

STATES OF JERSEY



CHARING CROSS: VACANT SITE – PETITION (P.38/2006) – COMMENTS

**Presented to the States on 11th May 2006
by the Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment**

STATES GREFFE

COMMENTS

The Minister for Planning and Environment owns property in the locality of Charing Cross. On this basis he considers it appropriate that he takes no part in commenting upon the proposition of the Connétable relating as it does to land in close proximity lest it be thought that his own views on this matter are unduly influenced by his financial interest in the area. Accordingly, the views stated below are those of the Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment.

The request of the Connétable of St. Helier to designate as an Area of Important Open Space any part of the vacant land situated at the intersection of York Street and Dumaresq Street is not supported by the Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment.

The Assistant Minister cannot support this proposition because –

- Only redevelopment of the site with a building will restore the character of the area and the townscape of this part of the town centre;
- Redevelopment of the site with retail use on the ground floor of a building is a more appropriate use of this town centre site than open space;
- Redevelopment of this site with a building has the potential to deliver wider benefits to the Island community that would not otherwise be realised.

These matters, and others raised by the Connétable of St. Helier in his report, are considered in further detail below.

Contribution to character and townscape quality

The Connétable, in his report, accepts that the development of this site with a building would restore the street pattern in the immediate locality. This cannot be in doubt as reference to maps in 1756, 1795 and the Le Gros Map of 1834 clearly show that as the town of St. Helier begins to grow in the first half of the 18th century new streets and buildings were beginning to be developed in the area that we now know as The Parade, Dumaresq, Hue, York, Castle, Seale and Sand Streets (map extracts at Appendix 1). It is clear that buildings existed on this site at this time and have done until their demolition in the late 1980s.

The report questions whether the development of a building here will re-capture the character of the area given, *'the near-complete destruction of much of the historic quarter which used to lie to the north and east of this area'* (i.e. Hue, Union and Dumaresq Streets). The Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment, however, considers that this is not necessarily the point at issue: he is of the view that the point at issue is whether the development of the site with a building will make a greater contribution to the character and townscape quality of this prominent site and this part of the town centre than an area of open space. The Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment believes that it will.

The Assistant Minister also believes that because the development of the site with a building will make a contribution to the character of the area and enhance the townscape quality of this part of town that it is important to achieve this objective and to realise this opportunity.

The St. Helier Urban Character Appraisal (UCA) (2005), which was commissioned by the former Environment and Public Services Committee, is quoted at length, but selectively, in the report and, in so doing, the *'scathing critique of planning policy'* that has allowed much of this historic quarter to be lost to 1960s development is highlighted. The Assistant Minister believes that the lessons of the past are not at issue here: the more pertinent point that needs to be recognised is that we have learned from them and are trying to respond to them. In this respect the UCA highlights this shift in planning policy, and the desire to not only protect but to repair the character – and the elements that provide that character – of different parts of the town. In this respect, the Urban

Character Appraisal is worthy of further, more detailed examination:

Urban Character Appraisal

The UCA seeks to divide the town up into areas and to define what is good and bad about those areas, and what can be done to improve them. In the case of the vacant site in question, it falls between two character areas, but the presence and problems of vacant sites are referred to in both (see maps at Appendix 2):

Character Area 7: The Parade and Esplanade

3. Parade / Town centre boundary

- Series of gap sites and altered street pattern breaks down urban grain;
- Weak visual and physical links between town core and Parade

Character Area 8: Town Centre core

11. Loss of grain

- pockets of underused or vacant land undermine townscape qualities;
- vacant sites affect continuity of street activity;
- inappropriate development resulting in loss of traditional St. Helier urban texture

Whilst this is perhaps expressed in slightly esoteric language it is essentially saying that vacant, gaps sites, such as the site the subject of this proposition, do little to contribute to the character or townscape quality of town.

The answer to this lies in their redevelopment in a manner that positively enhances and contributes to the unique character of an area and the town of St. Helier: in this case, that involves the development of the site with a building with a frontage flush with the back of the footpath, which would restore the character and grain of development in this part of the town.

Any development of only part of the site with a building, in an attempt to 'hide' the large, unsightly exposed gables of adjacent buildings, would not – in terms of restoring the townscape qualities of grain, frontage width and street pattern – make any positive contribution to the character of the area and would likely cause harm.

Land use

For the future of the locality, this site is important and its use and appearance should make a positive contribution to the streets around. In particular, the Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment believes that the use to which the space is put should make a significant contribution to the vitality and liveliness of this area. He believes that this is best served by establishing a use here that would, in its own right, provide an attraction and a reason for people to come and visit this part of the town.

In this respect it is important to have regard to the fact that the site is on the edge of the main retail area of the town centre: the primary function of the town centre is retail and it is the retail use of land and buildings that is the principal reason that people visit the town centre. On this basis, the Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment believes that it is important that any use on this site has a retail use on the ground floor of the building which will have an active frontage and which will create pedestrian movement. This will ensure that this use contributes to the vitality of the area; contributes to the maintenance of the primary retail function of the town centre; and that it animates the street by way of visual interest and activity.

The Connétable of St. Helier suggests that the site should become an 'important open space' part of the justification for which is the use it has enjoyed by people passing through York Street since seating has been provided here. This raises a number of issues which are worthy of further consideration –

The 'importance' of this area as open space

The site will never be a ‘green lung’ or an ‘important’ open space, but always an incidental one that, in itself, will not provide a reason to visit the area, simply because of its scale, context and location.

In the context of St. Helier and the locality of the site in particular, Parade Gardens; the Cenotaph and ever the newly created space at Charing Cross featuring the ‘crapaud column’, could be described as ‘important open spaces’ with different characters which all serve different functions and, in themselves, are used by people in their own right as ‘places to go’. It is also relevant to note that all of these spaces are within minutes walk from the site in question.

Animating the area

The provision of seating for those in need of a rest can and has been met by the provision of those seats and benches provided along York Street and at Charing Cross as part of the recent St. Helier Street Life Programme improvements undertaken here. There is also potential to provide more seating in the area, for example, outside the Town Hall.

The widening of pavements here has also provided opportunities for the street to be used for eating and drinking and a number of the commercial establishments along York Street have created al fresco areas on the widened pavements. The objectives of animating the street, including the provision of seating and places for people to eat and drink, do not thus need to be met by the use of the vacant site which could provide a more beneficial use that would be of greater value to the area by attracting people to it, to shop.

Potential for wider benefits

The Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment believes that this site does have the potential to deliver wider benefit to the community related, not only to the refurbishment of the historic buildings in Dumaresq Street and Pitt Street, but also to the remodelling and improvement of all of the buildings on the area of land bordered by York Street, Pitt Street and Dumaresq Street and occupied by the Channel Island Co-operative Society (CICS).

Establishing the nature and extent of any such potential benefit is, however, related more to the disposal of the site – which is matter that will come before the States – rather than the requirement to develop the site with a building: the view of the Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment would remain – that the site should be redeveloped with a building – irrespective of to whom the site might ultimately be sold to.

The Assistant Minister does not believe that an assumption that *‘building on the site is a prerequisite of the regeneration of the building group’* is made in the planning brief. The planning brief simply suggests that the site **could** act as catalyst for wider regeneration: whether it does or not is dependent upon the sale of the site and is not a matter for the planning brief (which concerns itself just with the vacant site).

Other issues

Use of Pitt Street for unloading

The Connétable correctly states that it was the decision of the Parish of St. Helier’s Roads Committee in 2002 to permit the CICS to use Pitt Street to service its premises that enabled the future of the vacant site to begin to be addressed.

The irony of this is that it was the Parish of St. Helier’s Roads Committee which had prohibited the CICS from using its unloading facility in Pitt Street in the first place (albeit during a previous incumbent’s term of office) that had prevented this matter from moving forward for several years.

Alternative uses

The Connétable asserts that the blank gables which abut the vacant site have served a useful purpose in allowing the installation of public art exhibitions employing banners. It is relevant to note that such banners can and have

been hung from buildings.

Protection of views

The Connétable refers to the advantage of being able to ‘glimpse’ the facades of buildings, including the Foot Buildings, in Dumaresq Street were this site to be retained as an open area and sets this against the context of the Island Plan and the requirement to protect and enhance views.

The Assistant Minister for Planning and Environment does not consider this view to be of such value as to be worthy of protection and enhancement and is of the opinion that this assertion is sponsored principally by those traders in Dumaresq Street wishing to preserve their visual presence to shoppers rather than any concern about the public appreciation of historic building frontages. Moreover, restoration of the built fabric of the site and a re-establishment of the street pattern and urban grain of the area would repair the character of the area whilst still retaining a tantalising ‘glimpse’ down Dumaresq Street.

It is considered that this serves to maintain and enhance the unique quality and charm of St. Helier, which was summarised in the Urban Character Appraisal as ‘*something different around every corner*’ and would evoke a sense of discovery in searching out the glimpsed gems of Dumaresq Street.

APPENDIX 1



Dumaresq Street,
St Helier
circa 1756



Dumaresq Street,
St Helier
circa 1795



Dumaresq Street,
St Helier
circa 1834

Extract from St. Helier Urban Character Appraisal

Strengths and weaknesses

Character Area 7: The Parade and Esplanade

3 Parade/Town Centre Boundary

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