

International games driving park plans

By TONY BIRD - Taranaki Daily News

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Top-level national domestic cricket at Pukekura Park is safe for now.

But a major upgrade of facilities at Taranaki's No 1 cricket venue is needed if it is to be in the running to host international matches.

The New Zealand Cricket (NZC) annual venue inspection reports going back two years have highlighted shortcomings of some cricket facilities at the New Plymouth park.

This week's front-page story in the Taranaki Daily News revealing plans to build new practice cricket nets at the park touched on just one area of need if the ground is to host further internationals.

The inspection reports also point to the Bellringer Pavilion dressing rooms for players and officials, saying they are too small, while the player viewing area is another critical facility that needs improving.

Significant security issues have been identified.

NZC cricket administration manager Tim Murdoch yesterday confirmed Pukekura Park would not receive a tick to host international cricket matches unless turf practice nets and other improvements called for were considered and put into place.

"[The ground] has got some deficiencies in the areas that I have outlined in the report," he said.

Murdoch said if Taranaki wanted to be in a position to be considered as a future international venue then "those changes really have to be made".

Taranaki Cricket Association chairman Neil Sulzberger sees the building of a turf practice wicket – predicted to cost around \$300,000 – as imperative if Pukekura Park is to continue to be seen as one of the premier cricket grounds in New Zealand.

Sulzberger stressed it was the type of first-class cricket – three to five-day matches – being played at the park that were in jeopardy, not the shorter forms of the game.

"Twenty20 cricket and one day cricket is not under threat as I believe," he said. "It's not a requirement to have full practice facilities for those matches."

Sulzberger said in planning to build a turf practice facility next to the Pukekura Kindergarten, on Fillis St, TCA was looking ahead to when New Zealand hosts the cricket World Cup in 2015.

"TCA would love to be in a position to stand up and say we would like to host some of those games, we've got the facilities to do it. That's another area [hosting internationals] where the practice wickets are important," he said.

In the last World Cup held in New Zealand in 1992, Pukekura Park hosted the pool round match between Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe when more than 600 runs were scored before a full house.

Sulzberger said what TCA was doing at this stage was putting the idea of building practice nets out into the public arena.

"To sit back and do nothing, that's not an option, so we've placed it out in the public arena for discussion. We don't want to upset anyone, but the other side of the coin is to do nothing and that, we believe, would mean long- term repercussions for Pukekura Park."

He said the items identified on the NZC inspection reports needed to be put in place if Taranaki was to maintain the status it had enjoyed with cricket at the park over many years.

Sulzberger said TCA had played a leading role over a long time in promoting the park and everything attached to it.

"We've got a significant investment in infrastructure there and we want to see what's best for the park long term."

Sulzberger said if TCA reached the stage of presenting something definite on its plans for the practice wickets it would be the council's decision at the end of the day. "It would be the councillors that will make the decision if it is to proceed or not," he said.

Sulzberger said outside funding for the project would also need to be secured before the project.

"So there's plenty of things to work through yet."