrith.

## The Committee's Terms of Reference

Three terms of reference are particularly relevant to the Birkdale proposal.

*(1) the adequacy of existing sporting infrastructure to host Games events.*

Australia already has an Olympic-standard canoe slalom course – the Penrith Whitewater Centre, near Sydney. Built for the Games in 2000, it is still the sport's premier venue in the southern hemisphere. Penrith will host the International Canoe Federation's World Championships in 2025 – the ICF's ultimate seal of approval. The future of the Penrith Whitewater Centre has been secured by the NSW government taking it over from July this year, and announcing it will spend millions upgrading its infrastructure.<sup>3</sup>

In early 2021, the International Olympic Committee's feasibility assessment<sup>4</sup> of the Brisbane Games gave Penrith equal billing, as its sanctioned alternative, to the construction of a new whitewater course in Redland City.

<b>Proposed new venue</b>		<b>Alternative existing option</b>	
			
Canoe (Slalom)		Canoe (Slalom)	
<b>Redland Whitewater Centre</b>		<b>Penrith Whitewater Stadium</b>	
Status	New venue	Status	Existing
Future Works	Business case under consideration	Future Works	TBC
Capacity	8,000	Capacity	12,500 (Sydney 2000 capacity)
Owner	TBC	Owner	Public
Operator	TBC	Operator	Public
Experience	• N/A	Experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Olympic Games Sydney 2000</li> <li>• 2005 ICF World Championships</li> </ul>

The IOC has pledged the Games will be “climate positive” by 2024. The first principle of its Sustainability Strategy, that underpins the pledge, is ‘use of existing infrastructure is maximised.’ Games officials must put aside ‘location loyalty’, and consider existing venues, however distant from the host city.

Organisers of the Los Angeles 2028 Olympics, have been quick to get on message. California, like Queensland, has no Olympic whitewater course. They are finalising a ‘venue offset’ to transfer the LA Olympic canoe slalom interstate, nearly 2,000 kilometres east, to Oklahoma City's Riversport whitewater course. What a mockery this would make of Brisbane 2032, four years later, spending \$100 million on a whitewater course duplicating the one ‘down the road’ in Sydney.

*(2) investments in the provision of new or upgraded sporting infrastructure to host Games events, which will have legacy applications for elite and community sports.*

The Olympic spend will gift Brisbane two big-ticket legacies – the Gabba stadium rebuild and the aquatic Arena on Roma Street. Around two billion dollars more will be spent on indoor stadia and venue upgrades beyond the inner city. All qualify as legacy investments of public money, easily multi-purposed across a wide range of popular sports and community activities long after the Games. The whitewater course proposed for Birkdale is the stand-out exception.

A canoe slalom course is purpose built for that sport alone.<sup>5</sup> It's a highly artificial construct – a few hundred downhill metres of reinforced concrete forming a water channel steep enough to mimic the tumbling descent of a wild river. The illusion is sustained by massive electric pumps. These force megalitres of water back uphill, fast enough to feed the roiling cataract which the paddlers must navigate.

Being purpose built, whitewater courses have a narrow range of post-Olympic utility – unless you're a paddler. The climate legacy is a problem too – the carbon footprint of acres of reinforced concrete<sup>6</sup> and gigawatts of electricity demanded by the huge pumps.

These negatives cut in as soon as the Games leave town, and have already compromised the legacy, even the survival, of Olympic whitewater venues. After Athens (2004) and Beijing (2008) their canoe slalom venues were simply abandoned. Rio (2016) has only recently re-purposed the Deodora complex as a public pool.



*Abandoned. 2004 Athens Olympic canoe slalom course (above) and 2008 Beijing course (below)*



And the venues that have stayed afloat, like Penrith, and London from 2012, do not owe their survival to 'elite or community sports'. The bills are primarily paid by the 'thrills and spills' of rubber rafts, packed with paying customers, careening down the cascades of pumped water.<sup>7</sup>

Supplementary income is gleaned from canoe sports, and side-hustles like flood rescue training and the occasional film crew.

Of course, the Penrith facility is a boon to Australian canoeists, and our Olympic champion Jessica Fox owes much to its existence. But it's a minority sport. It will never underwrite the towering costs of infrastructure and energy on which it depends. Penrith's electricity bill for its huge water pumps is around \$90,000 a month. That's a lot of rubber raft customers at \$100 a pop.

*(3) the costs and benefits to the Australian community of investments  
in infrastructure to support the Games, including any impacts on  
local government, communities and business in host locations.*

The best predictor of the likely impact on Redland City's council, ratepayers and business is the Penrith Whitewater Centre's civic history over 23 years. In summary, it's been a roller coaster ride of sporting highs, and financial lows.

The highs are led by Olympic gold medallist, Jessica Fox, the French-born daughter of elite European canoeists who migrated to Sydney prior to the 2000 Olympics and built Penrith's reputation as a world centre of canoe sport.<sup>8</sup> The spin-off for paddling, and local business, is Penrith's hosting of national canoe championships, and most international meets in the southern hemisphere. That global status attracts numerous elite paddlers from Europe and the U.S. who arrive in the city every year to avoid the northern winter.

Redland City is too late to the party to expect a share in these benefits. In a puzzling about-face the Council has now re-branded its white-water proposal as the Redlands Resilience Training Centre. Upskilling emergency workers in swift water rescue is highly desirable, and Penrith already does all the swift water training that's asked of it. But it's not a decisive revenue raiser.

Local canoeists would enjoy a world class facility at Birkdale. But, as the Penrith management has found, they will not pay a premium to use a publicly-funded venue. And neither they should.

The lows are financial - the annual losses the Penrith complex has posted for most of its existence, millions of dollars, underwritten by the Penrith City Council. Well before the Covid disruption, the PCC's 2018-19 budget reported a revenue fall of nearly \$400,000 from the whitewater course.<sup>9</sup> Not enough rafts packed with local thrill-seekers – whitewater's core business.

Since then, exponential hikes in electricity costs, Covid restrictions, and flood recovery, have made Penrith's existence even more precarious. The recent takeover by the NSW government is clearly a strategic intervention to guarantee the venue's future.

Would Penrith's setbacks be replicated by a new build in Redland City? A recurrent theme of new whitewater facilities, world-wide, is initial struggle, dashed revenue forecasts, high-cost bailouts, and management upheaval. Nothing about the Redland City whitewater proposal suggests a better trajectory. On the contrary, the viability of whitewater courses is greatly dependant on population density.

The most successful Olympic whitewater venue to date is the Lee Valley course built for London 2012.<sup>10</sup> It's now run by the UK's largest operator of leisure/sports facilities. Lee Valley is on the edge of Greater London, with a population over 9 million. Greater Sydney, an area of about the same size, has 5.3 million. A whitewater venue in Redland City would depend primarily on Greater Brisbane for its patronage – a population of around 2.6 million – less than half Penrith's principal catchment.

The Redland City Council has not released a business case for its whitewater proposal. We cannot know how, or even if, it plans to counter the unpredictable liabilities that so often afflict new courses. Bigger councils than Redland City, world wide, have been rocked by cost overruns, pump failures, and management woes, creating early losses in the millions.<sup>11</sup>

There's also an apparent absence of local goodwill towards the whitewater proposal. The Council has held promotional events on the Birkdale site and asked residents to rank compatible activities, including the whitewater course, that might co-exist across the large precinct. The replies, from 1,680 respondents, favoured nature trails (78%) and a variety of conservation, heritage and educational activities. Support for the whitewater course was limited to 149 respondents, less than 9% of those surveyed.<sup>12</sup>

I began preparing this submission with an open mind. I finished without finding a single compelling reason why \$100 million of public money should be spent replicating the world-class canoe slalom course, ready and waiting, in Penrith. I hope, for the sake of my own city, and its ratepayers, senators will come to the same conclusion, and recommend the Penrith Whitewater Centre be declared the canoe slalom venue for the 2032 Olympic Games.

Peter Wear

#### ENDNOTES

1. The projected cost of the latest United States' Olympic whitewater course, at Montgomery Alabama, is A\$113 million (US\$75 million) <https://www.enr.com/articles/55746-montgomery-ala-whitewater-project-builds-more-than-rapids>
2. 82 slalom canoeists will compete at the 2024 Paris Olympics. There will be 340 shooters, 288 wrestlers, 212 fencers, 212 table tennis players, 128 archers, 120 weightlifters, 88 skateboarders, and 32 breakdancers. <https://olympics.com/en/sports/>
3. <https://westernweekender.com.au/2023/02/upgrades-for-olympic-venues-state-government-to-manage-whitewater-stadium/>
4. IOC Feasibility Assessment – Brisbane 2032 <https://stillmedab.olympic.org/media/Document%20Library/OlympicOrg/News/2021/02/IOC-Feasibility-Assessment-Brisbane.pdf>
5. Canoe slalom champions 2022 at the Penrith Whitewater Centre, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZgQtDhZJR1U>
6. <https://www.climatemediacentre.org.au/solid-solutions-sneaky-polluter/>

**Cement: the facts**

- Cement making produces 8% of all global carbon emissions, more than the global car fleet.
- As limestone is heated in a cement kiln it decomposes, releasing carbon dioxide. This chemical reaction is the source of 55% of cement emissions, and more than 4% of all global emissions. As long as cement is made from heating limestone, carbon emissions are unavoidable.
- Burning fossil fuels to create the high temperatures required for processing makes up another 32% of cement emissions; and the other 13% is indirect emissions from electricity needed to grind and transport material within the manufacturing plant.
- Making one tonne of cement in Australia produces 0.82 tonnes of carbon dioxide, slightly less than the global average.

7. Whitewater rafting at Lee Valley Olympic venue near London.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgdus\\_8JTOk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pgdus_8JTOk)

8. Interview with Jessica Fox, Australia's champion paddler, on her rise to world class from her childhood at Penrith. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S92Gcdpa36c>

9. Penrith Annual Whitewater Report in Penrith City Council Policy Review agenda.P.43

[http://bizsearch.penrithcity.nsw.gov.au/PCCBPS/Open/2019/12/PRC\\_09122019\\_AGN\\_AT.PDF](http://bizsearch.penrithcity.nsw.gov.au/PCCBPS/Open/2019/12/PRC_09122019_AGN_AT.PDF)

10. Lee Valley Olympic Whitewater course from London 2012.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lee\\_Valley\\_White\\_Water\\_Centre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lee_Valley_White_Water_Centre)

11. Oklahoma Olympic whitewater course receives shortfall millions from city council

<https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/columns/2018/06/29/advisory-committee-oks-reimbursement-for-whitewater-park-costs/60516130007/>

<https://www.oklahoman.com/story/news/columns/2019/09/24/river-seeks-15-million-from-council/60433081007/>

12. <https://redlands2030.net/birkdale-community-precinct-vision-ignores-community-feedback/>