

Development Committee

Thursday, 7th September, 2006

SPECIAL MEETING OF DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor P. Maskey (Deputy Chairman) (in the Chair);
the High Sheriff (Councillor Humphrey); and
Councillors M. Browne, Convery, Ekin, Hartley,
Kirkpatrick, A. Maskey, McGimpsey, Ní Chuilín and Stoker.

In attendance: Ms. S. McCay, Head of Economic Initiatives;
Mr. K. Sutherland, Planning and Transport
Policy Manager; and
Mr. N. Malcolm, Committee Administrator.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from the Chairman (Councillor McCausland) and Councillor D. Dodds.

Presentation by EDAW Consultants Regarding the Public Realm Strategy

The Committee was reminded that, at its meeting on 21st June, it had agreed to receive a further presentation from representatives from EDAW Consultants, a Company which was examining the enhancement and development of the Public Realm in the City centre on behalf of the Department for Social Development.

The Committee was informed that a deputation comprising representatives from EDAW and the Department was in attendance. Accordingly, Messrs. P. MacDonald and J. Welsh, representing EDAW Consultants, and Mr. J. Johnston of the Department for Social Development were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman.

Mr. Johnston reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 7th December, 2005, it had been briefed on the Public Realm Strategy and that the presentation it would receive would cover the work which was planned for the first stage of Phase 1, for which a budget of £14 million had been allocated. The work during this stage would be undertaken in the area which was bounded by Queen's Street in the West, Victoria Street in the East, Wellington Place/Chichester Street in the South and Castle Street/High Street in the North, with the exception of Donegall Place which would be included in Phase 2 of the Strategy. He advised the Members that a planning application in connection with the first stage of Phase 1 would be submitted in the coming weeks and it was anticipated that the work would commence in February, 2007.

Messrs. MacDonald and Welsh provided information on the detailed designs which had been prepared for the proposed works. They circulated examples of the proposed materials which would be used in the construction of the pedestrianised areas and detailed drawings and artists' impressions. They stated that the intention was to create open spaces which would encourage people to come to Belfast and for those who worked in Belfast to remain in the City centre after work.

They advised the Members that works on the improvement of Donegall Place had been deferred until Phase 2 in order to permit consultation to be held with a number of organisations, particularly as to whether buses should be permitted access to the area. Mr. MacDonald indicated that Donegall Place could be transformed into a prime pedestrianised shopping street of international standing and, together with Donegall Square North, could become a piazza-type area which could be used for events throughout the year.

During discussion on the presentation, several Members expressed concern that the removal of vehicles from Donegall Place and Donegall Square North would result in increased traffic use in the streets on the edge of the City centre, which would have an adverse impact on both business and domestic residents of those areas. The point was made also that a considerable number of persons relied on public transportation to gain access to the City centre and that the removal of buses from Donegall Place could cause difficulties for elderly and disabled persons. It was, therefore, of importance that alternative arrangements, such as a light rail system or amended bus routes, were introduced. It was stressed that it was important that EDAW and the Department for Social Development liaised with the various utility companies regarding the proposed works in order to avoid unnecessary disruption.

Mr. Johnston assured the Committee that the funding for Phase 1 had been secured. However, as it was likely that, under the Review of Public Administration, the Council would become responsible for any further improvements to the public realm area of the City, the Department and the Council would be required to undertake a joint bid in order to secure the funding for Phase 2 of the Strategy. Mr. Johnston indicated that he and his colleagues in the Department had been working closely with the Council officers regarding the Public Realm Strategy and he encouraged Elected Members to become involved more directly in these discussions.

The Committee noted the information provided and thanked the members of the deputation for being in attendance.

Chairman