

\$22million question

Editorial

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Hopefully the delay by the Federal Government in stating whether it will give financial support to the redevelopment of EnergyAustralia Stadium is a sign that ministers have their bureaucrats looking for the money that can go to the project.

If the Government is unable to put the money in, it should not delay in letting the Hunter International Sports Centre Trust know there will be no Canberra contribution so the body can draw up a revised time frame for the proposed \$44million redevelopment.

True, it has been little more than two weeks since Premier Bob Carr sent a formal letter to Prime Minister John Howard seeking Federal funding to match the \$22million the NSW Government committed in late June.

But Mr Howard and other ministers in Canberra have been kept aware of planning for the project since it was first mooted 3½ years ago. And there always were encouraging noises about possible Federal help providing the State took the initiative in supporting the upgrading of the facility which it does, after all, own.

Now that the State has come to the party, however, the song has changed. The Federal Government, Hunter people have been told, has no program which provides funding for sport capital projects. The office of Sports Minister Rod Kemp has said bluntly that if any Federal money is to go to the project, the Prime Minister would have to find it.

Mr Howard's Government had no trouble finding more than \$10million for the upgrade of what is now NorthPower Stadium, matching the State dollar for dollar. Federal electorates on the Central Coast, of course, are more marginal than in the Hunter, with the exception of Paterson. But it would be appalling if politics rather than need were to deprive the Hunter of a world-class sporting facility which could help boost the region economically as well as socially.

The Hunter has a bigger population than the State of Tasmania, yet its main sporting stadium would be viewed as a disgrace in many Third World countries. The bypassing of Newcastle as a venue for next year's rugby union World Cup games while smaller regional cities such as Townsville are on the schedule showed how disadvantaged the Hunter is. A World Cup game would have attracted a lot of people and a lot of money to the region.

So, it's up to Mr Howard to answer the \$22million question as soon as possible. If no money can be provided, we should be told that. If funds are available, the timetable should be revealed. The uncertainty is helping no-one.