

Cook's nursing a \$1.6b headache

Roger Cook has a \$1.6 billion headache. According to informed sources, that's the minimum spend on the proposed revamp of the ugly and outdated Perth Convention and Exhibition Centre.

To put that spend into context, the new maternity and babies hospital being built at Murdoch is costing about \$1.8b.

It's a lot of money — especially when the demands on government are so high in terms of health, education and police spending. But the question being asked of this Labor administration is this: can the Government afford to quash a project that WA Tourism Council boss Evan Hall predicts will bring an additional 70,000 conference delegates to Perth each year — delegates likely to spend more than \$180 million a year?

And should the Government reconsider some of its other projects, such as a Burswood racetrack and amphitheatre, to make way for the redevelopment of the PCEC?

"PCEC is the oldest centre of any Australian capital city — every other State has expanded

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its convention centre to create jobs and diversify their economy," Mr Hall said this week.

"Perth is now losing jobs, events and business tourism to cities like Adelaide and Brisbane, which have expanded their convention centre capacity.

"We've seen major public and private investment in Perth Airport, stadium, arena and hotels; what's really holding the industry back is the long overdue expansion of our key business events venue.

"This is critical economic infrastructure that will fund jobs, hospitals and schools for the next 20 to 30 years."

So how did the revamp of the convention centre become so expensive?

The Cook Government has entered into formal negotiations with joint leaseholders Brookfield and the Wylie Group, which have a 35-year lease over the riverfront land.

What's given this project the hefty price tag is that it is not just about a simple revamp of an eyesore.

The project has morphed into something much bigger.

The proposed design, which the Government released in 2024, shows in addition to a "state-of-the-art convention centre" the inclusion of a new ferry terminal, integrated roadworks, a floating theatre stage, a river room and art node and a bridge to Elizabeth Quay.

As part of the redevelopment there is land available for a new convention centre hotel, housing, a new home for Scitech and a resource-sector anchor tenant — probably Rio Tinto.

Still, what's not known is how much of that initial \$1.6b-plus outlay will be carried by WA taxpayers.

Should the Government scale back the project to make it affordable and doable?

That's another question currently being asked in the tourism sector, which I suggest would be happy with just a redeveloped convention centre capable of attracting more people.

Cook and Treasurer Rita Saffioti do not want to kibosh the PCEC project.

But I'm reliably told they're spooked about proceeding because, alongside the cost, it would compete for labour with a swag of other government projects. The Government, for example, is still finishing up Metronet, building a new hospital at Murdoch and has promised to build or redevelop emergency departments at the Sir Charles Gairdner, Royal Perth and Midland hospitals — as well as build a new school at East Perth and a new racetrack and entertainment precinct at Burswood.

Both Cook and Saffioti are emphatic that they will not drop the Burswood project. According to Cook, a promise is a promise.

I don't reckon the Government would get too much flak for scrubbing or putting back the timeline for the Burswood racetrack and amphitheatre if those resources and labour were better spent on a more worthy project — like the revamp of the convention centre.

As I said, Roger Cook has a \$1.6b headache.