

# SPORTING MECCA IN HEART OF OUR CITY

HAYDEN JOHNSON

Three stadiums within a shock new multibillion-dollar sport and entertainment precinct will anchor Brisbane's landmark 2032 Olympic Games plan.

An upgraded 20,000-seat RNA arena at Brisbane Showgrounds was the surprise addition to Victoria Park where a new Olympic stadium and \$650m National Aquatic Centre will also be built.

They will be located near Suncorp Stadium, giving Queenslanders some 135,000 stadium seats within 2.5km.

Premier David Crisafulli revealed the government would endorse 90 per cent of the recommendations made by an independent panel.

He unveiled the plan at The Courier-Mail's Future Brisbane lunch on Tuesday and declared Queensland will be ready.

"When the eyes of the world turn to Queensland let them see the great people that call this state home – let them see we're not Paris, we're not LA, this will be better and it'll be the Queensland way."

The private sector will be tapped to build the Brisbane Arena before 2032 at a "fraction" of the \$2.5bn bill taxpayers were due to pick up, Mr Crisafulli said.

However, despite new venues and athletes villages being added, the state government insists the Games budget remains within the original \$7.1bn funding envelope.

Queensland Cricket and the AFL will be asked to contribute to the \$3.78bn cost of a new stadium at Victoria Park while the Brisbane City Council and RNA could be tapped to help fund upgrades to the Brisbane Showgrounds.

Mr Crisafulli said the cost of venues was being discussed with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, whose support to repurpose the \$2.5bn Brisbane Arena cash is critical to the entire Games plan.

"It is fully funded and it is fully costed," Mr Crisafulli said of his plan.

Deputy Premier and Infrastructure Minister Jarrod Bleijie committed to releasing the cost of the venues but said the independent delivery authority would now be tasked with working with the private sector to drive down the cost to taxpayers.

"I think what we've achieved here with the redirection of the \$2.5bn is a far greater spread for legacy, for swimming, tennis, the RNA and those discussions in good faith are happening with the Prime Minister and also the opposition leader," he said.

Mr Crisafulli also pre-emptively apologised for breaking an election commitment not to build a new stadium, declaring he would “cop that on the chin”.

“Any other choice would have meant placing the government’s political interests ahead of the interests of Queenslanders,” he said.

Mr Crisafulli said his preference was to rebuild the Gabba, but discovered it was not a viable option within the seven-year construction time frame, forcing him to make a decision between Nathan’s Queensland Sport and Athletics Centre and Victoria Park.

“I wasn’t prepared to take the politically easy option (of QSAC),” he said.

Asked how he would respond to public backlash for breaking his election commitment, Mr Crisafulli replied, “by being honest and copping that on the chin.”

“I have to own that, and I will, and I am sorry, and it’s my decision,” he said.

Anti-stadium protesters lined the entrance to the Olympics lunch and have promised to challenge the decision.

A 20,000-seat boutique stadium at Brisbane Showgrounds was the unexpected addition to the Games venue plan.

It was first proposed by Anastacia Palaszczuk as a temporary home for the Lions and cricket during the Gabba rebuild – but was shelved after she quit as premier one week later.

RNA chief executive officer Brendan Christou said the arena upgrade would complete the decade-long regeneration of the Brisbane Showgrounds.

“The last piece of the puzzle for us is the Main Arena and quite frankly if this didn’t come along we were unable to fund those upgrades. The Ekka will remain in Brisbane, in this location, for another 150 years and importantly, it will restore significant heritage assets and provided the much needed accessibility that those stands were never built to have.

“This is a game changer for the Ekka.”

Brisbane is also set to become Australia’s water sports powerhouse with swimming, diving, water polo and artistic swimming moving their head offices to a new 25,000-seat National Aquatic Centre at Centenary Pool that Mr Crisafulli declared would be the “best aquatic centre in the globe”.

Swimming Australia chief executive Rob Woodhouse said it was the most significant investment in the sport’s history and champion swimmer Cate Campbell labelled it “phenomenal”.

“When you think of the number of Australian icons who have come out of the sport, Susie O’Neill, Grant Hackett, Ian Thorpe, Emma McKeon, the list goes on and on,” Campbell said.

“How exciting is it that we will be able to create and crown new icons in a purpose-built stadium that they can revisit again and again, that young aspiring swimmers will be able to walk in and say this is where history was made.”

Brisbane 2032 President Andrew Liveris said the government's venue plan – supported by the International Olympic Committee – needed to get underway.

“They're very tolerant of what's been going on here the last three years,” he said.

“Yes, it hasn't been a good looking kind of time ... as the Deputy Premier spoke to you there's been a view to chaos but look, we're a democracy.”

Mr Liveris said the Games plan was achievable.

“I can't be more excited to have a plan to deliver,” he said.

“It is enough time, but it is enough time only if we have a plan, which we do and so we're going to get on and build this world class set of facilities.”

Mr Liveris acknowledged there were “details to be worked out” with sporting federations about some of the venue changes.

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