

STATES OF JERSEY



HISTORIC BUILDINGS IN PITT STREET AND DUMARESQ STREET: REQUEST TO MINISTER FOR PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENT

Lodged au Greffe on 29th May 2013
by the Connétable of St. Helier

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

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

to request the Minister for Planning and Environment –

- (a) not to allow the demolition of 4 – 6 Pitt Street and 6 – 8 Dumaresq Street due to the importance of these buildings to St. Helier's historic core;
- (b) to take steps to ensure that the owners of the buildings protect them against further deterioration; and
- (c) to work with interested parties to secure the repair and restoration of the buildings.

CONNÉTABLE OF ST. HELIER

REPORT

The redevelopment of the privately owned site bordered by Pitt Street, Dumaresq Street and York Street has been the subject of various schemes and planning applications over the last 20 years. Past proposals for the site have sought to achieve the retention of the historic buildings bordering one side of the site and their incorporation into a new commercial development as one would expect to find in any European town where built heritage is valued. On a recent visit to Rennes, a city which escaped the ravages of bombing during the Second World War, I was struck not only by the beauty of the many shops and houses dating back to Medieval times, but also by the pride taken by that community in their historic town centre and the obvious attraction that carefully and patiently restored old buildings have for visitors to that city. The demolition of any of the buildings which are the subject of this proposition would be simply unthinkable in Rennes or, indeed, in most UK towns.

This is not to underestimate the importance in the present economic situation of planning permissions being granted for the development of such sites as 'the Co-op site', and one understands the pressure on States members who make planning decisions to play their part in stimulating the economy. This application (P/2011/1283) offers not only a boost to the construction industry, but also significant economic benefits in providing new retail and office space in the heart of St. Helier. However, the historic buildings that are part of the development site have huge importance to the Island's heritage, especially since the majority of such buildings have been lost – not by bombing, as is the case in so many French towns, but to the developments carried out in the 1960s and 1970s, devastation recorded in the books of Andre Ferrari. The restoration and re-use of the shops and houses bordering the site in Dumaresq Street could and should be seen as of economic benefit in their own terms, especially if a masterplan is created by the Planning Department to inform and guide the redevelopment of the adjacent sites which are currently used for car parking.

Anyone who doubts the potential for these buildings to be restored and re-used only has to visit the newly repaired property of similar date at 16 New Street which is an important addition to the National Trust's portfolio of properties in Jersey. The National Trust is campaigning for the protection of the buildings that are threatened by the current planning application for the Co-op site, and there is no doubt that this body could oversee their restoration.

The retention of the properties at 4 – 6 Pitt Street and 6 – 8 Dumaresq Street was secured a decade ago when the St. Helier Roads Committee agreed to allow the Co-op supermarket to carry out unloading in Pitt Street, a Parish by-road. At the time, the redevelopment plan sought to punch a hole through the gable end of the building known to many as the Foot building, with its fast-fading 'His Master's Voice' mural. The Parish's agreement to unloading in Pitt Street meant that the loss of one part of this group was easier to resist. Later iterations of the redevelopment plan showed the 18th century shops restored and re-used, although recent proposals sought to remove some of the listed buildings in order to create access for an underground car park for the use of commuters to the proposed offices. The Roads Committee was generally supportive of the scheme, despite reservations some members had over whether the loss of any of the historic buildings could be justified in the creation of underground parking. The present application was supported by the Roads Committee principally because it solved the unloading 'problem' as well as adding to the public realm.

As Constable of the Parish, I have to look at the proposals with considerations other than simply the requirement to provide off-street deliveries and to remove the occasional vehicle from a Parish by-road. I believe that the arguments advanced by the National Trust and by such internationally respected local experts on heritage as Marcus Binney should give us reason to halt the demolition of a group of valuable and potentially charming buildings in the centre of St. Helier. We have, after all, signed up to the relevant agreement and have vowed in our Strategic Plan and Island Plan to pursue policies that will safeguard the built environment. The economic value of built heritage needs to be appreciated as an increasing number of visitors to Jersey are attracted by our history and culture.

The Minister for Planning and Environment has not welcomed my request for him to postpone the determination of the present application. In an e-mail (24th May 2013) he stated: 'I do not think that this is an issue for the States whilst the live planning application is being determined. It might well open up claims for compensation. The correct procedure is for the application to be determined and then if you so wish to bring a motion to the Assembly for purchase/assistance etc. the protocol followed with Plémont.' The reference to Plémont is ironic, in my view, given the Minister's decision to vote against the purchase of the site to secure environmental benefits for Jersey. Nor do I agree with him that my request is incorrect procedurally. The applicant has no right to be compensated if the States decide against the demolition of buildings of local interest, any more than a homeowner can expect compensation if the Planning Department prevents them from removing wooden windows, for example.

The Minister's e-mail continues: 'You may well of course be prejudging the decision to be taken in any event and that is something that the Panel and I should not be drawn on.' Perhaps I am: after all, the application is recommended for refusal by the officers. However, given the rather unpredictable nature of planning decisions and the importance of saving 4 – 6 Pitt Street and 6 – 8 Dumaresq Street, that is not a risk I am prepared to take.

Financial and manpower implications

There are no financial or manpower implications for the States arising from the adoption of this proposition.