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PROPOSED 'ADELAIDE AQUATIC CENTRE DEVELOPMENT' – DATA SEARCH REVEALS FRESH DETAIL

Exposed: the Adelaide park lands Park 2 buildings “reduced” footprint myth

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Among the City of Adelaide’s local-government politicians, Lord Mayor Dr Jane Lomax-Smith would be the most alert among former Lord Mayors about park lands matters. That’s because her passion to monitor and restrict the growth of development project ‘footprints’ on the park lands can be traced to what some younger voters might describe as ancient Adelaide history. She it was who drove the publication by the city council of the *Adelaide Park Lands Management Strategy Report* of 10 November 1999. At the time, she was city Lord Mayor (first time around). In that report, signed off by her, she wrote: “There may always be conflict between development pressure and those who see themselves as custodians, and this conflict may be heightened by the fact that the park lands are certainly seen as having “iconic” status.”¹ In the report there appeared an unambiguous objective: “Achieve a significant reduction in **building floor areas** and hard paved areas in the park lands.”² Pages later was this statement: “The seemingly differing attitudes and expectations regarding protection of the park lands from development of new buildings and enclosures, while ensuring the continued viability and amenity of buildings or enclosures servicing recreation and cultural activities, can be facilitated through a strict management policy of overall reduction in **building footprint** and **enclosures** during the vision period 1999–2037.”³

Fast-forward 24 years and she is again Lord Mayor (second time around) and prosecuting a council-driven approval of a Malinauskas state government proposed \$135m replacement aquatic centre for Park 2. It’s to be in the northern park lands and, once



August 2023 Development Application ground floor drawing of the proposed Centre development concept. What is the precise ‘footprint’ area of the building base, and does it include the adjacent enclosure? Does it deliver a “reduced” footprint, compared to the old centre? Why do the Development Application drawings lack data detail?

again, involves the matter of ‘footprint’ regarding a proposed large, new two-storey building. It’s to replace the existing centre, but the new one will dwarf it in total floor area, being almost double that of the old centre (footnote 9 reveals the detail). In light of the Lord Mayor’s 1999 *Strategy Report*, the proposal already fails to meet an ‘overall reduction’ standard.

When the idea to replace the old centre was publicly suggested by then opposition leader Peter Malinauskas, on 12 February 2022, Dr Lomax-Smith (a private citizen, not elected to the council at the time) was interested to see that any park lands proposal would be no bigger and, ideally, less than the existing footprint of the old centre. It is history now that Premier Malinauskas’s original \$82.4m proposed concept was suddenly replaced by an expanded version by his government 16 months later, announced on 10 June 2023. It will now cost \$135m, and the state would own, build and operate it.⁴ The Lord Mayor attended that announcement, supporting the bid. No mention was made at the time of the significantly expanded building total floor area. City council sources questioned since also claimed no knowledge of the specific data. The state project is driven by Department of Infrastructure and Transport (DIT) minister, Tom

¹ Hassell, *Adelaide Park Lands Management Strategy Report* 1999, Preface, Dr Jane Lomax-Smith, Executive Summary, page ii.

² Op. cit., Section 8, page 44 (6. Visions and Directions; Buildings and Land, point 1.)

³ Op. cit., Section 8, page 52. (8, Park Lands, Overall Frameworks).

⁴ That figure is curious, given that the Development Application claims that the ‘construction cost’ is to be only \$105m. Where will the other \$30m be spent? The minister hasn’t said, and neither has treasurer Mullighan.

Koutsantonis. He has been at pains to stress that the new, expanded concept would feature a footprint smaller than the old centre. So much so, that 1,000 square metres would be ‘returned to park lands’ as a result. This was met with acclaim by some observers. The suggestion was that the new building footprint was 1,000 square metres (0.1 of a hectare) smaller than the old centre footprint. So what *was* the footprint of the old (existing) aquatic centre? A 2021 council report revealed it to be 11,900 sq metres.⁵ That’s 1.19 ha. Critically, it was explicit: it used the word *footprint*.

Data fiddle befuddles the councillors

The best way to confuse anyone is to compare apples with oranges, but not point out the distinction. On 13 June, a departmental ‘official’ briefing to the council reported instead on “Total project site area”.⁶ This was not the same thing as *building footprint*. In fact, it was something completely different. It also introduced another metric, a “building footprint/area”. That new descriptor metric simultaneously embraced the terms *footprint* and *area* but did not explain the distinction. It stated that, by comparison, the proposed new concept would feature a “building footprint/area” of only 9,500 sq metres, an obviously surprising claim, given its easily apparent visual scale. Was that the explicit *footprint* of the building base, or the *total floor area* of the building? It didn’t say. The DIT briefing presented a table, titled ‘Facility size – existing vs new’. The ‘Total project area site’ bottom-line tallies were stated as ‘Current [facility]’: 30,305 sq m; and ‘New [facility]’ as 29,305 sq m. This delivered the much-vaunted ministerial number – 1,000 sq metres’ difference. But confusingly, before getting to the bottom line where that number appeared, the analysis had also introduced area data for the “Car Park area” and “External areas, Forecourt, public realm” elements. These items had nothing to do with establishing *footprint* data of the proposed new building and its associated enclosure area. But the area sums for the Car park and External areas items were critical to delivering the bottom-line tallies. It was a classic ‘pea-and-shell’ statistical trick to present a data result that the government desired,

⁵ Table 3, ‘Recommended Option Evaluation’, page 32, as found in: Adelaide City Council, The Committee, Agenda, Item 5.4, ‘Adelaide Aquatic Centre – feasibility study update’, page 32, 5 October 2021.

⁶ ‘Adelaide Aquatic Centre Development, CEO briefing’, Council special meeting, 4.30pm, 13 June 2023.



Development Application drawing of the base of the proposed new building (shown in beige) and the adjacent pool and play area enclosure (orange). Explicit *footprint* data couldn’t be found to verify DIT claims.

and would henceforth rely on, as would the council, to reinforce their oft-repeated “reduced” footprint claims.

On 31 July the government publicly released the Development Application, contained in a big Urban and Regional Planning Solutions Pty Ltd Planning Report (about 700 paper pages). The public was allowed a month to scrutinise its various reports. As anyone familiar with planners’ work would know, explicit footprint detail is commonly revealed in the architects’ drawings, in the floor plans. It is fundamental data. Except, for this proposal, neither the Ground Floor Plan, the First Floor Plan nor the Landscape Plan revealed any data about footprint.⁷ This is highly unusual. A veteran planner, with decades of experience, confirmed this.

The drawings illustrated a floor plan image of an expansive building of two levels (in parts), with a paved and turfed open space adjacent, facing north (see the orange-shaded image above, or the image on page 1). This area is to contain several swimming pools, to be fenced off from the wider Park 2, to keep out non-paying park lands visitors. Here arose a question. Did the ‘footprint’ (which was not stated) include only the building’s base (‘the platform’), or did it also include the adjacent fenced enclosure, given that this expansive outdoor pools and play area is to be integral to the whole of the aquatic centre concept? Alas, the drawings revealed no footprint

⁷ These plans were found in Appendix C of the big book Planning Report: ‘Place Analysis and Design Response’, including ‘3.0 Architectural Response’.

data, or data that could be segmented into building ‘platform’ versus the turfed enclosure with pools. The words ‘footprint area’ could not be found. The architects’ drawings also didn’t reveal the *total floor area* of the proposed building, or that of the turfed pools enclosure.

To cut to the chase, publicly the proposed building footprint matter as at 28 August 2023 remains shrouded in foggy ambiguity, despite what appears to be the complete satisfaction in the Lord Mayor’s office that the footprint of the proposed aquatic centre is demonstrably “reduced”, compared to the old centre, and that the public has full access to clear, unequivocal data to confirm it. But that’s not correct.

What is *certain*?

The state government must have the precise building *footprint* data, and must know how and why it has been calculated, but may be nervous about how it has been calculated. In which case, politically it may be best to not release such technical data, especially if the state opposition sniffs an opportunity to wreak havoc. Reliable sources suggested some time ago that the proposed building and enclosure *footprint* data were larger, and hinted that data presented on 13 June had been confusing and muddy. Moreover, other parties have also not drunk the Koutsantonis Kool Aid. Read on.

What *is* known?

Firstly, the footprint of the old (existing) centre is known. The city council Committee Agenda paper of 5 October 2021 recorded that “existing AAC” building footprint was 11,900 sq metres.⁸ (That is, 1.19 ha.) However, it remains unclear whether this area is explicitly the building-base-only footprint, or whether it is the building footprint *as well as* the land areas surrounding it, inside the centre’s perimeter fence. The DIT 13 June briefing said nothing about this.

Secondly, there’s no government data revealed in the DIT brochures or even in the Planning Report’s big book (on show during August, containing the Development Application) regarding the old centre’s *total floor area*. It means that precise total floor area comparisons between the two can’t be made. A

⁸ Table 3, ‘Recommended Option Evaluation’, page 32, as found in: Adelaide City Council, The Committee, Agenda, Item 5.4, ‘Adelaide Aquatic Centre – feasibility study update’, page 32, 5 October 2021.

problem? Yes, because the total floor area of the proposed \$135m centre *is* known. Not that the architects’ drawings revealed this. The data are buried in another section in the Planning Report big book, a ‘Traffic, Parking and Access Report’, submitted by contractor Stantec on 5 July 2023. It reveals that the total floor area of the proposed new development will be almost double that of the existing centre.⁹ The data comprehensively contradicts the DIT figures presented to the council on 13 June, which claimed that “Building footprint/area” was only 9,500 sq metres, an astonishing 1,860 sq metres *less* than the figure it claimed for the “Current [facility]”.¹⁰

Interestingly, the Stantec author had also not been able to access explicit *footprint* data comparisons (old vs new). He wrote: “While the overall building footprint *is understood* [emphasis added] not to increase compared to the existing, however the amount of useable area (excluding circulation areas/corridors) is expected to almost double the existing uses.”¹¹ This observation fundamentally contradicts the DIT 13 June briefing detail.

It is already obvious that the \$135m Koutsantonis-proposed concept is to be a large building in scale and bulk terms. Moreover, its height will be 12m and “up to 17m for the waterslide tower”. It’s to be a park monument, more dominating than the existing old centre’s bulk. Moreover, almost all online colour drawings of the proposed centre have used an aerial perspective, such that the scale is difficult to comprehend. This is a time-honoured visual trick used by firms designing park lands buildings, and goes back many years. Park lands walkers who think they are familiar with proposed paper concepts are almost always stunned when they see the real-life scale of the ultimate building.

The Stantec author also generously went the extra mile and completed a ‘Grouped Area Comparison’, which was particularly revealing and critically useful to compare like-for-like (old concept vs new). He fleshed out the data (which appears in footnote 9), to

⁹ Table 3.1: ‘Future facilities’, total floor area change: Existing 3802m²; Proposed 7439m²; [therefore] Floor area change: 3637m².

¹⁰ That was 11,360 sq m., which, by the way, was inconsistent with the council’s own 2021 area figure of 11,900 sq m. Confusing? Yes.

¹¹ AAC Development Traffic, Parking and Access Report, 5 July 2023, Stantec, page 23, footer title: ‘Proposed Aquatic Centre Development’.

show that ‘Pool Area’ is to expand from 2,630m² to 5,550m² (+2,920m²); and ‘Gym, Group Exercise Area’ is to expand from 442m² to 1,460m² (+1018m²). However, Café/Retail Area and Office Area will contract. The first drops from 203m² to 160m², and the latter drops from 527m² to 269m². All these data deliver a proposed new floor area total of +3637m². This is to become what the author describes as “... the amount of useable area.” By comparison to the DIT 13 June council briefing, this leaves no room for ambiguity. It is probable that city councillors haven’t had access to this detail.

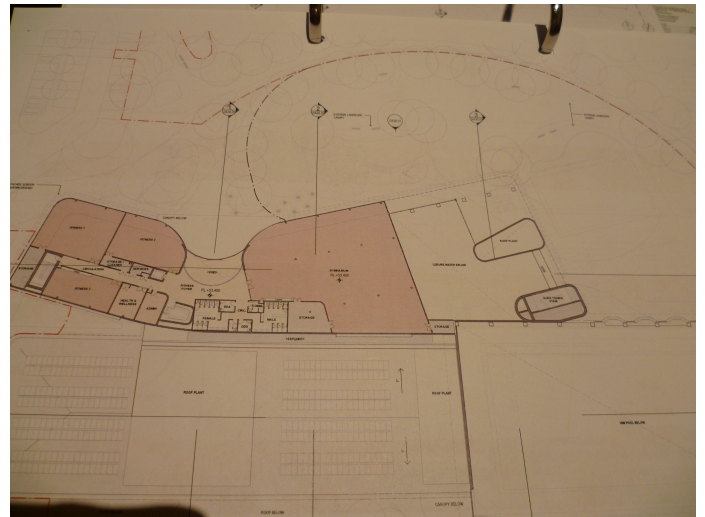
A fresh statement emerges

More information is revealed in the Planning Report. It comes from another section in the Planning Report big book, this time from contractor Colby Phillips in an ‘Advisory Report on Waste Management Plan’. It states: “The [new] site area is around 13,500m² [1.35 ha] including the centre building and external paved and landscaped areas (but excluding car parking areas to the north).” That appears to be a clear *footprint* assessment. All of the proposed new site’s features are factored in, including the “external paved and landscape areas”. This makes sense, because they’re an integral part of the concept. Moreover, it also states that the car park data are explicitly *omitted*, which the DIT 13 June briefing had included, which simply muddied the waters.

On that basis, a clear and direct building footprint comparison can be made. New: 1.35 ha, versus old: 1.19 ha. It’s not a “reduced” footprint at all. The result is not what the minister’s office wants the public to believe. Moreover, the Lord Mayor’s council-circulated formal August statement wording, which also embraces the minister’s script, stating “*a reduction in the overall footprint*”, is simply wrong. The area numbers don’t support that claim.

Rationalising the political position

Perhaps the following explanation is the way Plan SA’s planners and the minister have rationalised it. The footprint calculation that reinforces the Koutsantonis/Lomax-Smith claim stops at the edges of the ‘platform’ (the building’s base, usually the core ‘footprint’ assessable area). Could it be possible that an area measure of the external, open-air enclosure area (which includes a “Splash Pool” and a 25m “Outdoor Pool”, in an expansive, fenced paved and grassed area) is quietly omitted from the explicit *footprint* calculation? If that approach is endorsed by



Architects’ drawing showing the upper storey configuration: three ‘Fitness areas’ and a ‘Gymnasium’. On 11 June 2023 Premier Peter Malinauskas said “the new centre’s facilities, including gym and café, would provide an ongoing revenue stream to underpin its costs”. (*Sunday Mail*, ‘First look at new Adelaide Aquatic Centre’, News, page 17.)

planners, it would deliver data that might more favourably compare with the old centre, to deliver a “reduced” but misleading footprint figure, in which the new proposal features a lesser area, delivering an area figure that can be ‘returned’ to the park lands? Is that wrong? The only way the minister and the Lord Mayor could remove all doubt would be to set aside the misleading 13 June DIT summary, and reveal all of the data, stripped of the planners’ confusing descriptors, in an urgent media presentation. That would be the right thing to do.

By the way, there’s to be a new road constructed in Park 2, as a “service thoroughfare” from Fitzroy Terrace to the new building (an extension of an existing road, which will double its length). The dimensions will contribute to total new park lands ‘footprint’, given that the road surface is to be a new, development-assessable ‘structure’ at law, a fresh ‘development’ adding to the existing site.

On the building *footprint* matter, the minister had better be quick to call a media show-and-tell. The city council is under big pressure to rubber-stamp the whole \$135m plan. It would not do for the public to later obtain fresh and revealing *footprint* data that contradicts “reduced footprint” claims. After all, as Dr Lomax-Smith has stated for decades, the park lands are not cheap land, they’re priceless.

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