

5. “OUR CITY” - AN ENVIRONMENT CENTRE FOR CHRISTCHURCH

Officer responsible Environmental Policy and Planning Manager	Author Kerry Everingham Environmental Promotions Officer Angus Smith Property Projects Manager
Corporate Plan Output: Environmental Promotion	

The purpose of this report is to recommend proceeding with the establishment of an Environment Centre (“Our City – past, present and future”) in the former Municipal Chambers Building, Worcester Street. This will provide an existing and innovative addition to the assets of the City providing opportunities to show case Civic history, current projects and future plans.

BACKGROUND

In 1995 the Council first considered the possibility of establishing an Environment Centre in Christchurch. For a number of years prior to that, local civic and professional groups had been pushing for a similar centre where city developments could be displayed and debated. A workshop was held 1995 and a preliminary feasibility report prepared by Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu in 1997.

The general objective of such a Centre would be to bring together at one accessible place, the public, the Council, interested professionals and community/residents groups to present and exchange ideas and knowledge about the City and important development, planning and environmental issues. It could also be a place where civic gifts, heritage items and civic archives are stored and art could be displayed. It may also be a place where various community groups connected with general environmental issues could locate. It would also be of interest to tourists and visitors to Christchurch.

This report has been written to further progress with the establishment of “Our City” and in response to the following resolutions:

Environment Centre Subcommittee Meeting 7.12.1999:

“That provisions be investigated for the purchase and fit-out of a suitable building (for “Our City”).

That a report be prepared to investigate the purchase or lease of a suitable building.”

Strategy and Resources Annual Plan 21.2.2000 proposal:

“That the above funding be confirmed, subject to:

The Property manager, in consultation with the Environmental Policy and Planning Manager, reporting to the Environment Committee on the options for the location of the Environment Centre within the existing budget.

A comprehensive feasibility study and a condition report on the preferred building.

That the body, which operates the present Environment Centre, be invited to participate in the new centre as a lead partner.

That the grant to the present Environment Centre be reduced to \$10,0000 in year 2 and subsequent years.”

THEME AND TARGET MARKET

The following resolutions on the theme, form and target for “Our City” were made at the Environment Centre Subcommittee Meeting (Tuesday 7 December 1999):

- *Developed for the citizens of Christchurch,*
- *To provide information, education and exhibitions relating to the past, present and future environment of Christchurch “Our City”.*
- *The site of “Our City” centre to be in a central city heritage building, to achieve more than one Council objective.*

The target markets as identified in the Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu report are as follows:

- Firstly – Christchurch residents
- Secondly – Greater Canterbury Community
- Thirdly – Provide for visitors/tourists if there is a demand

SCALE AND FORM

There have been many discussions as to whether an environment centre should be, at one end of the scale, a small, community-based group of two or three rooms or, at the other end, a major interactive attraction in its own right with proactive displays that would draw tourists. There was general agreement that it should develop from the community base and be rather modest in its beginnings, but with scope for it to grow over time. Support for a community-oriented centre is recorded in the reports of The Multi Agency Working Group Report (spring 1999), the final report from the focus workshop held in 1995 and The Feasibility of an Environmental Education Agency for Canterbury Report. General consent is for a modest sized centre, but professionally outfitted, demonstrating quality displays and archives that meet the high standard set by museums such as the Museum of Wellington, City and Sea, and the Sydney City Exhibition Space, a social history museum profiling Sydney history through to current urban planning issues.

COMMUNITY SUPPORT

Support for the concept has come from a wide range of groups, including the Institute of Architects, The Civic Trust, Canterbury Dialogues, NZ Association for Environmental Education, the Canterbury Regional Council, the Department of Conservation Canterbury Conservancy Office, the Ministry for the Environment’s Christchurch Office and the existing Christchurch Environment Centre.

Some of the organisations listed above have produced reports and feasibility studies.

It has been suggested that the centre could provide accommodation for a number of environmental groups, including the existing Environment Centre. A number of community groups have expressed an interest in leasing space.

PROPERTY CONSIDERATIONS

A number of sites have been suggested and considered, including the Star of Lyttelton Times Building, the Avon Theatre, the former Municipal Building, Chief Post Office and Regent Buildings. While the use of any one of these buildings would secure a heritage building, all but one are privately owned. Some are in need of major renovations. Others do not have the prominence and history of visitor use. The opportunity to take over an existing operation has also been considered. Therefore, apart from the Municipal Chambers which is owned by the Council, all the other buildings would require considerable capital outlay to purchase.

Recommendations on the suitability of all of the buildings investigated for the “Our City” centre were based around the criteria which were identified as the key issues for the purpose of the centre in the report to Council, February 1999, ie:

“A central location close to public transport and car parking, accessible to residents and visitors and possibly utilising a heritage building would be desirable.”

Over the years introductory feasibility studies for housing of an environment centre have been done for the Avon Theatre, the Civic of Canterbury and the former Municipal Chambers (copy attached).

PREFERRED LOCATION

After consideration of the range of alternatives, it is considered that the former Municipal Chambers is the best option for a number of reasons:

- This building is the only purpose-built “home” the Christchurch City Council has ever occupied. It would, now that the building’s current tenants are vacating, be most appropriate in cultural heritage terms, to return the building to a core civic use.
- The building is already owned by Council, and is available. It is a listed Group 1 heritage building in the City Plan and therefore this limits its range of uses.
- The building is registered as a Category 1 Historic Place, by the New Zealand Historic Places Trust (NZHTP) under section 23 of the Historic Places Act. Category 1 buildings are defined by the Historic Places Trust as being “Places of special or outstanding historic or cultural significance or value”.
- The public already associate the building as being a place for information about the City because of its association with the Canterbury Tourism Council.
- It is in a central location close to public transport and car parking and is accessible to residents and visitors. Foot traffic on Worcester Boulevard makes for suitable location for weekend opening hours.
- Availability and layout of office (administration) space, display areas, public meeting rooms, educational/resource space, reception area, archival area, storage space, library area, kiosk/shop.
- The building offers a unique presence with its stand-alone position/setting.

- The “Our City” concept is an appropriate use for a listed heritage building and allows for proactive heritage retention and good conservation practise.

Attached is the preliminary feasibility report put together by staff when this building was first discussed.

Space Requirements

As identified in Deloitte Touche Tohmatsu report a floor area of 500 to 600 square metres is necessary to accommodate exhibition and display spaces, a meeting space, offices and resource centre/library. The former Municipal Chambers has a floor area of 558.m² and as mentioned above can be developed in ways suitable for the proposed centre.

ASSOCIATED COSTS

In general, a budget for the proposed “Our City” should provide for:

- **Property tenure costs, ie, (ownership) or (lease, rent)**

The assessed market rent for the former Municipal Chambers (the entire building 558.m²) is \$80,000 pa. Another building looked at within the same area had a rental estimated at \$150,000 - \$200,000 (approximately 1,000m²).

- **Property operating costs, ie, rates, insurance, etc**

The property operating costs for the former Municipal Chambers are approximately \$90/m² (\$74,000 pa). This does not include the costs of operating specialist museum/display/archival equipment, for example, and lighting and climate control.

- **Fitout costs**

Fitouts can be very expensive and it is difficult to put a figure on this cost without a more detailed plan or proposal. However, by way of example, recent display additions to the Canterbury Museum ranged from a small display costing \$20,000 to larger displays costing around \$150,000. The Museum of Wellington City and Sea cost \$3.5M, which included some special climate control equipment. Fitout for the Southern Encounters Aquarium has been estimated at approximately \$5M. A very open basic plan office fitout would cost approximately \$400 to \$500/m².

- **Operating costs, ie, wages, marketing, displays, procurement etc**

This is dependent on the type of operation to be run, but at a minimum operating costs could be from \$150,000 to \$200,000 pa to provide a full range of services over three levels, with staffing support.

- **Revenue**

There is only limited potential to derive revenue from sub-leasing a portion of the premises. However some of the community groups that it would be to our advantage to be housed in the centre due to operational synergies, are strapped for cash and realistically cannot provide high rentals, but may be able to provide services in kind, eg voluntary labour.

Current Budget

At the present moment \$50,000 has been set aside in the 1999/00 budget for a feasibility study/business plan. Provision of \$100,000 and \$140,000 has been made in 2000/01 and 2001/02 respectively for the operational costs of the new Environment Centre. Capital provision of \$150,000 has been included in 2000/01 to start to cover fitout costs. Additional capital funding for 2001/02 and beyond will need to be sought.

The current budget would allow for a modest beginning of:

- Lease of a building
- Housing of the existing Environment Centre
- A meeting room
- Limited display
- One and a half part time staff – to enable opening hours to include weekends
- Operational costs for two years

CONCLUSIONS

The principle of an environment centre “Our City” has been around for a number of years. There has always been community interest and support for the concept and currently there is a groundswell of new environmental community initiatives. We need to move forward on this project and take advantage of the availability of the former Municipal Chambers as it clearly meets the necessary criteria identified for such a centre.

Recommendation: That the Council agree to the use of the former Municipal Chambers for the housing of “Our City - past, present and future”.

The Chairman comments:

It is appropriate for a Group 1 heritage building with limited alternative uses, owned by the Christchurch City Council and on a prominent site, to be used for the benefit of our citizens for the housing of “Our City – past, present and future”.

Chairman’s

Recommendation: That the Committee agree to the use of the former Municipal Chambers for the housing of “Our City – past, present and future”.