

**TO:** Dunedin Centre Sub-committee

**FROM:** Communications Advisor

**MEETING DATE:** 23 June 2008

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

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## **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 agree a set of principles guiding the redevelopment project, using information from public meetings and independent research, before deciding on its preferred development option.

## **BACKGROUND**

The history of the redevelopment project is covered in the report to the Sub-Committee from the Dunedin Centre Manager dated 16 June 2008. 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.

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. In response to these submissions, Council chose to defer its decision on the project and asked 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, Option 13 appears to be the more straight-forward as it does not involve any changes to the exterior of the building. However, it is not yet clear whether Option 13 can meet the functional requirements of the redevelopment, particularly improving general flow and vertical circulation, and what this option will cost. The main communication risk in this option is in the potential for increased costs on the project, which is very likely to result in some negative public reaction. Even at the same projected cost, to spend a great deal of ratepayer money for questionable gain could also generate negative public reaction.

Option 14 involves more communications issues because it involves an addition to the Harrop Street side of the building and a change to the current addition on Moray Place. However, it incorporates many of the Peer Reviewer's recommendations and these took into account feedback from stakeholders and interest groups. Key changes are that the additions are smaller, the Metro Cinema can stay in its current location, and loading in and out of the Town Hall would remain off Harrop Street. All these factors have the potential to reduce some of the negative public response to the redevelopment from that received to date.

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. It could just as easily be argued that there is a 'silent majority' opposed to the project.

## **DISCUSSION**

The only outcome for the project that will meet with a level of public acceptance from those currently opposing the project is a gut-and-rebuild option that delivers full functionality at the same or less cost than currently projected. With the information available to date it is not clear that this will be possible, leaving the sub-committee deciding on some kind of compromise approach.

Making this decision will be simpler if the sub-committee has an agreed set of principles that is driving the project. Developing these principles should be done through an open public debate, backed up by information from independent research. This process can get underway at the same time as design and feasibility work on options 13 and 14 is proceeding.

A robust public debate will give councillors reassurance that all arguments for and against the various aspects of the project have been well canvassed. It will also give the public some reassurance that their arguments have been listened to and taken into account in the decision-making process and will provide a high level of transparency around the reasons for the final decision.

It should be emphasised that while such a process could lead to a greater level of public consensus around the project and the preferred option, there is no guarantee that this will be the case. In the end councillors will be the ones making the decision on how to proceed.

A public discussion on the principles driving the project would involve a series of public meetings, run by the Council but possibly independently chaired. Deciding on the questions should be done in the open forum, but the sorts of issues that could be debated include the future of the Town Hall and Glenroy Auditorium as performance venues, the benefit to Dunedin in having central city conference facilities, 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 the pros and cons of making additions to historic buildings. It would need to be emphasised that this is most definitely not design-by-committee. Design work will be dependent on the approved option.

Alongside these public meetings, the Council should commission independent research to test the same questions through a series of focus groups. This is a way of finding out the views of people who are not necessarily motivated to attend public meetings. The outcome of this research would feed into the public process.

## **CONCLUSION**

Council should agree a set of principles driving the redevelopment project before deciding on its preferred development option. This should be done after an open process of public debate and discussion combined with information from independent research.

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