

SILVER HILL, WINCHESTER – AN ALTERNATIVE APPROACH TO ITS DEVELOPMENT

Cllr Kim A Gottlieb BSc MRICS – 5th November 2014

Introduction

I have often been asked how I would like to see the site developed. My answer has always been that urban regeneration is a complex matter requiring a great deal of thought and imagination, and that the right scheme can't just be conjured up. Nor is it a matter of just identifying the faults in the current proposal, and hoping that by itself that will provide the guidance needed.

Winchester is generally regarded as a charming market town seemingly unperturbed by the vagaries of the outside world but it is, in fact, at a critical juncture in its modern history. It could follow the route of many other towns where the centre is dominated by the usual set of multiple retailers, and where the interesting aspects are marginalised. Or it could take a different route, and make the interesting bits the dominant feature so as to reinforce the historic character of the city.

In other words Winchester could become mundane and commonplace, or it could aspire to enhance its reputation and significance as a city in today's world by achieving something quite special. Because of its scale and strategic position, the regeneration of Silver Hill will greatly influence the perception of the city for the future, and my hope is that the Council will change its present course and instead pursue a development that is very much more distinctive and inspiring.

Achieving this won't be easy and what is urgently needed is a comprehensive exploratory process with historians, archaeologists, master planners, the city's architects and many others. Above all else this process needs to involve the public, who are going to be living, working, playing and shopping in the newly regenerated neighbourhood for decades and centuries to come.

The purpose of this document is to prompt discussion and debate, with a view to establishing a consensus and to see more concrete proposals emerging as the process evolves.

Alternative Uses

A good place to start the process is by considering what the site could contain, and my personal view of the sort of alternative uses that could be successfully located here includes;

- 1) a permanent indoor market, possibly built around the Antiques Market;
- 2) small independent and artisan shops;
- 3) serviced office space and a business 'incubator' (low cost office space for new businesses);
- 4) a boutique hotel possibly within a converted Woolstaplers Hall;
- 5) restaurants and cafes;
- 6) an archaeology visitor centre;
- 7) an art gallery/multi-purpose venue;
- 8) outdoor performance space;
- 9) more civic amenity space particularly alongside the river;
- 10) integrated bus facilities;
- 11) a renewable energy exemplar; and
- 12) a substantial number of dwellings, 50% of which should be 'affordable'.

This is a very preliminary list and I look forward to the public response to each of them, and to what they might add to this list.

Architecture

The success of this regeneration project will very largely depend upon the quality of its architecture, and much has already been said about the dreary and monolithic design of the current proposal. In my view, the architectural approach suggested by the 2003 Planning Brief was right, in that you would achieve far greater variety and interest by employing a number of different architects.

The general design principles need to reflect the small plot scale and incremental development that typifies the rest of the city centre, and that can be expressed in either modern or period styles, just so long as the architecture has integrity and is worthy of a major city centre.

The street layout should be far more intricate and irregular than in the current proposal, and in terms of its height the Planning Brief's view that the new buildings should defer to Woolstaplers Hall remains sound guidance. There is, however, scope on at least part of the site for a building of significance and scale providing it was of especial merit.

Site Constraints

The site is not a blank canvas, and careful consideration needs to be given to existing constraints.

Buildings that should be kept include Woolstaplers Hall, which is due to be converted, and the Antiques Market, which is due to be demolished. The Oxfam shop and Cross Keys Passage should also be retained. Then there are buildings that could be kept such as Coitbury House, which could be converted to residential use, and the Sainsbury unit which performs just fine as it is.

The river and water channels running through the site should be opened up, and made much more of a feature than is currently proposed. They could provide the focal point of the civic amenity space which also needs to be completely reconsidered, and more generously provided – the walk through to Abbey Gardens and to the Cathedral needs particular consideration.

The frontage to Friarsgate is an essential issue. It is the most exposed aspect of the site, and by lining the main traffic route through the city it provides its most 'public face'. Buildings need to be designed so that they front onto Friarsgate, and a continuation of the Eastgate Street terrace to wrap around the corner, to include office and residential uses, would be one direction to take.

Archaeology

Typically, archaeology is regarded by developers as a costly hindrance. I would like to see this attitude turned on its head and the archaeological remains present regarded as an asset, and as an opportunity to reveal and highlight the wonderful historic character of the city.

There are likely to be archaeological remains across the whole site, Roman and pre-Roman, but because of city's standing at the 'birth' of the English nation the medieval remains present may be even more significant. When the basements to the Brooks were dug out, the site was regarded at the time as the most important medieval excavation in Europe and yet two-thirds of the remains were destroyed.

An extensive investigation needs to be undertaken, and my hope is that something will be found that would warrant the building of a visitor centre around it. This could put Winchester in reach of being considered a World Heritage site.

Residential uses

A development on this site would need a sizeable residential element for the financial contribution it would provide, apart from which it would bring activity to the city centre throughout the whole day.

Because this is a Council-owned site it would be right to expect that it would provide a very high proportion of affordable housing, say 50% or more, to be offered on a shared ownership or below market rental basis.

This is where the Council should be trying to set an example, as well as doing its best to provide for local residents, many of whom would otherwise struggle to afford to live in the centre of the city.

Retail

I have not said that Winchester does not need any more shopping at all. It is just that the retail provision within the current proposal is of such a scale and is so positioned that it will inevitably draw trade away from the High Street and emasculate it.

Given the revolution that the retail sector has undergone and will continue to undergo for years to come, for any shopping centre to survive and succeed it needs to have a USP. In Winchester's case the way to do this is to emphasise the interesting and the quirky, and the shops that you don't typically find somewhere else.

Whilst maintaining a healthy provision of the basics, including foods, clothing, Boots and Smiths etc., Winchester needs to distinguish itself from the obvious competing localities and work needs to be done to strengthen its attraction.

The Brooks

I have been told on numerous occasions how, before The Brooks was built, the public all chose one scheme but the Council chose another, the one that we see today. The Brooks is a failure on every level, financially, architecturally and in terms of the retail offering it provides. I am more likely to win the lottery than to find someone who actually likes The Brooks.

I am prevented by confidentiality to go into the financial and legal details here, but the regeneration of Silver Hill presents a wonderful opportunity to remedy a previous Council-directed development mistake. It presents a unique opportunity, and there is no excuse not to attempt to orchestrate the inclusion of The Brooks within a more comprehensive master-planned development.

Bus Station

This is a thorny issue, but it is clear that the loss of a bus garage was a matter of great concern to many residents. It also flies in the face of general public transport and environmental policies.

The City is unable to force a bus operator to operate a bus station, but it does have the power of persuasion which could be used far more effectively than is currently the case.

Parking

Parking is another thorny issue, and there are powerful and rational arguments on both sides of the debate, though my view on the unpleasantness of pollution is much like everyone else's.

The harsh reality, though, is that the current proposal will reduce the current parking ratio, and have far less parking than at competing centres such as West Quay and Festival Place. It will clearly be disadvantaged and suffer. This is just another reason why the whole scheme needs to be revised.

Practical Considerations

There are a number of practical matters to be considered all the while, including such things as the project finances, programming and even who the developer might be. If the current developer left the scene, to comply with procurement regulations the Council would have to offer the opportunity out to the market place. However, the one potential alternative is that the Council could, because it already owns most of the site, act as the lead developer itself.

In this event, the Council could approach the development of Silver Hill as a not-for-profit venture and utilise the tens of £millions profit the current developer is scheduled to make, to facilitate a very much more civically-minded development than is currently proposed.

Again, because of confidentiality reasons I cannot provide the financial details of the current proposal, but they are not that impressive and I know from my own experience as a developer that the alternative development options are likely to be just as financially attractive, if not more so.

Programming will create some interesting discussion, but as an interim measure I would suggest erecting a multi-deck temporary car park on the open Middle Brook Street car park, to facilitate the closure of the Friarsgate car park and to free up much else of the site. Another idea is that the site could be developed on a piecemeal basis and just the Friarsgate block alone, which the Council owns all of, would make for a substantial and worthwhile development.

Conclusion (for now)

In my view, the city should aspire to create something really special, something that many decades from now will be regarded as an integral part of the city's then character and heritage.

Silver Hill should aim for national recognition, like Covent Garden and Camden Market, but to do so with a range of community-orientated interesting and characterful uses focussed on heritage and culture, that link the city's history with the hustle and bustle of modern day life.

The quality of the architecture is absolutely key, and once all the 'drivers' such as archaeology and The Brooks have been taken into consideration, and the concepts refined into a master plan based development brief, the different elements should be made subject to an architectural competition. This time, the public should be very closely involved and listened to.

Transformational regeneration of this scale and nature is difficult, all the more so given the sensitive nature of the context. To be achieved it will need resources, patience, imagination and ambition. The Council can be ambitious and far-sighted, and it should reject the idea that the current proposal should be progressed simply because "we have got to get on with it". That view is both morally and intellectually deficient.

Few generations get such an opportunity to create something that could really be quite glorious and inspiring, and we should seize it with both hands.

I hope that the above thoughts will stimulate discussion about this major development, and I very much look forward to hearing the views of everyone else.