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'Death by 1000 cuts in Canberra': pokies battle crosses into NSW



By [Steve Evans](#)

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A new Vikings club with 150 poker machines is being planned just over the NSW border because of the crackdown on pokies in the ACT, the club's chief executive says.

Pokies tragedy

The Canberra Times

1:18

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Vikings Jerrabomberra would be the Vikings Group's first expansion out of the ACT.

The development application said the club "would cater for a maximum of 3200 persons". The poker machine lounge and the bar would operate seven days a week from 10am to 3am.

"It's not the right place for something so ginormous," Jerrabomberra Residents' Association president Margot Sachse said.

Vikings say the move has been prompted by restrictions and difficulties the club feels it faces as the ACT government wrestles

with how to clamp down on poker machines.

"It's been death by 1000 cuts in Canberra. There hasn't been any growth. Our costs have risen dramatically, and revenue does not keep pace, so our profitability is virtually non-existent," Vikings chief executive Anthony Hill said.

"If we want to grow our core business, we have to go over the border. We've got approximately 10,000 members over the border."



📷 An artist's impression of the new club.

Mr Hill also blamed the ACT's "cumbersome" planning system for pushing clubs to look elsewhere.

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An aerial photograph of a coastal town and beach. The town is built on a hillside overlooking a sandy beach and turquoise ocean. The water is clear and shallow, with many people visible on the beach. The sky is blue with some clouds.

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He said clubs in the ACT had excess land which could be used for housing at a time when people badly needed it, but the rules and the slowness of the process also prevented clubs from developing it.

"The land could remain for community use under the clubs' guidance," Mr Hill said.

"It's an opportunity for clubs to change revenue streams in the ACT.

"Most clubs are situated in really well-located areas, with access to transport, shops, schools. There's an opportunity to maintain both sustainability for the clubs and to achieve a number of policy objectives."

The ACT government rejects the suggestion its policy on pokies is failing. In a statement, it stood by decreasing the number of machines in ACT clubs but recognised a difficulty, saying: "One barrier to reducing the impact of problem gambling in the ACT is the easy access gamblers have to machines just across the border in NSW.

"As the territory continues to reduce the number of electronic gaming machine licences available, some local clubs may choose to maintain their current business model by relocating to NSW. That is a matter for them and their members."

The Vikings Group is one of the biggest clubs organisations in the ACT with four venues (Chisholm, Erindale, Lanyon and Town Centre).



📷 An artist's impression of the new club. Picture supplied

Just before the pandemic (when the last figures were published by the ACT Gambling and Racing Commission), the four Vikings clubs had 540 gaming machines. Their patrons lost \$17,070,137 to them. In the last financial year (2022-23), those losses by patrons rose to \$24,350,687 despite the ACT government's policy of cutting the number of poker machines to reduce "gambling harm" when people become addicted to pokies.

[Experts on the industry](#) say Australian machines are particularly addictive to some people. A recent study identified 4.2 per cent of suicides in one state as gambling-related. The ACT is unlikely to be that different.



📷 Jerrabomberra residents Margot Sachse, Robert Wilson and Anna Murton object to the new Vikings club to be built across the road. Picture by Siththixay Ditthavong

ACT Gaming Minister Shane Rattenbury wouldn't comment on why a club might be expanding outside the ACT because of ACT gaming laws. It was, his spokesperson said, "more of a planning issue".

On the NSW side of the border, potential neighbours of the planned club accused Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council of not consulting them.

"It's either incompetence or deception," said Robert Wilson, who lives 200 metres from the proposed site.

"I'm angry about the way we've been treated. It's disgraceful.

"There has been a blatant breach by QPRC of their own planning procedures and the relevant legislation (NSW Environmental Planning & Planning Assessment Act, 1979)."

Queanbeyan-Palerang Regional Council said: "Properties were sent three notifications from council via Australia Post. These were issued on 11 March, 26 March and 3 April."

A spokesperson for QPRG said the planning decision would be made by the Southern Regional Planning Panel, a state body with experts and a representative of the local council on it. The council receives submissions from the public on the application, and then gives its assessment to the planning panel, which decides the matter.

Anna Murton, whose house is 50 metres from the new club, also blamed the tighter regulations in the ACT for the "ludicrous" development.

"To me it's got more to do with the pokies licences in the ACT being cut," she said.

"The smell, the noise, the parking - into our back yard. We don't need it this close to houses."

Jerrabomberra Residents' Association said: "There is clear evidence that poker machines induce problem gambling and that they make money for clubs at the expense of vulnerable members of our community.

"The NSW state government is looking to reduce the number of machines as part of their gambling reform and we believe that establishment should lead the way and not rely on any poker machine revenue, just like the ACT government is trying to do with Canberra-based clubs."

The issue of poker machines in the ACT came into focus [after the suicide of Raimo "Ray" Kasurinen](#), who took his own life after gambling heavily on machines at the Hellenic Club.

Club statements of the couple's gambling activity showed he and his widow Marlene lost \$345,597.67 between October 26, 2012 and February 29, 2020.

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Steve Evans is a reporter on The Canberra Times. He's been a BBC correspondent in New York, London, Berlin and Seoul and the sole reporter/photographer/paper deliverer on The Glen Innes Examiner in country New South Wales. "All the jobs have been fascinating - an...

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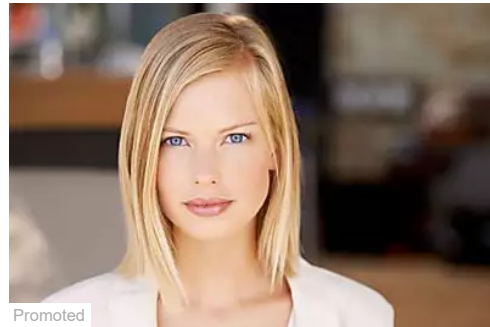
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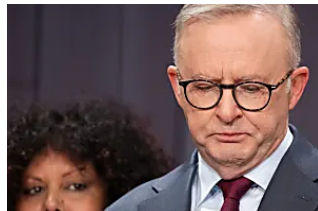
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