

Councillor

Tunbridge Wells Borough Council

10 November 2017

The Civic Development – an open letter

Dear Councillor

I am writing to you about the decision you will shortly be called upon to take regarding the civic development, the most momentous for Tunbridge Wells for a generation if not longer.

The Society welcomes the Council's intention to invest in the town, and promote it as a destination for visitors. We believe this will be both economically and socially beneficial for the whole borough. But like you, we need to be assured that the project is as good as it could be. Borrowing a net £72m for this package is a heavy commitment. Hence you and we must be satisfied that it is affordable to the Council and ratepayers.

The present civic buildings are the Council's largest single asset. They are fine examples of their period, protected by listing and embodying much civic pride. It is fundamental to any changes that they are respected; firm plans are needed now for the future of the whole complex, including the police station, and not left to be decided later. Regarding the Police Station, we feel that it will be in the town's and council's best interest if the police can be found a replacement building which suits their needs and their existing building purchased. We do not expect a Cinema-site situation of prolonged disuse and dereliction, but we are concerned that the Council might be forced later on into an unsatisfactory compromise eg. we would not regard residential use of the civic complex as satisfactory.

We welcome the strides that have been made in adopting digital communications, but we do not feel this displaces the need for personal contact. To us it is basic that a civic centre provides for personal contact between councillors, officers and the public, whether in formal meetings or otherwise. The Town Hall is said to be unsuitable for this, on structural and security grounds. If, as we now understand, the public will not be admitted to the new civic "offices", it needs to be restated why the Council is relocating from the Town Hall, and how it is intended the new building will function. Public access to the Council was a key feature of the successful campaign in 2010 against removing the offices from the town centre.

The Society strongly supports the Cultural Hub, and accepts that the decision to relocate Gateway there cannot now be revisited. Much Gateway business involves a need for support or information from specialist staff. We have always regretted the divorce between "first contact" and the rest of the Council's staff, and believe the general aim should be to make direct contact easier. There is the danger that removing the offices to Mount Pleasant Avenue will make this more difficult.

With regard to the theatre, we do not have the expertise to predict its future profitability. Hence we think it is our proper course of action to accept the consultants' positive report on this matter. Subject to this consideration, we support the new theatre. We recognise that significant upgrading of the Assembly Hall would take it out of use for at least two years, be very expensive and it would still fall short of what is

required for major touring productions. We welcome the Council's determination to make the new theatre suitable and available for cultural and community purposes as well as commercial ones. We support the objective of maintaining the Assembly Hall in use until it is replaced.

We understand the Council envisages rebuilding the interior of the Town Hall, with additional floors, and also proposes a residential block in Crescent Road. We do not oppose these ideas and will respond to the plans when we see them. However, when making your decision, it is important that these developments are regarded as integral, albeit subsequent, stages of the present proposal. This would help to set the project in the context of the town centre as a whole, in relation to parking, traffic generation, access and public realm improvements. The question arises why, if the Town Hall is to be comprehensively refashioned, it cannot accommodate the Council in part of the resulting space, and hence benefit from the proximity to the Hub.

We accept the principle of locating two substantial buildings on the edge of Calverley Grounds, but are concerned that they will transform what is now a significant green space in the town centre. The onus is on the Council to ensure that this transformation is beneficial. The proposed remedial planting is welcome but not enough to compensate for the loss of 66 trees, among them the finest in the park. We feel strongly that, if the project proceeds in the form proposed, a plan must be drawn up for Calverley Grounds. This must cover activities and facilities, planting and land-form, together with matters such as lighting and the disposal of spoil so they are all implemented in conjunction with the development.

We also feel the office building in particular is too large and does not respond well to its sloping site. A reason for its bulk is the incorporation of parking within the building and under Calverley Grounds. This and the additional parking in Crescent Road, account for a large element of the total cost (£20m out of £72m). The Calverley Grounds parking is accessed awkwardly from Mt Pleasant, where there are separate proposals to upgrade the urban realm with shared space. Some on-site parking may be unavoidable, but in this form it is very unsatisfactory and we question the need for so much as opposed to alternative parking (existing or new) nearby.

To sum up:

- * the Society calls for the future use of the present civic buildings to be decided now together with reasons as to why the Council cannot return there after rebuilding;
- * we think the Council should make every effort possible to purchase the Police Station;
- * we call for a re-think about the quantity of and access to the underground car-parking associated with the new office building and theatre;
- * we want to see the design of the new office building modified as it does not respond well to the sloping site;
- * we think there is an urgent need for a comprehensive plan for Calverley Grounds to be implemented in parallel with the civic development.

Thank you for taking the trouble to read this. I will of course be happy to discuss any of the issues raised here. I look forward to following your deliberations.

Brian Lippard
Chairman: Royal Tunbridge Wells Civic Society

Copies to: All Councillors, William Benson, David Candlin, Lee Colyer, Mike McGeary.