

STATES OF JERSEY



NEW URBAN SQUARE IN BROAD STREET: RELOCATION OF TAXI RANK

Lodged au Greffe on 10th May 2005
by the Connétable of St. Helier

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

THE STATES are asked to decide whether they are of opinion –

- (a) to request the Environment and Public Services Committee –
 - to defer the implementation of its decision to re-establish a taxi rank in the area previously used for this purpose in Broad Street for a period of one year from the date of opening of the new urban square on 17th June 2005;
- (b) to designate a public taxi rank in the area of Broad Street which provides adequate facilities for taxi drivers and their customers, whilst maintaining the integrity and maximising the potential of the new urban square.

CONNÉTABLE OF ST. HELIER

REPORT

Introduction

The regeneration of Broad Street has been a States' strategic objective for many years. '2000 and Beyond' (published by the Policy and Resources Committee in 1995) set out the objective of improved pedestrian facilities, amongst other things. States housing policies have increasingly focused on the need for St. Helier to provide more accommodation to relieve the pressure on green field sites, with the acceptance that the *quid pro quo* of that is the provision of sufficient amenity space within the urban area. Both the new and the former Island Plan, and the "street life" debate, recognise the need for improvements in pedestrian safety there, especially on the Lloyds TSB corner, while the former Urban Renewal Sub-Committee put in several years of work on the project, including a half-day workshop held at the Town Hall involving all stakeholders. As long ago as 1997, candidates for the new post of Centre Ville coordinator were required to produce a plan for the enhancement of the Broad Street area, and a vision of a new urban square was presented by them.

The Tourism strategy has also recognised the need for the town centre to be improved so that our visitors are attracted into the heart of town, rather than directed east and west from Liberation Square.

Successive Public Services, Planning, and more recently, Environment and Public Services Committees have undertaken consultation with stakeholders in the area, including with representatives of motorcyclists, who until recently enjoyed free parking alongside the Broad Street toilet block, but who have now been successfully relocated to other motorcycle bays around the town.

Negotiations with representatives of the taxi drivers, accustomed since time immemorial to park up and pick up passengers on the other side of the toilet building, have been far less productive. While alternative ranks have been proposed in every possible location around the new square, the taxi drivers have never accepted any proposal which does not allow their vehicles to penetrate the square and circulate around the Broad Street toilet block.

Retailer interest in the regeneration scheme has increased dramatically since the works started at the beginning of 2005, as it has become clear to them that economic growth is likely to go hand in hand with the environmental improvements being carried out. It was following approaches from this group of stakeholders that I sought to find an alternative to re-introducing what was as much a taxi parking area as a taxi rank into a high quality urban square.

The present Environment and Public Services Committee were faced at the beginning of 2004 with a problem: the previous Committee under Deputy Dubras had pursued the regeneration of Broad Street with a will; negotiations with stakeholders were progressing well, and materials for the scheme had been purchased by the Committee out of the Urban Renewal vote. The Committee of the day was united in its wish to see a new urban square that would only achieve its potential, especially given its small footprint, if it were not to be traversed by vehicles.

The present Committee under Senator Ozouf wished to progress the scheme but was unable to do so because taxi driver representatives made it clear that they expected their use of the former taxi rank to be preserved, albeit in a reduced scale. The Committee was told that unless they guaranteed the continued presence of parked taxis in the Square, work would not proceed. Taxi drivers collected a petition of around 1,500 signatures against the scheme, and The Transport and General Workers' Union became involved. Many meetings of the Environment and Public Services Committee were held to try to find a mutually acceptable solution to the problem, and the start date to the works delayed. Finally, the Committee was threatened with a picket line being set up preventing the States manual workers from starting work on site. Under the circumstances, the Committee felt it had no alternative but to guarantee the taxi drivers' continued use of the Square after the works had been completed. Only when the guarantee was provided was the threat of the picket lifted and the Committee 'allowed' to proceed with the works.

As soon as retailers, in particular, as well as members of the wider community, saw the new square taking shape, complete with the restoration of the Le Sueur obelisk including works to re-introduce the fountains, they voiced their opposition to the re-introduction of vehicles into the square. Another feature of the project, the conversion of

the Broad Street toilet block into some form of café, with replacement toilet facilities being provided in a refurbished facility at the head of Conway Street, began to excite the imagination of the community, not least the 9 firm tenderers that put in bids to operate the new kiosk. Although tenderers were aware that the potential for an al fresco area around the new café could be significantly compromised if the Square was re-opened to through traffic, yet a range of imaginative proposals was still submitted.

The Parish of St. Helier, which owns the Broad Street toilet block, has received underwriting from the Tourism Development Fund to carry out the conversion of the building, and there is a strong case for including within the facilities offered by the kiosk a central booking facility for cultural venues such as the Arts Centre and the Opera House.

It is well-known that al fresco facilities are transforming other parts of St. Helier into the vibrant quarters such as are an integral part of urban regeneration across Europe, North America and Australasia. It is a fact that, given the relative narrowness of the site, the reintroduction of vehicular movement will compromise the ability of local traders to exploit the potential for external seating or display areas, while the people who congregate at the new fountains around the Le Sueur obelisk will have to run the gauntlet of vehicles driving through the Square only a metre or so from the side of the new café.

In essence, the question being asked by many as they see the Broad Street project taking place, including some who were initially opposed to the scheme, is this: if alternative taxi rank facilities can be found close to the original position occupied by the taxis, then why prejudice the success of the new urban square by allowing parked and moving vehicles into it? One of the traders put it like this: 'I don't know whether the square will prove to be the exciting new urban space that is predicted, but we won't know unless we allow a period of grace of, say, a year, in which everyone involved can do their utmost to attract new customers to the area. If it doesn't work, then let the taxis back on.' This seems to me to be a commonsense response to the situation in which we find ourselves, so long as adequate alternative facilities can be found for the taxi rank.

Alternative taxi rank facilities have been proposed (see plan in the attached Appendix) close to the Le Sueur obelisk, in the location currently used as a temporary bus stop. It is difficult to conceive of a more central location in Broad Street than this. The head of the rank is clearly visible from the feeder rank in Conway Street. Advice has been taken by officers of the Parish of St. Helier from both the Environmental Health Department and the Health and Safety Inspectorate, and there are no problems in this location. This solution is an improvement on the current temporary taxi rank in Library Place as it is closer to the centre of Broad Street, and allows Library Place to revert to its previous layout, with valuable short-stay parking, disabled parking and unloading bays being replaced.

In recent weeks I have convened 2 meetings with taxi driver and TGWU representatives in an effort to find a practical solution to the competing needs of the stakeholders of Broad Street. At the meeting at which the alternative taxi rank was presented objections were made, not only to the scheme itself, which I was assured, was a waste of money and likely to be a wind-tunnel nobody would wish to use, but to the requirement of taxis to loop around Library Place and Mulcaster Street instead of being to exit the area by Broad Street. This is a valid concern and one which will be addressed by the Committee, if this Proposition is accepted, when it designates an alternative taxi rank.

I also pointed out to taxi driver and TGWU representatives that the interests of that industry (and, of course, the needs of their customers) have been respected in the past, as is seen in the willingness of the Environment and Public Services Committee and the Parish of St. Helier to allow taxis 24hour access through New Cut in place of the restricted access that was maintained for many years. This provision has cut taxi journey times significantly.

Unfortunately taxi driver and TGWU representatives are simply unwilling to consider any alternatives to the most recent scheme, as they have a guarantee from the Environment and Public Services Committee that they can return to the Square. Despite having heard the earnest entreaties of the retailer representatives who attended the first of the 2 meetings, they intend to re-occupy the Square when it is finished, and are not interested in discussing any alternative taxi rank which would allow the retailers' aspirations for the Square to be trialled. They said that they are unwilling to await the outcome of a States' debate on the subject, and will drive their vehicles onto the new paving as soon as the area is sufficiently paved to admit them.

It is for this reason that I am seeking the States' support in varying the decision of the Environment and Public Services Committee to allow taxis back into the Broad Street urban square and to allow a period of one year's grace, during which the Committee will continue its efforts in partnership with the Parish of St. Helier to meet the aspirations of all stakeholders, and the needs of the wider community, and to designate a public taxi rank which is fit for that purpose. I am confident that a solution can be found which provides a 'win win' solution for stakeholders.

Financial and manpower considerations: there are none, although the part that the Broad Street project can play in the economic growth of the town is bound to be reduced if its potential for retail activity is compromised by the re-introduction of parked and moving vehicles. The Parish of St. Helier would also receive less income from a much-reduced al fresco area, although the Parish is less concerned about the potential loss in al fresco income than with the impact upon local retailer confidence that will result from an inability to find a practical solution to the problem.

APPENDIX

