



The History of the Box Hill Athletic Club Clubroom Redevelopment 2000-2007

The following article is based on the speech given by Club President, Graeme Olden at the official opening of the new club rooms on Saturday 17 February 2007.

It is most exciting to finally be able to use our club rooms after so many years of expectation and disappointment.

Prior to the official ceremony to cut the ribbon to officially open our new club rooms, it is important that the contributions made by so many people to establish this wonderful facility are recognised. The following abridged version of the saga of the past 7 years gives some idea of the heartache and frustrations involved in finally bringing this project to a successful conclusion.

Way back in 1996, following the merger of the men's and women's clubs to form the Box Hill Athletic Club, the committee decided that it was important that a long term plan be developed to establish priorities and goals for the Club over the next 10 year period. Our members and other users of the ground were consulted and following an extensive period of review and consultation, a 10 Year Plan was developed which has formed the basis for the operation of the Club over the ensuing period. One of the key elements of the 10 Year Plan was to undertake a major upgrade of the pavilion and club rooms to provide an attractive and functional facility to use for training and competition while also providing a facility which would encourage people to socialise afterwards. For those who can remember, the old change rooms were somewhat like a rabbit warren, with the men's change rooms being used for stretching, massages and circuit training by members of both sexes. This created some rather embarrassing moments for some of our male members when using the room as a change room.

We immediately recognised that a major upgrade of the pavilion was going to require a different order of magnitude of fundraising compared to projects undertaken by the Club in the past and would require external assistance from the City of Whitehorse and hopefully the State Government. The Council were supportive of our proposal to upgrade the pavilion and suggested that we prepare an application for a State Government grant through the Department of Sport and Recreation Community Facility Grants program so in 1999 we prepared some basic concept drawings and costings and submitted an application through the Council.

After submitting our application to Council, they decided that the sketches that we had prepared were not sufficient to proceed with a major redevelopment of the pavilion and that an architect should be engaged to investigate a number of different options and layouts so a number of meetings were held with Rohan Waldie Architects who proceeded to develop some conceptual layout drawings. The architect had some grand ideas for the upgrade which would have made the pavilion one of the most impressive buildings in the City of Whitehorse but did not fit within the budget for a volunteer sporting club so it took some time to scale back the concepts to something approaching reality.

Unfortunately, we were unsuccessful with our application for a State Government Grant, however the following year the Council agreed to include an amount of \$200,000 in their capital works budget for a major upgrade of the pavilion and so in the second half of 2000 the detailed design process was commenced. The Council appointed Rohan Prathapasinghe from their building services department to manage the project and I would like to thank Rohan for his support and efforts over many years to assist with completion of this project.

The Council decided to appoint a different architect to undertake the detailed design phase for the project and engaged Terence Carey Architects for this phase of the work. I am a civil engineer by profession and hence didn't have the highest regard for architects before this project started, however our experiences in dealing with Terence Carey architects during this projects have left me wary of ever using architects again!

We went to the initial planning meetings with a number of simple requirements for the buildings once they had been upgraded. We wanted to retain the functionality of the existing rooms while providing additional toilets, public showers and change rooms, a dedicated first aid room and an enlarged weight training area. In addition, we required the provision of a room overlooking the finish line for future installation of photo finish equipment, plus an area for indoor circuit training and holding social functions. The initial plans that had been prepared by Rohan Waldie were rather grandiose and well outside our budget but at least they provided a framework to work within and we believed that by better use of existing structure, the extent of modifications could be drastically reduced and the costs reduced as well.

Unfortunately, we seemed unable to communicate these requirements to the architects. Their initial concepts involved extending the building to the north which completely ignored the requirement for photo-finish, apart from the fact that it would have obliterated the entrance to Parkside Pre-School. Time and again we would mark up changes to show what we wanted, only to have the next revision of the drawings submitted with many of our requests ignored and other things added which we hadn't asked for.

One critical issue which was raised at this time and has hurt us badly in subsequent years was the issue of disabled access to the upstairs rooms. We were concerned that the plans showed no provision for access for people with a disability to the upstairs rooms and submitted several sketches to the architects with suggested layouts showing external access ramps and separate internal access options. At the time we were assured by the architect and Council that no special access would be required to the upstairs rooms and hence no allowance was made in the original design. Luckily, we insisted that a corridor be provided in the upstairs rooms to allow for the possible future installation of such an access if required, although we were advised that this was really unnecessary and a waste of space.

Eventually, agreement was finally reached on an acceptable design and tenders were called for the work in February 2001. The Club is grateful for the enormous contribution made by Eddie Hassett during this phase of the project. For many years, Eddie was a delegate on the Whitehorse Sports Advisory Board and provided valuable feedback on the operations of Council and who to lobby for support. Eddie also attended all the meetings with Council during the initial planning and design phases and attended all the site meetings with the Contractor once construction commenced to ensure that what was built was exactly what the Club intended.

As the preliminary cost estimated indicated that the total cost of the project was likely to exceed funds available, the tender documents were structured to split the work into two stages. Unfortunately, this split proved to be necessary as the lowest tender for the total works was around \$470,000 – about \$120,000 more than we were able to commit at the time and Council had made it clear that they had no more funds available. Hence a contract was awarded to Environmental Expressions to remove the old pavilion roof and complete the upgrade of the downstairs facilities with an option to complete the upstairs section of the work at some later date when funds were available, and work finally commenced in late May, 2001.

The redevelopment of the lower levels of the club rooms meant a huge upheaval for the Club as we had to completely empty the building of 30 years of accumulated equipment, premiership flags, honour boards, photos, documents, tools, paint tins and numerous other items which were sorted and then transported to various members' homes for temporary (and in some cases not so temporary) storage. I think that Val and Les Armstrong were quite happy when we were finally able to take back the International Reps board which spent several years displayed in their hallway, while Stewart Livingston still has boxes and boxes of premiership pennants stored under his house.

The target date for completion of the downstairs facilities was September 2001, however a number of problems encountered during construction, including a redesign of the disabled toilet to retain a wider access-way to Parkside Pre-School, meant that we did not regain full access until November which caused some disruption to the start of the 2001 track season. It was wonderful to finally have access to the new toilets, showers and change rooms and an improved weights room and storage facilities, to re-hang the record board and photos on the walls and to be able to store our competition equipment in a dedicated, secure store room.

With a much larger area now available for weights training, there was a great deal of enthusiasm from our members to upgrade the equipment within the room. Robin Barclay managed to source a large quantity of excellent second hand equipment which he kindly donated to the Club and with the help of David Webber and Stewart Livingston, transformed the room to create a facility which bears no resemblance to the tiny room previously used for weights training for so many years.

However, it was not long before we started receiving complaints about the lack of shade and shelter at the ground as there was no longer a roof over the grandstand which left spectators and athletes with no shelter from the elements. The Council suggested to us that we prepare another application for a Sport and Recreation Victoria grant, so again we went through the lengthy process of preparing documentation for a grant application. However, after presenting our application to the Council, we were informed that they would not be submitting our application to the State Government and furthermore, that they would not be contributing any further funds towards completion of the pavilion as they considered the remaining facilities to be purely social in nature and Council has a policy of not funding construction of social rooms for sporting clubs. This was despite the fact that we had a grandstand with no roof and no other shelter at the ground at all and that the primary function of two out of the three upstairs rooms is for administrative use and use for officiating during athletic competitions. We were faced with the grim reality that if we wanted to complete our Club rooms we would have to do it ourselves!

The one concession that Council made was that they agreed to be guarantor on a bank loan to assist with funding the remaining works, so early in 2002 we asked Rohan Prathapasinghe to contact the contractors that quoted to construct the first stage of the work to ask if they would be prepared to confirm their original quotes for the second half of the work, with a view to commencing the remainder of the work later in the year. Unfortunately, we were now right in the middle of the real estate/building boom in Melbourne which meant that prices had sky-rocketed and the original tenderers were no longer interested in undertaking the work as they now had so much other work on.

Rohan eventually managed to obtain a quotes from a couple of the original tenderers, however they were about 50% higher than their original quotes from 12 months earlier. Given that we had exhausted most of our savings on the first stage, we were not in a position to commit over \$230,000 on the remainder of the works. However, the situation with a lack of shade and shelter was becoming quite desperate so we were not really in a position to wait several years while we raised additional funds (and costs continued to escalate). Hence, we decided that we would split the remaining work into two stages – firstly erection of the main frame and a roof over the grandstand, followed by construction of the infill walls and internal fitout.

We obtained approval from the design engineer to proceed on this basis and immediately began trying to source the various materials required to construct the roof. With limited funds available, we needed to keep costs to a minimum so resources within the Club were used wherever possible to assist with undertaking work and sourcing materials. As an example of the lengths that we went to, we ended up arranging for the main steel framing to be fabricated in Brisbane and trucked down to Melbourne as this proved to be significantly cheaper than using any of the local suppliers.

Our next problem was to find someone to take responsibility for organising erection of the roof and installation of the roof sheeting. After another extensive search, Adolf Mansour Commercial Builders agreed to take on the project after being referred to us by Julie Milner's son-in-law. Adolf did a great job of coordinating all the suppliers and subcontractors and within a month we had the roof completed ready for the start of the 2002 – 2003 track season.

With the roof now in place, we felt as though the end was now in sight and it was just a matter of raising a bit more money, arranging a loan for the balance and finding someone to finish off the building. So in the middle of

2003 we sent off the drawings to about 10 different builders who said that they were interested in quoting on the work and waited for their quotes to arrive. However, despite numerous follow-up phone calls, emails and letters, the only quote that we received from any of these builders was from one of the very original bidders for the work who had originally quoted about \$170,000 to build the whole of the upstairs section of the facility, but now 2 years later wanted about \$300,000 just to install the walls and complete the internal fitout!

By the end of 2003 we were getting quite frustrated as we had made no progress for over 12 months and there did not appear to be any end in sight to the building boom and inflated prices. However we continued to follow up different builders whose names were passed on to us and thanks to a recommendation from Kate Beever, we eventually found a company – Building Impressions, who were interested in doing the work for us and with whom we were able to negotiate an affordable price to complete the building for us. To keep the price within our budget, we spent several months working with Richard Vernan from Building Impressions to reduce the cost as much as possible by investigating alternative materials to give a similar finish and removing items of work which we could complete ourselves such as painting of internal walls. We finally signed a contract with Building Impressions in April 2004 and looked forward with some excitement to work commencing with a view to having the building complete by August.

At this point, on the verge of seeing our long term goals completed, the Club hit our biggest obstacle from which we have still not recovered and will still have an impact on the Club's finances for at least the next five years. We approached Rohan Prathapasinghe from the City of Whitehorse to ask him to arrange for the Council to issue a building permit for the remaining works, which they had done for the previous two stages. In practice, this should have been a mere formality, as they had already issued building permits for the first two stages of the works based on identical drawings and specifications, however Rohan advised that the Council building survey department was overloaded and it would take between 3 to 6 months to issue a permit. Rohan suggested that we engage a private building surveyor to issue the permit for us, so we arranged for Building Impressions to arrange this through a building surveyor that they had used in the past.

However, rather than simply issuing the permit, the Building Surveyor returned a list of deficiencies with the design which he required to be rectified before issuing the building permit. Many of these were relatively minor items, however to resolve most of the issues required changes resulting in about \$10,000 of extras. While this was most frustrating, the real problem was that he would not issue a building permit until the design was changed to include access to the upstairs rooms for people with a disability.

To say that we were annoyed is an understatement. We immediately requested clarification from the City of Whitehorse Building Surveyor as to why he had twice previously passed the design without comment on this aspect, but were advised that the previous building surveyor had left the Council and the new building surveyor agreed that disabled access was required. Not satisfied with this answer, we requested that another opinion be obtained so the Council engaged an independent expert to rule on the matter, however this expert also agreed that a disabled access was indeed required. The bottom line was that Terence Carey Architects had made a mistake and we were left to sort out the consequences.

After several months of pleading for leniency and lobbying Council, local Councillors and even the State Government for assistance, it was clear that we were not going to find anyone to over-rule the building surveyor and we had to face up to somehow providing a disabled access to the upstairs rooms. After investigating a number of options, we agreed that the best option was to provide a ramp over the canteen towards the main gate and so we drew up some concept drawings which we submitted to the building surveyor for his approval. After much discussion he eventually agreed that this was an acceptable solution and agreed to issue us with a building permit on condition that we prepared a letter guaranteeing to construct the disabled ramp within the term of the building permit (which would expire after three years). Finally, work was allowed to commence in late July 2004, nearly 4 months after we signed the contract with the builder.

On completion of the building works in October 2004, we were left with a hollow feeling – we had this wonderful new facility which we were not allowed to use and still required a lot of work to paint the walls and floors. However, we were given a great opportunity to use the facility on a one-off basis when the 2004 Zatopek meet was held at Box Hill and we gained permission to use the upstairs rooms for the night. We are indebted to the great effort put in by Peter Robbie and his team of Work for the Dole assistants who completed most of the internal painting, and to Rob Falkenberg who stained the timber window frames to enable the rooms to be made ready for the Zatopek meet in December. It was a great opportunity to showcase what a wonderful facility we had as the meet was acclaimed as one of the most successful ever held and the facilities were widely praised by officials and athletes.

However, after the euphoria of the Zatopek meet, we were again faced with the grim reality that we were \$60,000 in debt and had no realistic hope of raising the \$100,000 or more to build the disabled ramp to give us access to our club rooms. The feeling of anger and disappointment amongst the committee and club members became an added burden which we have struggled to deal with ever since.

Having made numerous representations to Council regarding our predicament, early in 2005 the Council agreed to assist by engaging an architect to prepare some conceptual designs and cost estimates for various disabled access schemes. For some reason which I still can't understand, the Council again engaged Terence Carey Architects to work on the project. They again ignored the sketches which we had prepared and developed three new options ranging in cost from \$170,000 to \$220,000 and including such features as glass covered walkways and a viewing atrium! it was politely pointed out that there was no way we could afford to spend \$170,000 on a disabled access ramp. They were then given a copy of the drawings we had prepared showing a ramp across the canteen and a quote from a builder to construct the ramp for \$100,000 and asked to try again.

After several more meetings, the architects were finally able to prepare a design which was estimated to cost just over \$100,000 and consisted of a ramp over the canteen with stairs and stair climber down to the main gate. We were still not any closer to actually getting the ramp built as \$100,000 was still way beyond our means, however Council suggested that we once again try for a Sport and Recreation Victoria Grant which they assured us that they would support, so once again we went through the exercise of preparing a grant application and seeking letters of

support for our application. At last we were in luck, as the State Government agreed to provide a grant of \$45,000 towards a total project cost of \$135,000 including architect fees and contingency, with both the Club and Council also agreeing to contribute \$45,000.

I would like to thank all those who assisted with the preparation of the many grant applications which we made throughout the course of the project and who wrote letters of support. In particular, I would like to thank the ongoing support that we have received from the office staff at Athletics Victoria, from Anna Burke, Federal Member for Chisholm, and from Robert Clark, Member for Box Hill in the State Parliament.

To assist with expediting the design process, while the grant application was being considered we had undertaken a detailed design of the ramp option to investigate options for the most efficient and cost effective solution and we passed on this design to Council for their use in finalising design drawings, however once again Terence Carey decided to ignore our input and produced a design that contained twice the weight of structural steel as our design. He assured us that his design was simpler and thus more cost effective and Council proceeded to call tenders and awarded a contract for construction of the ramp in late October 2005, without consulting us along the way. On discovering that this contract had been awarded, we were horrified to learn that the value of the contract was more than \$20,000 more than the budgeted amount and that the total project funds of \$135,000 had been committed without any allowance being made for items such as relocation of the main electrical cable to the building and final landscaping and signage works.

We immediately requested that the Council investigate options with the Contractor for reducing costs, however the Contractor clearly had no incentive or interest in reducing the project cost so all that this achieved was a delay of a couple of months. Eventually Council agreed to underwrite any project over-runs and capped our commitment at \$45,000 so approval was given for the Contractor to commence work in December 2005. The Contractor advised that the works were scheduled to be completed by mid-February 2006 so we commenced preparing tentative plans to have our first function in the room during the Commonwealth Games in March 2006. Unfortunately, we were a bit optimistic. We thought that one month's contingency was being quite generous, however we probably should have allowed one year rather than one month.

It soon became obvious that there was no way that the work would be completed by February. First there were problems with the main power cable blocking access for the crane to install the steelwork, then there were problems with the steelwork not fitting properly and then there were problems getting the Contractor in to finish off the works so that everything was not finished until May 2006 – about 3 months after planned. Now all we needed was a certificate of completion from the Council for the ramp so that we could finally gain our Certificate of Occupancy for the building.

In theory, now all we needed was a certificate of completion from the Council for the ramp so that we could finally gain our Certificate of Occupancy for the building. However, there was also one other minor item that required attention before we could use the upstairs rooms. From the northern front window in the upstairs rooms, it is possible to look into the back yard of one of the neighbouring properties, belonging to a Mr and Mrs Spiteri. As soon as the walls and windows of the upstairs rooms were completed we received an angry complaint from the Spiteri's demanding that the window be blanked off or removed completely. This would have completely destroyed the view out of the building onto the front straight and so was clearly not an option for us, so after many heated discussions we agreed that a screen would be erected to block the view into the Spiteri's yard prior to using the upstairs rooms. During the protracted negotiations regarding construction of the ramp we investigated a number of options for construction of the screen and eventually reached agreement with the Spiteri's early in 2006 that we would erect a series of poles behind the club rooms and fix a screen between them. We prepared drawings of the screen, obtained engineering certification and quotes for the work so that not long after the ramp had been completed we were able to award the work to Trusteel Fabrications who commenced fabrication of the poles.

As the poles were to be installed along the back of the building adjacent to the access path to Parkside Preschool, we suggested that Council should advise the Preschool that the work would be undertaken some time in July. After we hadn't heard back from the Council for a few weeks we contacted them to find out what the problem was and discovered that the Preschool were objecting to the installation of the poles and demanded that the path be widened and the fence re-aligned around the poles. Clearly we were not prepared to pay for these extra works so now commenced yet one more frustrating delay while we waited for the Council to reach agreement on the design and layout of the relocated path. We thought that this would be a relatively simple matter to resolve and we were sure that it could be sorted out by the September school holidays so that the works could be carried out while the Preschool was closed. However, again we were mistaken as we were told that works could still not commence as agreement could not be reached with the Preschool. To say that we were frustrated was an understatement. Several times we set tentative dates for this opening ceremony several months in advance, only to be told that there was still no agreement in place.

In October we finally received a certificate of completion from the Council for the ramp works and within a couple of days had applied for and received our long-awaited Certificate of Occupancy for the building. Not long after we also received notification from Council that they had finally lost patience with the Preschool and advised them that the screen would be constructed whether they liked it or not, but we would have to wait until the Christmas holidays to carry out the works. So much for having the rooms ready for the start of the track season!

Trusteel finally commenced work on installation of the poles in January this year and after some minor dramas with having to relocate some of the poles to clear underground pipes, the screen was eventually completed and we are now all able to finally celebrate gaining full access to the completed pavilion and club rooms.

Over the past seven years, this project to upgrade the club rooms has placed an enormous strain on the Club from a financial perspective and also from the time and effort spent by the committee and members on dealing with matters related to the redevelopment. The Club has invested over \$410,000 of our own funds into the project which is a remarkable achievement for a volunteer sporting club. A large proportion of these funds have come through donations and special fundraising events. We are most grateful to all those that have made donations to the building fund which has been most efficiently administered by Colin Organ. We also owe thanks the efforts of

Chris O'Connor, Leana Tilley, Cameron Joyce and many others for organising a series of most successful Trivia Nights which have been the mainstay of our fundraising efforts each year.

The Club has been most fortunate to have had a small core of dedicated and hardworking committee members over the past seven years without which this project would not have been possible. Adam Pepper and Colin Organ have done an enormous amount to assist with fundraising and with the numerous minor works projects that have been required to fill the various gaps left between each stage of the works. It is largely thanks to the hard work and efficiency of Angela Robbie in her role of treasurer that the Club has continually reported healthy surpluses and been able to invest so heavily in our facilities. As well as chasing up membership and ground hire fees, she has kept a tight reign on expenditure and has still found time to manage and operate the canteen which has been one of our major income sources over many years. Our secretary, Julie Milner has also made an enormous contribution to the building works by assisting with sourcing materials, chasing up contractors, preparing drawings for various items and also assisting with the endless list of painting and other fitout works required to be able to present the rooms in the state that they are today. We are indebted to you all for the fantastic contribution that you have all made over many years – it is certainly greatly appreciated.

The Club is now in a wonderful position to move forward to another period of success with the club rooms now completed and ready to be fully utilized and some exciting developments to look forward to, including the redevelopment of the track later this year. A wonderful legacy has been created for future generations to use and enjoy, while continuing on the wonderful tradition of success of the Box Hill Athletic Club.