

TO: Dunedin Centre Sub-committee

FROM: Communications Advisor

MEETING DATE: 16 June 2008

SUBJECT: **DUNEDIN CENTRE RE-DEVELOPMENT PROJECT -
COMMUNICATIONS**

SUMMARY

This report reviews the communications position around the Town Hall Redevelopment project and recommends a course of action to take the project forward.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the Sub-committee initiate a series of focus groups around the principles guiding the redevelopment project, with the objective of developing some kind of public consensus on these principles.

BACKGROUND

The history of the redevelopment project is covered in the report to the Sub-Committee from the Dunedin Centre Manager. When the project was first included in the city strategy and a staged redevelopment plan developed, it did not attract a significant amount of public attention. When four options were put to the 2007 annual plan deliberations there were 11 submissions, nine of which were opposed to the plans. In response to issues raised by these submitters and councillors, 12 options were presented to a council workshop in January this year.

Perhaps due to further publicity around the project, or realisation among interested people that the plans were well developed, opposition to the project led to the formation of a lobby group, Hands off Harrop, early this year. The group opposes any extension being built on the Harrop Street side of the Town Hall, with a key focus being the preservation of the view of the First Church spire looking down Harrop Street – one of the precinctual values set out in the District Plan. It is not clear whether the view per se is the prime motivation for the group, or whether the preservation of the view is the most direct way of arguing against building an extension on to the Town Hall, and that preserving the existing façade of the Town Hall is the main objective.

Hands off Harrop has successfully galvanised a significant amount of public opposition to the redevelopment project, such that there were strong and vocal submissions made during the recent annual plan hearings. Council chose to defer its decision on the project, asking instead for more work on two new options (13 and 14). This discussion is covered in the Centre Manager's report.

CURRENT POSITION

From a communications perspective, the project is now effectively in deadlock.

Without independent research it is impossible to say exactly where public sentiment lies on this project. While it might be tempting to think that there is some kind of 'silent majority' in the city that supports the redevelopment and would like to see Council get on with it, there is no factual evidence to back this up.

However, even if there was a majority in support of the project, there is still an active and effective level of opposition to it; opposition that may be mobilised if the Council attempts to move ahead under any of the options that involve adding an extension to the Town Hall.

DISCUSSION

The only way to develop a clear path forward on the project is to 'backtrack' a few steps and work on developing some kind of consensus around the principles driving the project.

While it is probably not possible to get full public agreement on all the principles, a robust public debate will give councillors some reassurance that all arguments for and against various aspects of the project have been well canvassed. They can then agree a set of principles and decide on the most appropriate development option.

A public discussion on the principles driving the project would involve a series of focus groups, run by the Council and independently chaired. The kind of questions that would need to be debated include the future of the Town Hall and Glenroy Auditorium as performance venues, whether it is preferable to have Council facilities subsidised through commercial operations or rates, what support there is for developing public space in Harrop Street, and whether there is any situation in which an addition to an historic building is acceptable. It would need to be emphasised that this is most definitely not design-by-committee. Design work will be dependent on the approved option.

There is no guaranteed outcome with a process like this and it would take time. It may be that the outcome is a general consensus that the city should only go ahead with the compliance upgrade.

Regardless of the outcome, such a process will generate a great deal more informed discussion around the options that must be well publicised through both the media and the Council's own communication channels.

CONCLUSION

Council should initiate a series of focus groups around the principles driving the redevelopment project. Once this is done, the Council will be able to agree a set of principles, which in turn will suggest which development option, should be approved.

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