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## Construction on Walsh Bay's Pier 2/3 arts precinct set to 'begin soon'

Construction on Walsh Bay's Pier 2/3 arts precinct is set to begin within weeks after the Berejiklian government finally gave the green light to around \$100 million in funding for the project.

Create NSW, the government agency which is overseeing the project, confirmed construction works would "begin soon" after the *Herald* on Thursday reported Cabinet's expenditure review committee had ticked off long-delayed money at the end of October but had not announced it yet.

An artist's impression of the Walsh Bay redevelopment with Pier 2/3 in the background. Pier 2/3 will be home to some of the country's most significant arts organisations — including the Australian Chamber Orchestra, the Australian Theatre for Young People and Bell Shakespeare — which welcomed the restoration of the funding after a lengthy period of uncertainty.

But documents obtained by the *Herald* also indicate the government spent considerable time attempting to negotiate lower-cost ideas for the refurbishment of Pier 2/3, the final part of a major \$245 million revitalisation of Walsh Bay first announced during the 2015 election campaign.

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Bell Shakespeare executive director Gill Perkins, in emails to the project's managers sent on September 10, warned the company had raised "substantial private money ... on the basis of the design and footprint that had been previously agreed".

"Whilst we recognise the financial challenges government faces and can see how this revised design might equate to a reduction in construction cost, these premises in their current iteration do not support our operational or business needs and the aspirations," Ms Perkins wrote after the company was consulted on proposed designs, documents obtained under freedom of information laws show.

The Australian Chamber Orchestra, under the artistic direction of Richard Tognetti, is one of the organisations who have been displaced by the Walsh Bay redevelopment.

Australian Chamber Orchestra chairman Guido Belgiorno-Nettis, in separate emails to Arts Minister Don Harwin sent in June, said advice from the government that it was "currently unable to fulfil its 2015 election commitment ... is catastrophic news".

"The now unknown and uncertain commitment of this government to complete the Walsh Bay project places the ACO in a precarious and unacceptable position, a position we least expected from a government publicly committed to supporting the arts," Mr Belgiorno-Nettis wrote.

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The ACO's managing director Richard Evans also confirmed that "variations" to the original proposal which had been presented to his organisation were not "fit for purpose".

But Mr Evans yesterday said the new funding would provide the company more opportunities when it was able to move from its current headquarters in Circular Quay to the new precinct.

"We'll be able to more run education and ideas programs than we can now and they'll be some commercial and philanthropic opportunities that will arise by having greater visibility," he said."

Chris Puplick, the former Liberal senator who now chairs the Australian Theatre for Young People, said the additional funding was "more than adequate and from [the theatre]'s point of view, we look forward to a great new home".

Richard Crookes Constructions will begin the construction process in coming weeks, including finalising work on preserving the heritage structure of the wharf.

"The Walsh Bay Arts Precinct project is continuing as planned and construction works on Pier 2/3 will begin soon," a Create NSW spokesman said yesterday.

"Create NSW continues to work ... to confirm the existing agreed tenancy designs through detailed design finalisation meetings which are due to commence in the coming weeks."

The three arts organisations were originally scheduled to move into Pier 2/3 in January 2020, but construction is expected to take up to two years.

Mr Harwin declined to comment.

