

10. COLOMBO STREET (MOORHOUSE-GLOUCESTER): MEASURES TO IMPROVE THE TRAFFIC ENVIRONMENT

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INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this report is to introduce measures that are designed to generally reduce traffic congestion in Colombo Street. They are also intended to achieve wider objectives to provide an appropriate environment for the premier strip shopping street in the South Island. The proposed measures are intended to achieve:

- Reduction in traffic congestion;
- Improvement of public transport reliability and regularity ;
- Improvement of the business operating environment;
- Improvement of the air quality; and
- Improvement of other ('quality of life') environmental factors.

A further, over-arching series of objectives is that the measures will be easy to implement quickly (to address the current problems), be of modest cost and, when taken together, will produce relatively high benefits in terms of meeting the above objectives.

At this stage, a general endorsement from the Council is sought for the thrust of the measures. This will then allow the draft scheme to be subject to consultation with the public (and in particular retailers). It is then intended to report back to the April meeting with a comprehensive scheme, programme and budget for final endorsement prior to implementation.

EXISTING PROBLEMS

Complaints have been received from bus operators and the general public about the level of congestion on Colombo Street and the consequential impact on their travel times through the City. A significant issue is the variability of bus journey times and the consequences this presents for reliability. This has become more apparent as a result of the recent extensions to the bus routes. Increasing traffic volumes are leading to a gradual deterioration of the shopping environment. The recent improvements to parts of Colombo Street and Cathedral Square have highlighted that significant improvements can be made to the amenity of the street by providing more space for pedestrians (and in particular shoppers) and less emphasis on through-traffic. These factors, together with the drive to make the central city a more attractive destination have resulted in formulation of the following objectives.

OBJECTIVES FOR COLOMBO STREET

While there may be a wide range of objectives for Colombo Street, those that affect, or are affected by the movement of traffic include:

Reduction of Congestion

Traffic congestion gives rise to both uncertainty and re-routing, as well as lower amenity in terms of air quality, noise and visual clutter. The presence of general traffic congestion means that the city centre is a less attractive place to visit than other locations without these problems.

The congestion also has severe impacts on the ability of public transport and business to provide a reliable services to customers.

Re-routing of traffic results in traffic intrusion into sensitive areas and consequent environmental deterioration.

In general reduced traffic congestion can be achieved by the introduction of measures to improve traffic flow and/or to reduce traffic. For Colombo Street, the measures proposed below are aimed at discouraging through-traffic and encouraging these motorists onto the one way system. This will lead to a general improvement to conditions for all traffic, and in particular that traffic with genuine destinations along Colombo Street.

Improvement to Public Transport Reliability and Regularity

Unreliability, rather than overall travel time, deters many potential bus customers. Improvements in public perception of this form of public transport can therefore be achieved through improving reliability. Improvements can be made both by measures reducing general congestion and by dedicating certain road space solely to public transport vehicles.

The introduction of short sections of combined bus, taxi and cycle lanes in Colombo Street (and potentially in the future on other high frequency bus routes) has the potential to impact positively on general levels of traffic congestion and in particular to provide improved levels of service for public transport.

Improvement of Business Operating Environment

Reducing overall levels of traffic activity will improve accessibility for businesses and deliveries. Not only do commercial vehicles suffer from the levels of congestion but also suffer from limitations of access. In many situations, the limitation of traffic can provide the right catalyst for physical improvements with the associated economic regeneration of the area concerned. Increased pedestrianisation of many central areas has already resulted in increased levels of business activity.

Such areas are generally dependent on traffic reduction but care must be taken to avoid increasing traffic congestion in adjacent areas. For Colombo Street, greater space needs to be made available for pedestrians, which can only come from the road carriageway. If fewer parking spaces are made available on-street, a balance can be achieved by both providing alternative off-street parking and by providing shorter time restrictions at on-street spaces to allow a higher turnover of fewer spaces.

Improvements of Air Quality

Improvements to the air quality will come from two areas. Firstly, there is the need to reduce general traffic congestion and the second, which is outside the scope of this report, is the removal of pollutants that affect our health by requiring higher standards for vehicle emissions. It is desirable to reduce or eliminate those elements that contribute to long-term deterioration and meet wider stated objectives of the Council in this respect.

Improvement of Other Environmental Factors

In addition to improvements in air quality and traffic safety, other improvements to 'quality of life' factors include less noise, fear and intimidation from traffic and the severance effects these can impose - particularly on pedestrians. Although significant traffic reduction would be needed to bring about any marked improvement in Colombo Street, the removal of unnecessary traffic would provide a modest improvement in these factors.

OPTIONS FOR COLOMBO STREET

There are a wide range of options that could be adopted for Colombo Street to meet the above objectives. The available approaches may be broadly described as follows:

Measures to Reduce Congestion

Measures available to discourage through-traffic include a restriction of turning movements *into* Colombo Street. There are two existing examples of this at Hereford Street and Gloucester Street. A further alternative is the restriction of turning movements *off* Colombo Street. Apart from the obvious existing restrictions into the one-way streets, there is a further existing example of this type of restriction at the Hereford/Colombo intersection, where right turning vehicles from Colombo Street (north) are restricted except for buses and taxis. A restriction of turning manoeuvres, as described above, would not only reduce congestion by a reduction in extraneous traffic, but would also improve capacity by reducing queuing problems.

Other measures to reduce congestion, by increasing capacity, are generally limited to four principal intersections because of physical limitations.

One of the key intersections is the Moorhouse-Colombo intersection, where the options include the construction of a roundabout, or a reduction in the number of traffic phases (which would require turn restrictions) and some minor kerb reconstruction under the bridge. The current-draft scheme would result in significant capacity improvements for all traffic (in particular improving accessibility to Moorhouse Avenue), whilst also providing the potential for ‘metering’ of northbound general traffic into Colombo Street to keep overall traffic volumes within acceptable limits.

Other *potential* improvements (which are not proposed for implementation at this time) include the removal of the exclusive pedestrian phase at the Hereford, Gloucester and Armagh Street intersections and permitting the pedestrians to cross parallel as at the Tuam, St Asaph, and Lichfield Street intersections. Removal of the existing ‘Barn- dance’ pedestrian phases would result in a significant reduction in both vehicle and pedestrian delay by allowing a reduction in the signal cycle time. This is because pedestrians crossing one leg on the intersection would have less than half the present delay, while those that previously crossed on the diagonal would experience similar times as they do at present.

Measures to Improve the Consistency of Bus Travel Times

Bus travel times, and their reliability, will be improved by measures which are being pursued by the Regional Council, such as the introduction of a single-fare coin system to speed bus loading times.

As well as the above measures to reduce general traffic congestion, bus travel time regularity could be achieved by measures which include the limitation of bus stops, the provision of exclusive public transport lanes and the removal or reduction of conflict with adjacent land uses. These are factors that are under the control of the City Council.

There are five existing bus stops serving the central section of Colombo Street, at South City, South of Tuam Street, South of City Mall, Cathedral Square and adjacent to Victoria Square. It is proposed (in consultation with the CRC), to consolidate these to three principal bus stops at South City, the Bus Interchange, and north of the Square between Gloucester and Armagh Street, as this is considered to offer a number of advantages.

The provision of combined bus, taxi and cycle lanes can provide the opportunity for buses to jump the queues of other traffic. These lanes generally require the removal of on-street parking during times that the lane is in operation and it is generally accepted as best being a 24hr restriction to promote compliance. There are only two locations on the section of Colombo Street between Moorhouse Avenue and the Square where it is easily possible to introduce these lanes and there is also a good supply of alternative parking nearby: On the north approach to the Moorhouse Avenue intersection and the south approach to the St Asaph Street intersection.

At present there is a conflict with the entrances to South City. This occurs where mall traffic trying to *exit* onto Colombo Street can impede buses using the northbound bus stops. These problems can be improved with either relocation of the bus stops, or a restriction to the movement of vehicles to and from South City or a combination of both. Problems can also occur where traffic *entering* the mall from the north fails to make proper use of the flush-median and impedes southbound buses. This can be improved by remarking.

Measures to Improve the Business Operating Environment

Pedestrian amenity (which assists the attractiveness of shopping by these pedestrians) is considered likely to be much improved by the measures described above which would reduce congestion and associated adverse affects.

Given that the width of Colombo Street from building-to-building is fairly fixed, any further increase in pedestrian amenity is only likely to be achievable by way of a reduction in traffic space, and allocation of this space to pedestrians.

Small improvements for pedestrians have already been proposed between Lichfield and Cashel Streets to assist with the operation of the Interchange and The Crossing development. These have received the provisional approval for consultation purposes of the City Services Committee at a seminar on 17 December 1999. It is suggested that a similar facility is required between Dundas Street and St Asaph Street to assist pedestrians to cross Colombo Street at that location.

Other more significant potential measures to improve the business operating environment are outside the scope of this report, which, as explained in the Introduction, is focussed on measures which can be implemented relatively quickly and cheaply to address current problems.

It should be acknowledged that associated with a number of the proposals set out above (and shown in more detail below), is a modest reduction in a number of on-street parking spaces on Colombo Street (up to a maximum of 17 spaces between Moorhouse Avenue and Gloucester Street). It is possible to make up for this loss of parking in a number of ways. Firstly, there is the increase in the supply of adjacent off-street parking as a result of new public car-parking buildings at Farmers and (shortly) The Crossing development. It is also proposed to provide additional on-street angle parking along the north or south side of Dundas Street.

There is also the ability to increase the turnover of the remaining on-street spaces. By reducing the allowable time that a vehicle is allowed to park, from the present 60 minute metered spaces ('M60') to M30, or P5, allows the same or more vehicles to utilise a smaller number of spaces.

The disadvantage of increasing the turnover is that these manoeuvring vehicles do impact on passing traffic – so a balance must be struck between retaining parking turnover (where possible) and not impacting adversely on traffic movement.

THE DRAFT SCHEME

The elements of the draft scheme proposed for Colombo Street are identified in the attached table. A plan will also be made available at the meeting (the length of the plan unfortunately makes it rather difficult to include with the report at this stage without reducing the scale significantly).

The attached table identifies a notional programme (in broad terms) for implementation of these measures. These include “virtually no-cost” measures, which could be implemented virtually immediately from the existing City Streets budget, following approval of the Council. Also included are measures which are currently not budgeted for (eg Moorhouse-Colombo intersection) and measures which require statutory procedures to be followed prior to implementation (eg a three month period for the Special Order procedure required for restricted traffic lanes). The draft programme shown also makes allowance for consultation and when any measures would become necessary as a result of re-routing of buses planned by the CRC.

The attached table also offers an indication of the likely overall costs of the scheme. Excluding items budgeted elsewhere (such as on-street elements associated with the Bus Interchange), the cost of the scheme is likely to be in the region of \$140,000.

Following approval of the draft scheme by the Council and public consultation - and any modification of the scheme that these processes may suggest as appropriate - it is intended to report back to the April meeting of the Council with a comprehensive scheme, programme and budget for final endorsement prior to implementation.

- Recommendation:**
1. That the Council approve the draft scheme for measures to improve the traffic environment on Colombo Street for consultation.
 2. That the Council seek a report to its April meeting on the results of public consultation on this scheme, any modifications that may be appropriate as a result of this consultation and the costs and budget allocation required for implementation as soon as feasible.

3. That these proposals be regarded as initial measures to improve Colombo Street, and that further measures, with special reference to improving the commercial environment be developed in consultation with interested parties.
4. That a consultation subcommittee be appointed to oversee initial consultation and the further consultation referred to in 3, comprising the chairman and Councillors Buck, Evans, Manning and Wright supported by appropriate staff.