

Moray Place Hotel proposal hearing - Meg Davidson appearing for City Rise Up.

Wednesday August 3, 2017.

I am a co-founder of City Rise Up. City Rise Up is a community group formed two years ago with the aim of protecting the heritage and amenity values of City Rise. Protection of the CBD's heritage and amenity is also within our brief.

Our submission covers familiar territory: a hotel that is too high, too bulky, out of keeping with its heritage surroundings, that does little for streetscape amenity; a building that will deprive the Octagon of sunlight and City Rise residents of views. We have worked hard to brand Dunedin as the heritage capital of New Zealand and don't want to lose that reputation.

Other submitters have covered these points very ably and I don't want to spend time rehashing them. Instead I want to examine the trade-off we are being asked to make: that despite breaching the spirit and letter of the operative and proposed district plan, this hotel should still be built because it will help Dunedin 'go ahead' financially. I will also talk about the changing demographics of City Rise and how the growth of a low-wage economy based around the hospitality industry adds to the threats the area is facing.

The applicant has so far presented no convincing figures to back up the claim that this hotel will help Dunedin grow. The Infometric analyst's one firm conclusion was that this proposal will NOT kick-start growth. It will lift the city's GDP, but profits will not be ploughed back into the community. They will go offshore to an international hotel chain; Dunedin, its businesses and its attractions will be there merely to service that chain.

The number of tour buses expected – 8 a day – indicates that this hotel is not principally about conference or stadium-related accommodation (and by the way, I am told by a reliable source that few conference organisers demand five star accommodation anyway). No. This is about mass tourism.

Is the trade-off worth it? Do we really want Dunedin to be a resort town where people on package tours bus in, spend a day being ferried around the usual traps and depart without seeing the real Dunedin we want to show them?

The proposed hotel is designed to capture spending in-house, in retail outlets, a restaurant, bar and hot pool. There is little incentive to leave the hotel on foot and poor pedestrian connectivity between the hotel and the street.

Being a host to mass tourism of this sort has well documented risks apart from the 'leakage' of profits offshore. It can shut out small local tourism operators, disadvantage existing retailers, overwhelm infrastructure and degrade natural resources.

Tourism is a volatile industry, no more so than today. The end of cheap aviation fuel is inevitable and will have a catastrophic effect on mass tourism. Recent floods, slips and earthquakes have demonstrated how vulnerable we are to factors outside our control. Can Dunedin's infrastructure cope? We can barely look after our own.

Resilience in the face of these threats is more likely with small, locally owned, adaptable, value added heritage and eco-based tourism operations and accommodation providers, and 'slow tourism'. Let's play to our strengths, not be railroaded by an outsider's agenda.

Jobs. Yes we need them in Dunedin; jobs to keep young, skilled, entrepreneurial people in Dunedin, to help them buy a house here and raise a family; not the low-paid, unskilled, itinerant sort of work the hospitality industry offers. (It is also dismaying that the applicant expects the apartments associated with the hotel to be sold to investors, not permanent residents.)

The social and economic consequences of the resort model are evident in Queenstown. The applicant's evidence suggested the hotel would help with the problem of crime in the Octagon. Really? The Queenstown court news would suggest the opposite.

Then there is the matter of accommodation for a low-paid, transient workforce. City Rise, the closest residential suburb to the CBD and the oldest, would be the most affected by the hotel. For residents it's not just about lost views. It's also about a loss of social cohesion and a loss of our residential heritage. The Edwardian and Victorian houses in this part of town range from small workers' cottages south of Rattray Street to the grand showcase residences of the Victorian city's elite. Houses in pockets where some charm and architectural coherence still remains have been turned into high-quality visitor accommodation – there's a real growth in Airbnb. Our city's residential heritage has great pulling power.

But in recent years there has been a large demographic shift. Many houses have been bought by investors for rental accommodation. They are either converted to studio rooms or demolished and replaced with multi-unit rental accommodation, often of a poor quality, poorly managed and with owners outside Dunedin or offshore. A healthy community needs a mix of residents to survive, and permanent residents are the glue that holds a community together. But poor behaviour of their transient neighbours coupled with rising property prices gives them a great incentive to leave. And if you also lose your view, what is there left to stay for?

Both during the construction phase and after it, the hotel will send many transient workers looking for nearby accommodation, so we can expect this trend to accelerate. We don't want City Rise to turn into a ghetto like the student area. We want to keep its residential heritage and we want to absorb our new residents into functioning communities, not low-quality dormitories.

City Rise Up has been very involved with the 2GP process in an effort to save our residential heritage and amenity. The DCC planners did acknowledge the poor quality of much of the new construction happening in City Rise. It looks as though there will be some design controls in the 2GP on new multi-unit development, which we are very relieved about, but nothing to protect heritage building stock from demolition in the areas nearest the site of the proposed hotel.

The applicant's evidence on Monday has unmasked the true nature of this hotel proposal and as a group City Rise Up has not had time to discuss it, so on these points I can not claim to speak for the group. What I have said about the tourism industry today is based on my own research rather than personal experience. Also, I realise my evidence must be regarded as speculative as the extra information the commissioners have requested is not in yet. However I previously owned and lived in a house in Cargill Street which would be badly affected by the hotel and I now own another City

Rise house where I hope to live in the future, in which the view of the hotel is very dominant; so I am open to questions on that score, and anything in our original submission.