

Development Committee

Wednesday, 23rd May, 2007

SPECIAL MEETING OF DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor McCausland (Chairman); and
Councillors M. Browne, Convery, D. Dodds, Ekin,
Hartley and Humphrey.

In attendance: Ms. M.T. McGivern, Director of Development;
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 High Sheriff (Councillor Kirkpatrick) and Councillors Kelly and Newton.

City Centre Bus Re-Routing

The Planning and Transport Policy Manager circulated information to the Committee regarding the proposals to re-route bus services within the City centre. He informed the Members that representatives from the Department for Regional Development and Translink were in attendance to make a presentation regarding the proposals. Accordingly, Messrs. T. McCourt, K. Monaghan, S. Pollock, B. Gilpin and B. Clarke were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman (Councillor McCausland).

Mr. McCourt thanked the Chairman for the opportunity to address the Committee. He indicated that consideration of the re-routing of bus services within the City centre had arisen from proposals for traffic management contained in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan and the Belfast Metropolitan Transport Plan, which aimed to give priority to public transport within the City centre.

With the assistance of visual aids, Mr. Monaghan explained the various aspects of the proposals for traffic management within the centre of Belfast. He informed the Members that, since the City centre was seen as a key travel destination and the major objective of the Metropolitan Transport Plan was to improve accessibility within that area, the Plan had examined the conflicts which took place between buses and other traffic, with a view to removing those problems. Accordingly, the Plan proposed a reorganisation of the road network within the City centre to improve accessibility and to facilitate the reduction of traffic, in order to increase walking, cycling and public transport use. He outlined the main proposals for the City centre, which included the introduction of a "civic spine" in the vicinity of the City Hall, where there would be reduced levels of traffic, and the completion of the City Centre Ring by constructing the Bankmore Link and upgrading Cromac, Bruce and Hope Streets. The main purpose of these proposals was to ensure that traffic bypassed the City centre rather than going through it.

He pointed out that three projects were being taken forward currently. These were the improvements to the City Centre Public Realm, the undertaking of the City Centre Traffic Management and Bus Routings Survey and plans to complete the southern section of the City Centre Ring. Mr. Monaghan informed the Members that the ultimate goal was to remove all traffic from Donegall Square North and Donegall Place, introduce changes so that the portions of Wellington Place and Chichester Street nearest the City Hall and Donegall Squares West and East would become bus only streets and the provision of bus lanes in a number of streets in the City centre. He assured the Committee that buses would no longer be parked for lengthy periods of time in Donegall Squares West and East. They would be stopping briefly to load and unload passengers but only at certain times of the day. As a result, the pavement areas in Donegall Squares East and West could be widened. He explained that a number of options were being considered currently in regard to the construction of the Bankmore Link and the widening of Cromac, Bruce and Hope Streets to complete the southern section of the City Centre Ring and that each option would result in the provision of improved facilities to enable pedestrians to cross the road. He pointed out that the volume of traffic in the City centre would not be reduced without the City Centre Ring being completed. He informed the Members that the Roads Service was examining currently the existing sections of the City Centre Ring to establish methods of maintaining the traffic flow, whilst at the same time improving facilities for pedestrians.

Mr. Monaghan concluded his presentation by advising the Committee of the issues which needed to be addressed regarding the various projects. He also emphasised the interdependency of each and the importance of the various public sector and private sector organisations working together in order to achieve a reduction in traffic in Belfast City centre and to improve the streets within it for pedestrian use.

During a lengthy discussion on the presentation and the comments thereon, Members indicated that the traffic management proposals for the City centre appeared to be aimed at facilitating traffic rather than removing it, that the construction of the Bankmore Link, thereby completing the City Centre Ring, would result in the City centre becoming an island cut off from its hinterland communities and would result in residents of those areas having to cross major roads in order to access the City centre. They pointed out also that the absence of a comprehensive public transport plan meant that people would continue to use their cars to access the City centre. It was considered that the proposed new bus routes should be designed to ensure that persons shopping in the City centre did not have to walk any great distance in order to access the new bus stops and that measures should be set in place to alleviate the difficulties caused to pedestrians and traffic in the City centre by taxis and privately operated buses parking illegally.

In response, the members of the deputation indicated that the proposals were aimed at reducing the number of cars which used the City centre and pointed out that, following the introduction of the Metro Service, the number of people using public transport was increasing. It was pointed out that Translink believed that the new locations for bus stops represented the best compromise which could be achieved and that people would not have to walk any further than currently was the case in order to access a bus.

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The Committee thanked the representatives of the Department for Regional Development and Translink for the presentation and for the information which they had provided and they then retired from the meeting.

Noted.

Site B Gasworks Site Northern Fringe

Following discussion, the Committee agreed to defer consideration of a report regarding Site B of the Northern Fringe of the Gasworks Site until its monthly meeting in June.

Loss of Quorum

The Chairman's attention was drawn to the absence of a quorum. Accordingly, those Members in attendance agreed to defer consideration of the remaining items of business on the Agenda.

Chairman