

Déjà vu: Grand Prix Corporation admits ‘the truth would hurt us’. Again!

VCAT has again refused a Freedom of Information (FOI) request from Save Albert Park (SAP) because of the “likelihood” of detriment” to the Australian Grand Prix Corporation (AGPC) if the facts on how they ‘make up’ attendance numbers are released. “Again, the ‘commercial in confidence’ reason relied on by the Kennett and Brumby Governments is now used by the Napthine Government to hide from scrutiny”, said SAP president, Peter Goad.

On February 26, 2008, The Age newspaper published an article headed **‘Truth on crowds would hurt us admits GP chief’**, reporting on a FOI application seeking details of tickets sold and given away free. VCAT refused the FOI application that time for the same reason.

In a new FOI case at VCAT, SAP argued that it was in the public interest that the AGPC release its method of estimating attendances at the grand prix event. Evidence was presented indicating that published estimates were grossly exaggerated, and that as a result the Victorian public was being misled as to the success and popularity of the event. As Victorian taxpayers are the majority funder of the grand prix they have a right to know the truth, SAP argued.

The Corporation stated that its estimates were ‘fair and reasonable’ but refused to reveal how they were determined. The Corporation stated that the use of turnstiles or ticket scanners was impracticable and too costly because of the size of the Albert Park venue and the number of entry gates. Save Albert Park produced evidence to show bar code scanners and turnstiles are a cheap and cost effective way of accurately counting attendees and suspects the Corporation avoids accurate figures as it suits their argument for extending the grand prix contract.

The Corporation argued that release of the attendance estimation method would put it at a disadvantage in its business operations, explaining this as follows:

“The release of the methodology is likely to enable the Corporation’s competitors to better understand the effectiveness of the Corporation’s marketing and promotional campaigns and their impact on the Corporation’s ticket sales. The Corporation’s competitors would then seek to use the information to discredit the Grand prix in making marketing pitches to potential customers and sponsors, in an attempt to lure them away from the Grand prix to their own events. They would do this by criticizing - or trying to unfairly discredit - some of the assumptions made by the Corporation in the attendance methodology, and by suggesting alternative assumptions (without the benefit of the Corporation’s experience and expertise).”

The competitors referred to were other Victorian sporting events, such as the AFL and the Tennis Open and the Spring Racing Carnival. All of its competitors use turnstiles and electronic bar code counting. They don’t live in the world of “alternative assumptions” because they use an accurate counting method.

The VCAT tribunal did not accept the public interest of a future liability to taxpayers of hundreds of millions of dollars was sufficient as the wording of the FOI Act gave the AGPC the advantage of protection from the “likelihood” of detriment from exposing its attendance methodology. Undeterred, SAP still contends the AGPC’s refusal to use turnstiles and bar code readers is a smokescreen to avoid scrutiny. If all of Melbourne’s other events use them (and survive without the government subsidies the grand prix enjoys), why can’t the grand prix?

Once again, the Grand Prix Corporation, aided by a formidable legal team, has been able to avoid scrutiny by claiming that ‘the truth would hurt us’.

For more information: Peter Logan, SAP Inc media 0412 697 074 or Peter Goad, SAP Inc president 0407192455.

Visit the Save Albert Park website www.save-albert-park.org.au for the fact sheet: ‘Every major claim about the grand prix is false or misleading’.

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