

Visions of pedestrian area, but
'No action' on Town Centre Plan

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In view of the economic situation, Christchurch Council decided this week to take no action on the long-awaited Healey and Baker report on the town centre development.

At a special meeting on Monday, the council discussed the suggestions made in the report, ordered in 1973 at a cost of £1,000. They agree that the proposed developments could not get off the ground in the present economic climate, and took no action to implement the proposals contained in the 28 page document.

They agreed that it should be 'kept well in mind' in dealing with any development proposals in the future.

They also authorised officers to continue discussions with developers who showed a genuine interest in carrying out a scheme in the town centre, if the developers had the "capacity to proceed".

Councillors agreed that any proposals arising from the discussions will be sent to the Policy and Resources committee, and would then be expected to minimise any expense to the rate fund. They were also to be directed to the earliest progress possible in restoring a degree of activity to the High Street.

CONSERVING CHARACTER

The report recognised the desirability of conserving the general character of the area, and in particular any listed buildings or archaeological features. Chief officers were instructed by the council to prepare practical proposals to improve the traffic circulation and car parking arrangements in and near the town centre, to be implemented as quickly as possible.

They were authorised to prepare proposals for the use of any council land in and near the town centre which would be remunerative, or beneficial in the short-term.

They decided to consult with the local Chamber of Trade on their preferred solutions to specific questions arising from the report and their deliberations.

Many members also spoke in favour of the creation of a commercial development subcommittee to consult with trader's organisations and other interested bodies on the town centre redevelopment.

An amendment to delay action on the report until the Town Centre Map and Purewell Policy Plan have been revised, put forward by Coun. Peter Stickley, was narrowly defeated.

The Mayor, Coun. John Morgan, said that the meeting heard a lot of negative talk, when they should have been being positive.

"Christchurch cannot live by the Priory alone, and something has to got to be done to stop it going down and down", he said. "We should have been saying how best we can do something for Christchurch. We should stop this business of looking over our shoulders. We have a duty to the young people in the area to look forward."

PEDESTRIAN AREA

Dealing with the Saxon square area of Christchurch—bounded by the By-pass road, High Street, Millhams Street and the Mill Stream—the ‘shopping feasibility study produced by Messrs. Healey and Baker envisaged the High Street as being converted into a pedestrian area, with service roads at the rear on either side.

After taking into consideration the proposed redevelopment, by other interests, of the Fountain Hotel and Keith Motors sites with four-storey blocks of shops, offices and showrooms, the ground floor layout of the Square provided for:

- 28 shop units;
- Two large store units with parking-space above, on two levels, for about 250 cars;
- A ground level car park for disabled drivers;
- A crèche in which young children could be left while their parents were shopping; and
- A public house opposite the frontage of Sainsbury's store.

As the United Reformed Church and its hall are ‘listed’ buildings, the assumption in the layout was that they would be retained.

But as the Town Hall is not listed, the suggestion was that the rear part of the property should be demolished ‘if economics were right’, while the attractive frontage should be preserved and adapted as an arcade entrance to the shop scheme.

To sound the potential demand for new retail space, over 400 traders—including national and local multiple companies and leading Christchurch private traders—had been approached, and the response had been encouraging.

Those who had stipulated definite requirements had included seven supermarkets, seven menswear firms, three stationers and booksellers, three fashion houses, three cafe/restaurants, five footwear firms, a rainwear firm and a fabric firm.

Maintaining that any major scheme for shops to the north of the By-pass would be detrimental to the success of the Saxon Square proposal, Healey and Baker suggested that the long-term aim for Bargates should be to terminate that road north of the By-pass.

It was thus become a cul-de-sac, but with a ‘link’ into a large car parking area envisaged north of the By-pass, opposite Sainsbury's. To the east of Bargates, and immediately north of the By-pass, an area should be reserved for office/car park/public house development, with the possibility of associating this with the Pit Site being borne in mind.

Emphasising that any scheme for development of the Saxon Square site should embody a traffic free precinct, rear servicing of existing shops in High Street and a main access from the Mill Stream, the study conceded that the suggested traffic arrangements had not been approved by the council—full pedestrianisation of the High Street and development of an ‘inner distribution road’ towards the King’s Arms being only suggestions.

Even if ultimately approved, these suggestions might not be implemented for some years. Alternatively, other and better solutions might be found.

Existing businesses would not, however, be jeopardised. “We do not believe that the development, if carried out, could anything other than an advantageous effect on existing shopping in Christchurch,” it would consolidate the position of the town in the shopping hierarchy, and arrest the outflow of spending power from Christchurch to other centres.”