

Council Briefing Meeting Minutes

Date: Tuesday, 7 July, 2020
Time: 9:00 a.m.
Location: Council Chamber
Forum North, Rust Avenue
Whangarei

In Attendance

Her Worship the Mayor Sheryl Mai
Cr Gavin Benney (Chairperson)
Cr Vince Cocurullo
Cr Nicholas Connop
Cr Tricia Cutforth
Cr Jayne Golightly
Cr Phil Halse
Cr Greg Martin
Cr Anna Murphy
Cr Carol Peters
Cr Simon Reid

Not in Attendance

Cr Ken Couper
Cr Shelley Deeming
Cr Greg Innes

Scribe Sue Reid (Democracy Adviser)

1. Apologies

Apologies were received from Crs Couper, Deeming and Innes.

2. Reports

2.1 Theatre Options

Cr Benney convened the meeting at 09:00 and said there would be two presentations to provide Elected Members with information for consideration in the context of the Long Term Plan 2021 – 2031.

The first presentation was from David Pugh (Jasmax), Stephen Billing (Exponential Consulting) and Greg Randall (Randall Arts Management) to present the Whangarei Theatre Options Report, which was commissioned by WDC. Mr Randall attended the briefing via VMR.

Mr Pugh introduced the presentation which covered the brief, cultural vitality, identity, community and placemaking. He said the focus of the brief was on current and future requirements of the community and to ensure that both the functional and operation brief was being met.

Mr Billing continued the presentation which gave the background to the brief, determined investment objectives and outlined the four social and cultural key investment objectives that had been identified.

He explained the methods used in community consultation summarised by highlighting the nine findings from the questions and responses.

The presentation continued with Mr Randall explaining what the industry thinks and what are the services needs to be met. He said four options were developed from the options analysis, with the preferred option being Option C – a new performing arts centre.

Mr Pugh said clarity has been achieved around the business case and the next steps are to proceed with the further requirements for a full business case and to develop strategies with the stakeholders.

Questions and comments from Elected Members

Mr Pugh was asked if, with his background in urban design, he would be able to advise if location would be a critical aspect to make the project a success. He responded that it is essential to create a heart to the city and show how things will interact, ideally during the day and the night and it was a delicate balance to achieve this.

Mr Randall had referred to “good seats” and he was asked to explain what these were. He said there is an important connection area in a live performance, the audience need to be able to see and hear the performer needs to be able to have a relationship with the audience without restricted sight lines and flickering lights. Maintenance is also a factor and the seating needs to be cleaned, sanitised and replaced and has to have disability access.

The management model is critical to the complex, but Mr Pugh said he was reluctant to say whether the theatre would be joined with the civic centre until a proper study had been done.

Referring to carparking, Mr Pugh said there was an interesting balance between cars and buildings. For the area around the theatre to be vibrant it needed to have people using it rather than simply cars parked around it. He said you can bring cars into the city for drop offs or you can park close and walk to the centre to attend the show and possibly a restaurant nearby.

The theatre should not be a “white elephant” that would never be used, and Mr Randall was asked his thoughts on the best way to manage it. He said

there were different options but one that doesn't work very well is to try and hand it to a commercial operator. Other models are a separate incorporated body or a business unit within council and there are examples where they both work very well and examples of where they do not. He said it is important that the theatre management needs to be able to take what are strong commercial decisions and when it sits immediately within Council that can be problematic. There could be a skills based board who provide a level of governance from council but need, but the approach needs to be discussed further.

It was mentioned that the Capitaine Bougainville is a much loved institution in Whangarei and Mr Pugh was asked if he saw a role for it in the future. Mr Pugh responded that he saw them working combined, depending on location. Mr Randall said the brief is very clear that it didn't include consideration of location. He said he was pleasantly surprised by the size of the Capitaine Bougainville stage and the quality of the building and that there was a capacity of good seats with a good view.

Mr Randall was asked if he could give some feedback on how to sell the concept to the community to invest on an ongoing basis. He said the next stage should be an investment mapping process as part of the Treasuries Better Business Case methodology. In previous reviews, every one of them has benefitted from consultations with community and there is a general desire for better theatre facilities. It is a similar community to sporting fields and there is no objection to those.

Mr Pugh was asked if they looked specifically at the expansion of the Captain Bougainville theatre as an option and he responded that they found the geometry of the forum when you extend it means the sight lines deteriorate very quickly and to change the geometry of the whole theatre does not make sense. They had looked at this but there was no benefit.

Mr Randall was questioned as to whether the box office should be close to the theatre and he responded that the box office has become more of a face of welcome for a connection that you do not get from a website. He said you never get enough storage and often the box office becomes a store room.

It was mentioned that Whangarei has an ageing population, so it is necessary to ensure there is enough transport and easy access. Mr Pugh said drop off is a very important part of the theatre and cars should not dominate the area around the theatre, as long as you have drop offs it is almost like a valet service.

The three different ownership options were discussed, and Elected Members would like to see a presentation about the ownership structure and the best possible way to do the project, with cost estimates.

Ms Sandra Boardman (General Manager – Community) said the key thing when considering the theatre is that, if a new theatre is funded, it will not be run in the same way as the Capitaine Bougainville, which is a venue for hire. It will be a different operating model and both the capital and operating costs and the management side of it would need to be considered in the LTP.

The meeting adjourned at 10:12 and reconvened at 10:23.

The second presentation was from the Forum North Trust 2013 Trustees and advisors to present their concept proposal for an 850-plus flexible proscenium theatre and to provide the results of the Reviving Forum North survey undertaken with Creative Northland.

Ms Andrea Ross led the presentation and said members of the Forum North Trust 2013 would be available to answer questions at the conclusion of the presentation.

Questions and comments from Elected Members

When asked about the accuracy of the figure of \$34 million, the Trust responded that, using concept design, it has been independently peer reviewed and quantity surveyed, and they are comfortable with that figure. The details and paperwork have been given to Cr Benney (Chairperson – Community Development Committee), Her Worship the Mayor and the Chief Executive. They said it is the Trust's problem to get the funding for the engineering block and renovation of the foyer and Council is only being asked for \$10.5 million. They said the project would be done on time and within budget.

The Trust confirmed that their proposal is for the Trust to operate the whole complex, including the whole of the Forum North complex based on a peppercorn rent. In terms of the process, the architect is willing to present Council with full costings for the refurbishment of the current facilities, but this work has not been done yet.

As two to three years' notice is required for bookings, the Trust would like to take over earlier rather than later so they can start planning performances and activities for that period as it is an important part of where they are going, and it will be more difficult to raise funds if it is left for another year. This would be done in consultation with Council staff to understand the processes currently in place.

The Trust suggested that Council could have confidence in them running the complex as it happened from 1981 to 1993 when it was run by the former Forum North Trust. At that time, there was an amalgamation between the City and County Council and the District Council had a change of emphasis on the Civic Centre and took over operation of whole building, but before that it was run by the Forum North Trust as a very successful operation. They

were looking to revitalise this with a proper artistic director, rather than just a place to hire.

They clarified that previously the Forum North complex was run under licence and operated by the Trust with the offices run by the Council and the cultural side by the Trust. They confirmed they are asking for the Trust to take over the cultural side of the new building, not the Council office side.

The Trust was asked, in the original build, how much money was raised by donations and philanthropic sources rather than Council. They responded that about \$800,000 was raised by public sources and the council put in the rest of the funds.

The Trust was asked how they saw themselves working together with other organisations. They responded they would certainly support the Hihiaua development, which is quite different to what the Trust are proposing, but were not fully aware of the proposal for Whangarei High School. They tended to see the Northland Development Corporation as more of a business and commercial model, rather than a community servicing model. In addition, the facilities Northland Development Corporation are proposing do not include a fly tower where everything drops from the ceiling and makes a wonderful experience.

When asked if the operation financials correlate with those in the report, the Trust said this was \$1m per annum operating model and they believed funding of the initial budget would be considerably less with a good management structure in place

Elected Members felt it would be good to have a figure at this stage, to include project costs to get trucks in and out and if the roadway would need to be reconfigured. Also they would like to see what amenities, such as a restaurant, they want to include. The Trust confirmed demolition and construction would be project led locally.

The Trust was asked if mana whenua have been engaged with as they will have significant interest around the site. They responded that they have spoken at length about the project and mana whenua see it as competition to their project, but they are fully supportive and understand the need for a theatre, although obviously they would like to see their project go ahead first. The Trust sees the project as complimentary to the Hihiaua development and there will be consultation with the Chairman of Hihiaua.

The Chair handed over to Ms Boardman who said she could sense the enthusiasm but noted that any decisions on a new theatre needed to take place as part of the LTP process later in the year.

3. Closure of Meeting

The meeting concluded at 11:13.