

Development Committee

Thursday, 3rd August, 2006

SPECIAL MEETING OF DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor McCausland (Chairman);
the High Sheriff (Councillor Humphrey); and
Councillors Convery, Hartley, Kelly, Kirkpatrick,
Ní Chuilín and Stoker.

Also attended: The Rt. Honourable the Lord Mayor (Councillor McCarthy).

In attendance: Mr. C. Quigley, Director of Legal Services;
Ms. S. McCay, Head of Economic Initiatives;
Ms. S. Watson, Economic Development Manager; and
Mr. N. Malcolm, Committee Administrator.

Apology

An apology for inability to attend was reported from Councillor D. Dodds.

North Foreshore - Presentation by Belfast Harbour Commissioners

The Head of Economic Initiatives informed the Committee that, in response to the Council's consultation document regarding the development options for the North Foreshore, the Belfast Harbour Commissioners had suggested that the site upon which the Council intended to develop as an Environmental Business Park should be used for distribution logistics warehousing.

She informed the Members that the Council had appointed consultants to undertake a cost benefit analysis of three options, that is, the Harbour Commissioners' proposal, the Environmental Business Park and a third option which would involve a mixture of distribution warehousing and the Business Park. She stated that, whilst the analysis had not been completed fully and that a detailed report in the matter would be submitted to the monthly meeting of the Committee on 16th August, the consultants had concluded that the preferred option would be the development of an Environmental Business Park. This rationale was that that option had the potential to provide more long term jobs to the area, it fitted better with the ethos of the North Foreshore in terms of it being sustainable and environmentally focused and, given the nature of the companies which were likely to be operating in the Business Park, had the potential to provide much more to the economy in terms of encouraging innovation,

The Head of Economic Initiatives reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 21st June, it had agreed to receive a presentation from representatives of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners regarding their proposal. She informed the Members that Messrs. Joe O'Neill, Port Commercial Manager, and David Giffen, Port Commercial Officer, were in attendance and they were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman (Councillor McCausland).

Mr. O'Neill proceeded to outline the history of the Belfast Harbour Commissioners' submissions regarding the zoning of land for port use within the North Foreshore site. He assured the Members that the Commissioners did not wish to own or operate the 25 acres of land upon which the Council proposed to locate the Environmental Business Park. Rather, they wanted the Council to agree that the site be used for distribution warehousing and that any companies which made enquiries regarding locating such warehousing within the Harbour Estate would be referred to the Council.

He informed the Members that the Commissioners operated a number of distribution logistics warehouses within the Harbour Estate, a number of which had been built in recent years. Based on the usage of those premises, he was of the opinion that the 25 acre site on the North Foreshore would provide the Council with ground rental of approximately £375,000 per annum and a rates revenue in the region of £900,000 per year. In addition, approximately 366 full-time jobs would be created, with 60-65% of those employed being from the North Belfast area. Mr. O'Neill indicated that distribution companies preferred to be located on the County Antrim side of the harbour since that was where the ferry terminals were located and it was possible that the rental figures which he had referred to could be increased given that the site on the North Foreshore was located close to the M2 Motorway. He stated that the Harbour Commissioners did not have any further land available on the County Antrim side of the Harbour Estate which could be developed for distribution warehousing. He was confident that, if the Council chose to locate distribution warehousing on the site, it would have no difficulty in obtaining customers.

Mr. O'Neill suggested that the Council could operate both projects on the site by allocating 10 acres for distribution warehousing, which would enable one 150,000 square feet development to be built, with the remaining 15 acres to be used as an Environmental Business Park. Such a mixed scheme was less risky and more tangible than a Business Park. He stated that the North Foreshore site represented a one-off strategic opportunity and he urged the Committee to use the 25 acre site on the North Foreshore solely for distribution warehousing or for the mixed scheme. Mr. O'Neill concluded his presentation by inviting the Members to participate in a tour of the Belfast Port on 10th August.

At the conclusion of the presentation, Mr. O'Neill answered various questions which were put to him by the Members. Messrs. O'Neill and Giffen thanked the Committee for receiving them and then retired from the meeting.

During discussion in the matter and in answer to Members' questions, the Head of Economic Initiatives stated that the proposal by the Council to provide a flagship Environmental Business Park on the North Foreshore which would promote and encourage the fledgling environmental sector, had received considerable support from a number of organisations, including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Investment. She informed the Members that, in recent discussions between Council officers and representatives of the Harbour Commissioners, the possibility of the two organisations exchanging areas of land for mutual benefit had been discussed and such a scheme might enable an Environmental Business Park to be located in another area of Belfast.

During further discussion, several Members made the point that further information was required to enable an informed decision to be taken on whether the 25 acre site on the North Foreshore should be used for either an Environmental Business Park or for distribution warehousing.

The Head of Economic Initiatives undertook to ensure that as much information as possible regarding the two proposed uses of the site would be made available to the Committee at its meeting on 16th August and indicated that, since funding was being obtained from the European Union in connection with the Environmental Business Park, the Committee would be required to take a decision as soon as possible.

Noted.

Chairman