

Saturday, September 28, 2013

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How \$2.2m of council cash was spent on Thomson Reserve

MITCH'S MONEY TRAIL



Photo: GLENN FERGUSON

IT has been revealed more than \$2 million of former mayor John Mitchell's council ward allocations was spent on developing sports facilities at Thomson Reserve where he had been a long-time footballer and administrator.
SPECIAL REPORT: Pages 4, 5

CITY OF GREATER GEELONG FUNDING

FIASCO



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Sports reserve given

Council spending revealed

GREG DUNDAS

FORMER mayor John Mitchell spent more than \$2 million of ratepayers' money developing sports facilities at Thomson Reserve where he had been a long-time footballer and administrator.

The *Geelong Advertiser* has obtained figures from the City of Greater Geelong that detail which projects councillors supported using the controversial Community Priorities Projects program over the past nine years.

The figures show Mr Mitchell allocated \$4.3 million to projects in Austin ward from 2005-06 to 2012-13 while he was a councillor.

More than half of that \$2.197 million was spent on implementing a masterplan for the Thomson Reserve, where Mr Mitchell is revered as a legend of the Thomson Tigers Football Club.

Yesterday Mr Mitchell defended his ward allocations. "This area has been neglected for years, and, once this system came in, I certainly wasn't going to see it neglected any longer," he said.

The *Geelong Advertiser* does not imply Mr Mitchell acted inappropriately in his ward allocations.

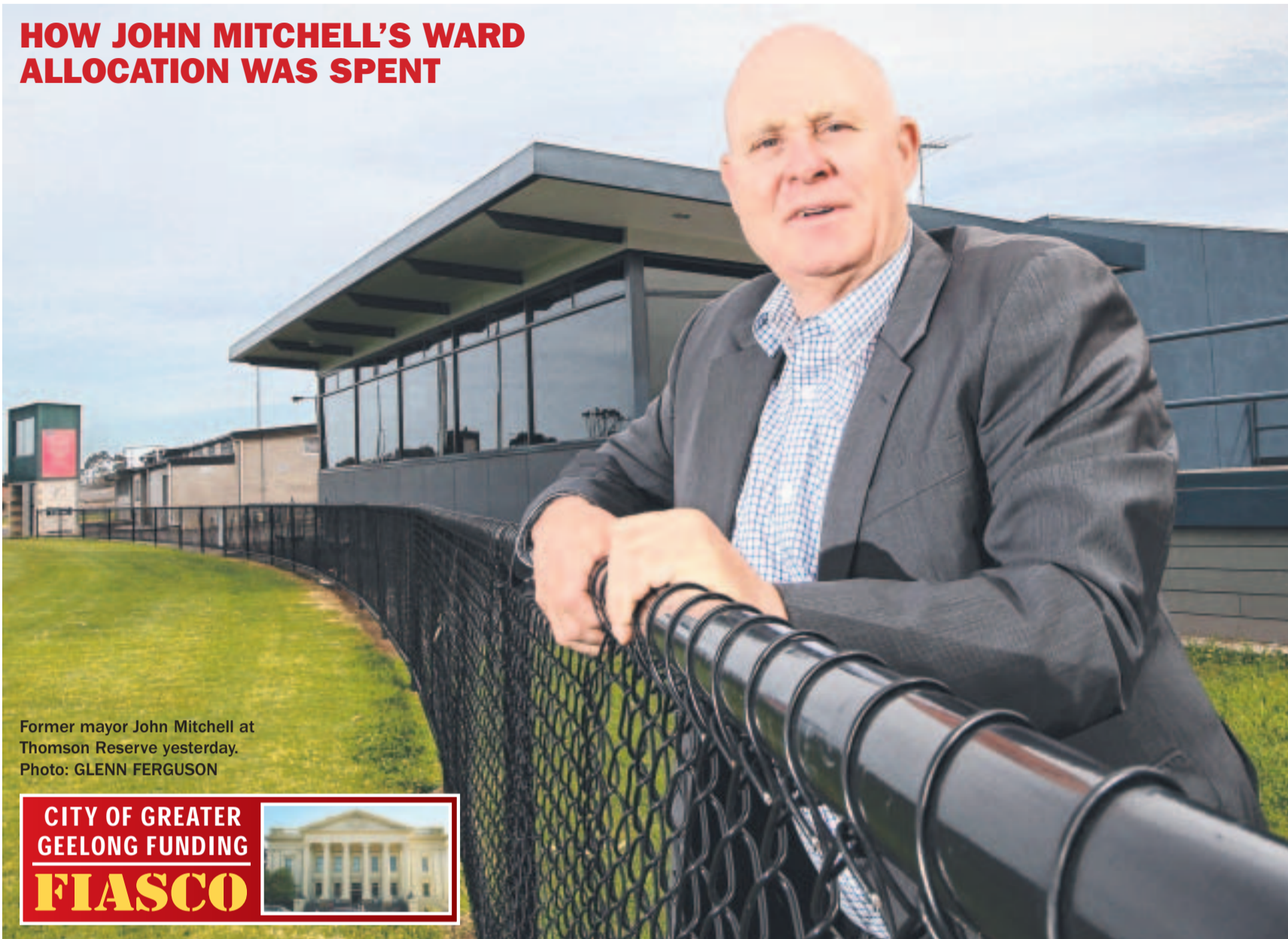
The money he allocated to Thomson Reserve was used to upgrade the social and change rooms, improve sporting facilities, build pathways and a playground and improve lighting.

The figures show Mr Mitchell also allocated a further \$100,000 to additional football, netball, cricket and tennis projects at that reserve.

The Thomson Reserve was the most heavily supported project in his ward in six of the eight years he was in office, including three of the four years he was mayor (2008-12). In his final year in office (2012-13) he allocated \$526,900 out of his \$670,000 allocation to the project.

Mr Mitchell who is a possible contender in Novem-

HOW JOHN MITCHELL'S WARD ALLOCATION WAS SPENT



Former mayor John Mitchell at Thomson Reserve yesterday. Photo: GLENN FERGUSON

CITY OF GREATER GEELONG FUNDING FIASCO



ber's mayoral by-election was a long-time player at Thomson Football Club, former president, and an official club 'legend', but held no official role at the club while on council.

He said yesterday he was proud of the improvements at Thomson and the other projects he funded through ward allocations.

"If you look at the funds I put into the other sporting facilities and bear in mind that I was the Sport and Recreation portfolio holder I've put a lot of my funds into sport and recreation in this area, but I've also looked after the elderly, I've also looked after the environment.

"I'm super-proud of this."

Mr Mitchell said all of the work was guided by a master

plan, developed with wide community consultation.

City of Greater Geelong CEO Stephen Griffin said the master plan was developed with input from a community reference group and funding was allocated through the standard budget process.

"Former councillor John Mitchell did not declare a conflict of interest relating to the Thomson Reserve Master Plan. Being an ordinary member of a club is not grounds for having a conflict of interest, as defined by the Local Government Act," Mr Griffin said. "The Local Government Act requires councillors to declare a conflict of interest if they are office bearers of a club or organisation that is subject to a de-

cision by council."

The *Geelong Advertiser* revealed earlier this month that the State Government was investigating the CoGG and its Community Priority Projects program, which was not identified in council's budget papers.

Council reacted this week by releasing retrospective ward-by-ward listings of the projects funded.

Mr Mitchell said he was keen to see the facilities at Thomson be used by a wider variety of community groups. But he denied his long association with the Thomson FC meant he was unable to make objective decisions about funding priorities in his ward.

"I don't back away from the fact I lived 500m away



Buildings at Thomson Reserve.

Photo: MITCH BEAR

from this reserve, and I spent my youth in this reserve, and I still follow the Thomson Football Club," he said.

"I haven't been a member of the Thomson Football Club committee since, I think, 1999. I was elected to council in

2004. This (fund) system came in to play in 2005. This gave an opportunity for me, as the ward councillor, to put something back into the Thomson area."

DARK DAYS AT CITY HALL:
WEEKEND EXTRA



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WEDNESDAY 9 OCTOBER | 6:30 - 8:00PM BELMONT LIBRARY

Hear Maria speak about her short stories set against backgrounds ranging from rural Australia to Northern Europe and beyond, from the dark past of the Soviet era to a terrifying vision of the near future.

PROFESSOR MICHAEL BERK: CAN WE PREVENT DEPRESSION?
WEDNESDAY 16 OCTOBER | 6:30 - 8:00PM WAURN PONDS LIBRARY

This is a thought-provoking insight into depression by Professor Michael Berk, leading mental health researcher and current Alfred Deakin Chair of Psychiatry at Deakin University.

Find out about school holiday activities for children and youth. Visit our website or any library branch for further details.

DR PETER VUILLERMIN: EARLY LIFE ORIGINS OF COMMON ILLNESSES
THURSDAY 24 OCTOBER | 6:30 - 8:00PM WAURN PONDS LIBRARY

Join Peter for a fascinating look at the research being conducted by the Barwon Infant Study into how to provide babies with a healthy start in life. Learn about the potential relevance of modern environmental factors in the development of a range of common conditions.

TONY PARK: THE PREY
MONDAY 28 OCTOBER | 10:00 - 11:30AM BELMONT LIBRARY

Tony's gripping adventure novels set in the African heartland have thrilled audiences around the world. Join us for morning tea as Tony discusses the story behind his new book.

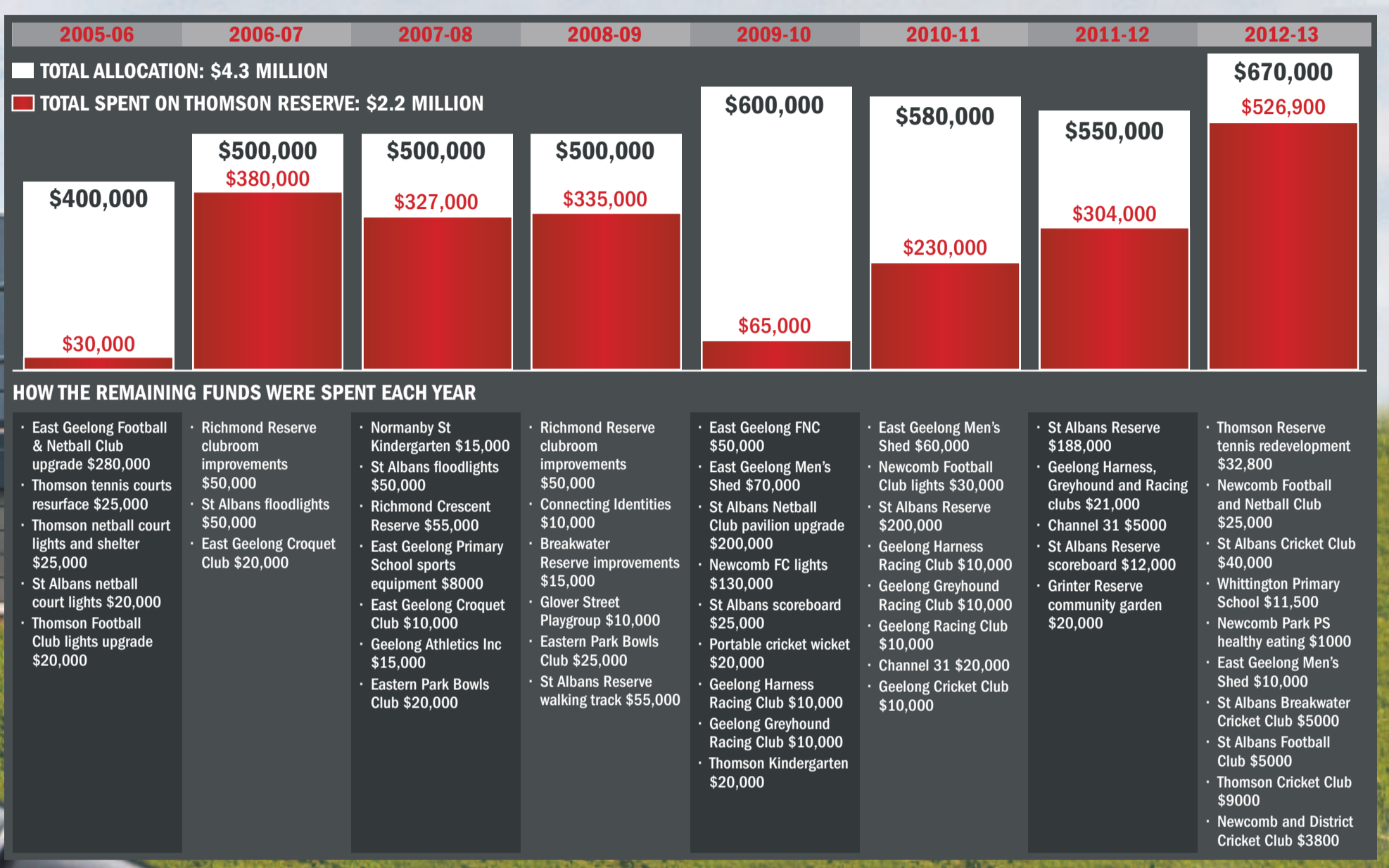
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\$2.2m in city funds



A basic flaw in the system of community funding

IT took the Whelan report into the "Cash for Council" saga to unleash a wave of conflict of interest admissions at the Geelong council.

Among those to declare their interests at the first post-Whelan meeting in June, 2006, was Cr John Mitchell, then two years off becoming the city's mayor.

The Austin ward councillor said he was a member of Thomson Sporting Club, which was about to undergo redevelopment.

A "member" is a modest



Shane FOWLES

COMMENT

way to describe his connections to the Thomson Tigers; former games record holder, former president and treasurer, and later to be an inaugural Hall of Fame inductee.

The timing of the declaration of interest was also curious. Through the Community

Priorities fund, Mitchell had already allocated \$380,000 out of a maximum \$500,000 to the Thomson Reserve Master Plan in the 2006-07 budget.

From Mitchell's personal ward-based fund, the rivers of cash for the Godfrey St reserve never ran dry.

Over the subsequent six budgets, a further \$1.787 million was allocated to the multi-sport facility. The spoils were also shared, with the reserve's football, netball, tennis and cricket clubs all receiving individual support

during Mitchell's eight-year reign.

It has taken another controversy — the public revelation that Geelong's ward-based scheme is being investigated by the Local Government Inspectorate — for the council to release its full list of funding via the program.

The Geelong public knew that Thomson Reserve had been well funded; it might have even deserved the support. What wasn't known was that it was ultimately one man — bestowed the title of a

Tigers official Legend — who had the majority control over the purse strings for the project. Whatever the merits of the master plan, the system of allowing councillors to direct large sums of money each year opens up a minefield of issues.

At the least, there is scope for public perceptions of conflict of interest and pork barrelling; at the worst, blatant favouritism.

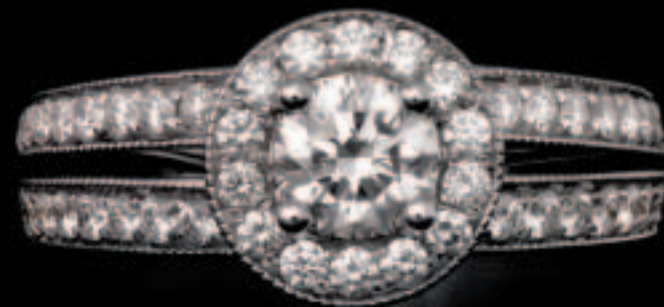
Mitchell felt he had a conflict of interest in June 2006, when the issue came to the

public chamber. That he was left unhindered to use the system — which was not publicly advertised and essentially controlled by him alone behind closed doors — to direct such substantial funds to Thomson Reserve speaks to its fundamental flaw.

It is not suggested that Mr Mitchell has acted inappropriately but the case demonstrates that perceptions of possible conflicts will always exist when funding control is given to a small group of people.



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