

Strong Protests But Experts Are Appointed

"I'm Grateful To The C.T." Says Coun. Staniforth

C.T. May 24, 1963

WITH a vote of 13 to 5, Christchurch Council on Tuesday appointed Messrs. Shingler Risdon Associates as consultants to the Corporation for town centre development. But this was not before strong opposition had been voiced by some councillors during a heated debate.

During the debate Coun. Tom Staniforth referred to the Christchurch Times of two weeks ago in which it was exclusively announced that it was the intention of the Planning Committee to ask the Council to approve the appointment of the consultants. "I am grateful to the C.T. for its public spirited interest in this matter," said Coun. Staniforth.

In a report to the Planning Committee the Town Clerk stated that the firm had indicated that all the terms and conditions previously outlined were acceptable to them and that their fee would not exceed £2,700 and might be substantially lower dependent on the amount of survey information which could be made available by the County Planning Officer.

The recommendation which the Council approved was that they enter into an agreement with Messrs. Shingler Risdon Associates in a form to be prepared by the Town Clerk on the lines that no fee will be payable by the Corporation for the work involved in advice and consultation and preparation of plans until such time as the statutory maps have been submitted to the Minister and published, when the Council will, at their option pay the appropriate fees or seek the engagement of a development company.

Such a development company will (a) pay the consultants' fees, (b) carry out development in the town centre on the basis of the detailed plans prepared by the consultants and approved by the Council, and (c) appoint the Council's consultants to be architects for the purpose of such development.

The recommendation was proposed by Coun. W. E. Tucker, chairman of the Planning Committee. His statement is reported in full on page eight [below].

Coun. Staniforth said he was unashamedly opposing the recommendation because he was

In the limelight already this year is Christchurch Planning Committee. Newly appointed to it at the Council's annual meeting on Tuesday were Aldermen Mrs. D. Baker, W. E. Morgan and J. W. Richardson, and Couns. H. R. Bourke, W. A. Bridge, A. J. Griffiths, E. N. S. Spreadbury, Mrs. I. A. Stevenson and W. E. Tucker, who is the committee's chairman.

not in favour of "changing the face of our old town".

He went on: "I am quite sure I am giving the opinion of large numbers of townspeople when I say: 'Why don't you leave our town alone'.

"I suggest it is not possible today for members of the Council to vote on the recommendation for the simple reason that we do not know what we are asked to vote for.

"True, we are asked for the appointment of consultants but what are they going to recommend? Maybe members of the Planning Committee know what is envisaged in connection with the development, but the Council has not been told.

"GRAVEST DISQUIET"

"There is the gravest disquiet in the minds of townspeople who are wondering just what is being planned in respect of the town centre".

The preamble to the minute referred to a previous minute, but having read that he would ask councillors if they really knew what they were being asked to support. "Quite frankly all I understand is we are asked to approve the appointment of consultants to advise us on town centre

development and from that it is quite obvious that a far reaching scheme or the alteration of the town is being worked out.

"I have no idea what these plans are. Certainly the C.T. have made an attempt to tear away the veil of secrecy which covers the Planning Committee's proposals. I believe that the ratepayers, denied any official information of what is being planned for this lovely old town, are very worried and anxious. I am very grateful to the C.T. for its public-spirited interest in this matter".

Coun. Staniforth went on: "In the C.T. article we did begin to get a glimmer of what is in the minds of those who would change our town.

"The new town apparently, is to be a town consisting mainly of large multiples because in this development envisaged it would be only those who could afford the high rents asked for the properties to be built.

"To encourage these large multiples to come to Christchurch, as I read it in the article, the Town Council is to be asked to exercise compulsory purchase powers to buy out owners of land and property who do not wish to part with their property".

NEW APPEARANCE

In recent years, he said, the High Street had to a very great extent taken on a new appearance in relation to new shop fronts. Most of the eyesores had disappeared, and by and large the new shop fronts were rather attractive.

He wondered, under the suggested scheme, what would happen to those shops. "We don't know, but according to the article in the C.T. the consultants did apparently, tell the C.T. that if the new buildings stood in the way of the major scheme, it might pay to pull the shops down.

"I ask you, Sir, is this not madness—midsummer madness?"

"Christchurch is still a town possessing individual character and charm and if it were to be redeveloped in the way the planning committee possibly has in mind it would become a town like hundreds of others.

"Before we vote we must be told what the committee has in mind and how much of High Street is involved—does it involve Bargates, Church Street, Castle Street?— what will happen to the Town Hall?—what properties will be bulldozed?—what are the finances of the scheme?"

"There has been much talk of public relations between the Council and ratepayers. This makes for bad public relations. We 20 have a duty to consider the feelings of the 20,000 electors and I believe in a matter such as this —so far reaching—we should not embark on it without the approval of the people.

BLANK CHEQUE

"If this resolution were to be passed it would mean in effect, we, the Council, were giving the Planning Committee a blank cheque and taking the first step to the destruction of Christchurch as we know it. We would be committing ourselves to something we know nothing about, or at the best, next to nothing".

Said Coun. Staniforth: "I know it will be said that my views are clouded by sentiment, but sentiment is not the dirty word that many would have us believe".

Supporting the recommendation, Ald. Mrs. D. Baker said they hadn't got a veil of secrecy in the Planning Committee—"No more than in any other committee".

All the trouble about multiples and pulling down can be answered by a section in the recommendation which says that the plans prepared by the consultants will be approved by the Council.

Something had got to be done; the difficulty of the land round the Town Hall and the housing of their officers had been going on since 1961. How could they meet those difficulties unless they settled on some plan. Nothing would be done until the Council had approved the plan

and the recommendation was just one step forward.

Opposing the recommendation, Coun. John Higgins said he had been canvassing the Somerford area for the past three months, and it had been difficult to find anyone in favour of the scheme. They were suspicious of it.

It was not so very long ago that a petition went round Christchurch against a similar project to this. It had 7,000 signatures on it.

He could not see what Christchurch would get out of the scheme financially, culturally or even visually.

Ald. W. E. Morgan said he was voting for the recommendation because they wanted the best advice they could possibly get

Coun. Higgins, he said, had referred to opinions he had obtained, but he could not see how anyone could give an opinion worth having if they didn't know what the plan was. He did not know what it was himself. He was not voting for any plan but for the appointment of consultants who would consider a plan with the planning authorities.

He suggested they go to the back of High Street and have a look; "Do Couns. Higgins and Staniforth think that is an area that should be left alone. Well I don't. I think it is a slum and the sooner we do something about it the better".

Ald. Morgan had seen one of the plans produced by the planning officer and had indicated certain parts of it he objected to. Whether his objections would be overruled or not, he did not know. He could see nothing wrong with trying to get the best possible advice from people who had the "know-how" and the people who had the "know-how" were the people who were doing this all the time.

A lot had been said about multiple shops, but of course, where there was development they always heard it was going to be occupied by multiples. "It may well be, I don't know. I don't see anything wrong with multiple shops providing their buildings conform to what we think should be there."

INITIAL REASON

The initial reason for wanting a plan was that if the Council had not got one, they would have designs thrust upon them. It was all very well to say the Planning Committee could turn this and that down, but members of the Council knew by now that their's was not the last word. "I think this is a safeguard and I am voting for the recommendation for that reason".

Speaking against the recommendation. Coun. W. A. Bridge said that whilst he agreed certain areas of Christchurch could be developed he was not in favour of the whole of Christchurch being changed into something which was quite against that which the people desired.

He unsuccessfully moved reference back to the Planning Committee.

Coun. Barrington Myers, Deputy Mayor, who seconded the recommendation, said it was made clear in the C.T. article that the consultants were not making specific reference to Christchurch but were talking in general terms.

The position at the moment was that anybody who was the owner of land or a prospective owner within the town centre area, was at liberty to put in an application for development.

The Council would then have two options. One was to approve the plan which might be a bad plan for the town, and the other was to refuse it with a view to having good planning in the town. The refusal might mean the serving of a purchase notice on the Council.

He thought it was far better to have good planning for the benefit of the townspeople as a whole, rather than unsatisfactory development because they hadn't taken any action. Suggestions had been made that the recommendation would mean the mutilation of the High Street. This was not implicit in the recommendation. The whole purpose of having expert consultants was to ensure good planning and good development.

Town Centre Development

A Very Competent Firm

—*Coun. Tucker*

COUN. W. E. TUCKER, chairman of Christchurch Planning Committee, told the Council on Tuesday that before recommending the appointment of Messrs. Shingler Risdon Associates as town planning consultants, his committee had caused extensive enquiries to be made.

All evidence, he said, pointed to the fact that the firm was very competent, had ample experience in town centre development, were good people to work with and had such knowledge of methods and practices of local authorities that they had been able to submit their schemes in ways which had satisfied councils and public in towns where they had worked.

He went on: "In case it should be thought that the engagement of such a firm is only appropriate for a large central population, it should be pointed out that the firm has not only undertaken work in cathedral towns such as Gloucester and Worcester (in the latter case almost in the shadow of the cathedral) but has also undertaken schemes in smaller towns such as Leek in Staffordshire. Lichfield, Staines and also as near at hand as Fareham".

The Planning Committee had also considered the engagement of other firms instead of Messrs. Shingler Risdon Associates. It would, of course, have been possible at that stage to select a development company who would prepare a full scheme and carry it to fruition.

There were, in fact, a number of development companies who offered the service of a consortium of town planners, architects and surveyors to deal with town centre developments provided only that that particular company be the one which carried out the development.

The Planning Committee thought it wise to avoid arrangements of that sort and believed that the best interest of the borough would be served by introducing an element of competition amongst developers after a scheme had been settled by the consultants and the Council jointly.

Earlier in his statement, Coun. Tucker said the Council would be aware that expert advice of that nature could not be obtained without cost and the Council had before them in the preamble to the minute an estimate of what the maximum cost might be.

Mr. Shingler, however, in an interview with the committee had indicated arrangements which would be made whereby the cost would not fall on the Council directly, and this was an attractive feature of the proposals of that firm.

A question had been raised as to whether the Council would have to pay for a scheme which the consultants prepared but which was not acceptable to developers. The firm had indicated that in those circumstances no cost at all would fall on the Council.

There was one other possibility: that the firm might prepare a scheme which the Council, for their own particular reasons, found unacceptable.

RIGHT AND PROPER

Said Coun. Tucker: "If it should happen that modifications which the Council would like to see are such that in the firm's estimate they would render the scheme quite unacceptable to developers, and the Council preferred therefore to terminate the appointment of the consultants, it will be right and proper that the Council should in those circumstances pay the consultants something towards the expenses which they have incurred in preparing the scheme. The firm put the maximum sum in these circumstances at £500".

Coun. Tucker said a Town Centre Development Committee was set up in 1956 when it was realised that the appearance of certain parts of Christchurch as approached from the "alternative" entrance would be unattractive. Various plans were prepared for development of land between High Street and the Mill Stream and Bargates and the Mill Stream, respectively south and north of the "alternative" entrance.

Consideration was given to various schemes put forward by the County Planning Officer to

indicate the pattern of future development in these areas, but it became clear that full control of that development could only be achieved by purchase of the sites involved. Unfortunately, at that stage, the Council had no powers to acquire any of the land by compulsory means and attempts to acquire the land by agreement were unsuccessful.

POWERS

At the time of the review of the Christchurch Town Map, the County Council took the opportunity at the request of the Council of defining an area of comprehensive development. This step would, if approved by the Minister, give the Council any necessary powers to acquire land for the purpose of the proposed development.

The Council was consulted on the maps prepared in statutory form for comprehensive development purposes and agreed to the County Council's proposals subject to certain minor modifications. In the next stage the County Council's officers submitted the proposals informally to the Minister who indicated that it was desirable to approach the future development of the town in a much more far reaching way, considering not only a larger area of land, but also looking further ahead with particular reference to future traffic problems.

It was therefore left for the County Planning Officers to prepare an outline plan for the future of Christchurch on entirely new lines. As a preliminary step the County Planning Officer put certain questions to the Town Centre Development Committee which were dealt with in 1961 and reported to the Council in December of that year.

Working on the replies given by the Town Centre Development Committee at that time, the County Planning Officer prepared further sketch plans as a basis for a guide map for the future development of Christchurch. Members of the Planning Committee had seen some of the interim proposals in respect of this guide map, but the map was not yet complete and for that reason could not yet be published.

NOT PRACTICABLE

It would be appreciated, went on Coun. Tucker, that so long as these steps were in progress it was not practicable for owners of land to be given planning permission for any development they wished to carry out unless it could be made perfectly clear that that development would ultimately fit into whatever plan was selected as being appropriate for Christchurch.

The guide map would show the general outline for the future development of the town. It would for instance show the road pattern and indicate those areas which were to be used for shopping and commercial purposes, for car parks, open spaces and for municipal purposes.

The map would not show in detail how the scheme would be developed architecturally, nor would it show how the best commercial use could be made of the land within the overall pattern.

It was in respect of those matters that the Planning Committee felt it necessary to obtain the advice of experts in the field of town centre development, and it was for that purpose that they had selected Messrs. Shingler Risdon Associates.

The Council would remember that some time ago publicity was given to the proposal of the Council for town centre development broadly on lines indicated in plans prepared by the Borough Surveyor (known as Plan C) and approved by the Chamber of Trade.

AN INTEREST

Many firms expressed an interest in the town centre at that time but because of delays associated with the preparation of the statutory map for town centre purposes and arising from the Minister's decision with regard to proposals of the Council for new municipal offices and Town Hall very few firms continued to show an interest.

One of the firms which continued to be interested was the development company which

bought land adjoining the Town Hall site in respect of which a purchase notice had now been served on the Council.

Another firm which showed interest at an early stage and had continued interest was the firm mentioned in the recommendation. It could be said that this continued interest was due in some measure to Mr. Shingler's personal (that is non-business) interest in the Bournemouth and Christchurch areas. He was in fact a frequent visitor to this area.

It was reasonable to assume, said Coun. Tucker, that this personal interest would be an advantage to the Council in connection with the town centre development.

The Planning Committee did not think they could choose as their consultants a firm which could offer a better combination of wide experience, good recommendations and attractive financial arrangements.