

Former Tauranga MP Bob Clarkson labels new CBD stadium idea 'bloody stupid'

By

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Former Tauranga MP and builder Bob Clarkson says more effort should be made to use the existing Baypark Stadium rather than spending \$170m on a new version. Photo / George Novak

The man who effectively gifted a 20,000-capacity stadium to Tauranga city says the idea of building another near the CBD is "bloody stupid" and a waste of money.

But the boss of Bay of Plenty rugby says it has already moved its games to other venues without shelter and parking because it considers them more suitable than the existing stadium.

Former Tauranga MP Bob Clarkson built the Baypark Stadium at Te Maunga for \$24 million and sold it to Tauranga City Council for \$12m in 2007. About \$500,000 for building consents was funded by the Bay of Plenty Speedway Association.

But the council is now backing the development of an idea, led by Western Bay economic development group Priority One, to build a new multi-use arena at Tauranga and Wharepai domains for an estimated \$170m.

Clarkson said such an idea was "flawed" and there was no need for such a project, which he believed would offer limited carparking at best.

"There's all this talk about building another stadium at the Domain but every time we have a big game you can't get through that road [due to traffic and pedestrians] come hell or high water," he said.

"This idea they have about having football at the Domain so that people will go into town to spend money? What a load of crap. They don't go shopping. They might go for a beer ... but you can't tell me they're spending large in the shops."

Clarkson said he was embarrassed to watch the Black Ferns' match at Tauranga Domain on June 6, when spectators were drenched in heavy rain.

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Bird's eye view of a Bay of Plenty Steamers rugby match at Baypark Stadium, pictured in 2010. Photo / John Borren

"Why the hell are we not using the stadium out there with a roof? When I had that stadium, we used to get crowds of 15,000 for football," Clarkson said.

"If they are going to put the money up, they can afford a cheaper option."

Clarkson said he'd prefer the council to spend \$5m to \$10m to freshen up Baypark Stadium than create a second stadium.

Clarkson said he built Baypark predominantly "to get football and stockcars here".

A then-contract with the Bay of Plenty Steamers meant most of their games were played at BayPark, he said.

"We have a stadium there. It just needs to be freshened up."

Bay of Plenty Speedway Association president Mark Decke echoed Clarkson's concerns that the proposed new stadium was a "waste of money".

Decke said he did not believe rugby clubs, players or fans would be better served with the new stadium plans. He did not think there was enough reason to justify spending millions on a new stadium at the Domain to better cater to rugby as, in his view, rugby crowd and player numbers were declining.



Hori BOP at Tauranga Domain, where he believes a new stadium should be built. Photo / George Novak

"I love rugby and have been involved since I was five, then I played it, then I was a coach ... rugby should've never left Baypark."

The association was also concerned that the CBD concept created an uncertain future for Baypark. Speedway was regularly attracting crowds of several thousand and had a lease until 2029.

"We're not going anywhere."

Bay of Plenty Rugby Union chief executive Mike Rogers said because Baypark was built with a speedway track, it made the rugby spectator experience "very poor".

Other issues making it unsuitable included hospitality set-up, access, clay track and field size. This contributed to the decision to move games to Tauranga Domain "and effectively build a

temporary venue to host our games as that was deemed better than what Baypark provided as an experience".

"While Tauranga Domain has issues when trying to erect a temporary venue, like we do and at a significant cost, it's still based on feedback [that it] provides a better experience for our thousands of supporters that attend games versus when games were historically hosted at Baypark," Rogers said.

"The connection to the CBD also means our events are able to provide value back to the cafes, bars, etc, which is important to us being part of the community."

Terry Leaming has campaigned for a stadium at the domain for about 20 years and believed it was key to the city's future.

Leaming is also known to many as Bay of Plenty Steamers' unofficial mascot, Hori BOP.



Baypark Stadium transformed into a jet sprints water track in 2018. Photo / Andrew Warner
"Baypark is a purpose-built speedway stadium, therefore it has a clay track outside. As soon as it rains, it gets bogged and that creates all sorts of major problems.

"Each end is a long, long way away from the action.

"Speedway and rectangular sports just don't dovetail."

Leaming said Baypark was also far from hospitality, accommodation, and public transport infrastructure, compared to the domain.

"Baypark was great for its time. It got stuff kicked off for the Steamers but it's not fit for purpose anymore."

Priority One chief executive Nigel Tutt said the speed and scale of Tauranga's growth put pressure on resources. Existing facilities were not fit for purpose for "the activities we want to see in the future" such as rugby, exhibitions and larger entertainment events, he said.