

Carla Forbes

Speaking to submission at HWCP hearing

27/03/2019

Thank you for taking the time to hear these submissions on what is to be a landmark project, not only for Invercargill, but for Southland.

My name is Carla Forbes and I am here to speak to my submission, which is in support of the HWCP inner city redevelopment. I'm a local business owner, board member of the Southland Chamber of Commerce and a proud Southland resident. I have been a small part of the HWCP project, having coordinated some of the communications around the project and along with my team at Market South have created the HWCP website. I'm very proud to have played a small part in seeing this bold and innovative chapter in Southland's story come to life.

Over the years, I have seen the heart-breaking decline of this once-great provincial region. This project will be a crucial turning point in Southland's history. It is, without a doubt, necessary if we want to see Southland prosper.

I'd like to congratulate the Invercargill City Council for having the foresight and courage to become involved and invest in such a significant project. It's great to see we have a council that is considering Southland's future, ploughing through the catastrophic mistakes of past councils and leaving behind a city that is better for the next generation.

A joint venture between the council and HWR is to be commended. Public-private partnerships are not the norm, but as we have all come to see, this relationship is absolutely vital to the success of this project. Either group cannot complete this immense body of work their own; working together to complete this ground-breaking redevelopment is the only option.

Let me be plain: town is broken. It has been broken for many years. We are now at the stage where this project must happen. There is no other option. Businesses have either moved premises or closed their doors for good in order for the inner city block to be demolished. If this project does not receive consent and doesn't happen, then the death of these businesses will have been for naught and we will have a CBD on our hands that's in an infinitely worse state than it was to begin with. Southland is poised for change; if this project does not progress, Invercargill may as well shut its doors.

Your decision this week will effectively choose the sign we will hang on Invercargill's metaphorical door. We are open for business, or Invercargill is closed.

Many of these buildings are broken and not viable. You've heard this week that even structural engineer Graham McDougall would not set foot in the former Government Life building. When we've got professionals saying they won't enter buildings – that absolutely speaks for itself. These buildings are not safe. They need to come down. Leaving them up could have catastrophic consequences. I would to see anyone be harmed because of this.

The reality is, not every building can be kept. Many have been so neglected for years that essentially there is nothing to save. What the public can see on the outside doesn't reflect the weak and unsafe structures of the inside. To spend significant amounts of money on some of these heritage buildings

would be irresponsible and a misappropriation of funds which could be better used in other parts of the redevelopment.

I think HCWP has made its position on heritage very clear. They support the retention of heritage where possible and have gone out of their way to put funding towards the preservation of some facades and buildings when they didn't have to. This has to be commended. From a business point of view, it doesn't make sense financially but demonstrates their commitment to preserve Southland's unique heritage.

Invercargill is rich in heritage. You need only look down Tay and Dee street or at our churches to know this. In my opinion, it would make more sense to invest in pockets of heritage and do those projects well, rather than dribbling ineffective amounts of money here and there across all of Invercargill's heritage buildings. If done well, this could absolutely become part of Invercargill's iconic scenscape.

This week you've heard from people who oppose the project due to what they see as a loss of heritage in Invercargill. Commissioner Sweetman, you asked Submitter Henderson how she thought her request to retain the Government Life building should be funded. She replied it should be the Southland community through rates and other avenues. Now, while I can't speak for every rate payer in Southland, and I won't try to either, but I am across many touchpoints in the community and I know a lot of people will support me when I say we would much rather see our rates put toward the construction of this project than millions spent on a tired and unsafe building which has not had tenants in the majority of it for more than 30 years.

While doing the communications and informal consultation on this project for HWCP, we set up a pop-up shop for people to find out more about it when the plans for the block were unveiled in June last year. I personally have spent several afternoons there to get a litmus test of the community's feel and have been met with genuine excitement to see the inner city lifted out of the doldrums its currently in. Again, the general consensus is the town is broken – this exciting project can fix it. I've spoken to numerous community groups, we had a video of the plans playing at the inner-city pop-up shop 24 hours a day with speakers on the street that, day or night, this information was available for anyone who wanted to know about the project.

We also set up a feedback form for the public to be able to voice their thoughts on the redevelopment. We've had hundreds of these forms returned to us and their feedback has been immensely positive. The most common statement we saw was along the lines of "just get it done" and "thank you – we need this". Even where people have raised their concerns about heritage – yes, that's feedback we've had too – they have still expressed their absolute support and eagerness for the project to go ahead.

Besides the necessity to fix the broken shell that is our inner-city, this redevelopment is projected to be a major economic booster for Southland. It will reignite pride from our people, it gives our city a heart and a sense of place, and it will no doubt become a catalyst for future development. It needs to be fixed and will be a platform to drive us into the future. Let us be brave and bold in our investment in our region!

You are now presented with a choice. And it's not an easy one. You can choose to give HWCP this consent to allow this exciting body of work to go ahead, or you can deny the application and Invercargill's CBD will remain in a perpetual state of being tired, shabby and run down. As a business owner, a ratepayer and a proud Southlander, I know what option I'd prefer.

Essentially, all of Southland recognises that we need this project. There is no going back. We all want to be proud of this city, and a revitalised CBD is the key to that.

Thank you for your time. I welcome any questions you may have.

