

Development Committee

Tuesday, 11th November, 2008

SPECIAL MEETING OF DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE

Members present: Councillor M. Browne (Chairman); and
Councillors Campbell, Convery, Cunningham, Lavery,
C. Maskey, McCarthy and Rodgers.

Also attended: Councillors Adamson, Moore and Mullaghan.

In attendance: Ms. M. T. McGivern, Director of Development;
Miss. A. Doherty, Planning and Transport Officer; and
Mr. N. Malcolm, Committee Administrator.

Apologies

Apologies for inability to attend were reported from Councillors Ekin and Humphrey.

York Road / Westlink Intersection

The Committee considered the undernoted report:

“Relevant Background Information

This report provides background on the previous consideration by the Committee in respect of the initial Yorkgate Junction consultation with the Council.

Key Issues

A request for initial comments in respect of the proposed Yorkgate Junction modifications were received from consultants (Scott Wilson Consultants) acting on behalf of the Department for Regional Development.

The initial responses to the consultation on behalf of Council were based on technical comments, previous submissions or existing information. These comments were reported to the Committee in August 2008.

The Council, through engagement in the Belfast Metropolitan Area Plan and associated documents, presented a consistent approach to proposals for the development of new transport infrastructure such as the Inner Ring and Sydenham By-pass. The Yorkgate Junction proposals would be considered to have similar potential impacts in relation to the immediate area and wider City.

The Council has previously raised a number of strategic and policy concerns in relation to such proposals. The junction proposal involves increasing the road network capacity in an area where there is existing residential accommodation within an inner-City location. As indicated there are implications in relation to air quality management and the impact the development of this infrastructure may have on the local residential accommodation or existing communities.

This proposal should be supportive of the need to consider alternatives to increased road infrastructures and the potential for smarter choices as outlined in the Government White paper on The Future of Transport and supported by the transportation unit of the DRD Roads Service. A corridor plan for the wider area should integrate the development of sites, in particular housing and employment, with the proposed transport network and will provide a phased programme for the implementation of improvements to transport infrastructure and services that enhance accessibility for all members of the constituent communities.

The Council has highlighted concerns regarding the negative impact of new road infrastructure in terms of the increased severance of the inner-City communities from the City core and the potential for the existing separation to be exacerbated by inappropriate infrastructure. In addition to evaluating or addressing the existing severance presented by the junction, the potential for new severance should be addressed in relation to the proposals both from the base position and for projected junction operating capacities.

The consideration of the route options in this corridor and wider context should also address opportunities for any new road configurations to be developed as more traditional urban streets to maximise connectivity and ensure minimisation of potentially adverse impacts on the surrounding communities.

The consideration of the junction options as part of a broader area allows the assessment of the opportunities for the reallocation of existing potentially surplus road space within the surrounding network. Any increase in the efficiency of the proposed junction arrangements should deliver direct positive impacts for the northern City centre and surrounding communities. The redesign of Dunbar Link and the reduction in road space could contribute to enhanced connectivity within the City centre and the integration of the areas to the north of the Frederick Street/ Dunbar Link axis.

It should also be noted that the Council has highlighted concerns in respect of the potential impact proposals may have on air quality in this area. The potential air quality impacts for existing and any proposed residents are likely to require proposals to be accompanied by detailed air quality assessments.

The initial response is provided for information and Members are requested to note the contents as context to the proposals for the Yorkgate Junction modifications.

Resource Implications

There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.

Recommendations

It is recommend that the Committee notes the contents of this report and the appended information papers as context to the presentations on the Yorkgate Junction proposals.”

The Chairman welcomed to the meeting Messrs. Kevin Monaghan, Roy Spiers and Lionel Walsh, representing the Department for Regional Development, Roads Service.

With the assistance of visual aids, Mr. Spiers apprised the Committee of the Department's plans for the York Road/Westlink Junction. He indicated that when the current improvement works on the M1 and Westlink were completed this intersection would be the only signal-controlled junction which would remain on the motorway network. As a result of the improvements, traffic would arrive much quicker to this junction from the M1/Westlink direction and the Department for Regional Development had recognised that the York Road/Westlink Junction would eventually come under increased pressure to deal with the volume of traffic. Accordingly, the Roads Service had developed preliminary proposals to provide a grade separated junction using flyovers which would provide direct links between the Westlink, the M2 and the M3. He informed the Members that the proposals to improve the junction were included within the Department's recently published Investment Delivery Plan for Roads which envisaged the works being completed between 2013/2014 and 2017/2018. However, construction of the new intersection would be dependant upon the successful completion of the necessary statutory procedures, a detailed economic appraisal and the availability of funding through the normal budgetary process. He pointed out that it had been estimated that the work would cost £57 million.

In answer to Members' questions, the representatives from the Roads Service indicated that:

- (i) the quality of the air in the neighbourhoods close to the junction would be addressed within the Environmental Statement which would have to be prepared as part of the statutory processes;

- (ii) the Department would be undertaking a lengthy period of both formal and informal consultation and that residents living close to the junction would be included within this consultation;
- (iii) during construction works, it was considered that traffic flow would be able to be maintained to an acceptable level;
- (iv) since it was not possible for the Roads Service to build the number of new roads necessary to completely remove problems with traffic congestion, it focused its efforts in removing traffic bottlenecks on strategic road links;
- (v) the proposals for the intersection would not conflict with any future rapid transit scheme between the City centre and North Belfast; and
- (vi) the Roads Service had attempted to reduce the potential isolation of the communities in North Belfast from the City centre by ensuring that pedestrian access to the City centre would be addressed within the plans.

The representatives from the Roads Service thanked the Committee for the opportunity to address it and retired from the meeting.

The Director reminded the Committee that, at its meeting on 9th April, when it had received a presentation by representatives from the Department for Regional Development regarding the Rapid Transit Study for Belfast, it had been advised of a proposal to develop the areas between the roads which would be constructed as part of the Road Services' scheme for the Westlink/York Road Junction. This project had been prepared by the Boyd Partnership and WDR and RT Taggart and it had been considered that it would be useful for the Committee to receive a presentation on these proposals.

Accordingly, Messrs Arthur Acheson, Abdel Saddi and John Smiley representing the two companies, were admitted to the meeting and welcomed by the Chairman. They advised the Committee that their companies believed that the open spaces which would be created as part of the Roads Service's scheme could be put to better uses than those of grassed areas and surface car parks as proposed by the Department. They saw this as an opportunity to transform this busy junction into an area which linked North Belfast and the City centre. They believed that these areas, together with those which would be created by covering over the underpasses, could be used for development purposes which would regenerate this area of York Street. Their proposals included the provision of offices, residential units including some social housing, bars and restaurants and the provision of a car park and bus and rail stations and would enable the area to be developed as a park and ride or transport hub, which would add vitality to that area of the City. Their plans would allow the area to become a pleasant walking environment, which would be enhanced by the provision of a covered walkway from York Street to Corporation Street. The deputation concluded by requesting the Committee to endorse its proposals for the York Street/Westlink intersection.

In answer to Members' questions, the representatives indicated that:

- (i) they had consulted with the Department for Social Development, Translink, the Roads Service, the Strategic Investment Board and the Belfast Harbour Commissioners regarding their proposals, the cost of which was estimated at £400 million;
- (ii) if the Roads Service were to hand over the land which it owned at the intersection, the developers of the scheme proposed by the deputation would integrate the road scheme into their overall plans which would, in effect, result in the scheme being undertaken at no cost to the Department for Regional Development;
- (iii) it would take up to 5 years to obtain the necessary statutory approvals before construction works could commence; and
- (iv) as the plans were currently in the early stage of development, the Boyd Partnership and WDR and RT Taggart were keen for local representatives to bring their ideas to the attention of the local community.

The deputation thanked the Committee for the opportunity to address it and retired from the meeting.

During discussion in the matter, the Committee noted the information which had been provided by both deputations regarding the York Road/Westlink intersection and agreed to endorse the scheme which had been proposed by the Boyd Partnership and WDR and RT Taggart.

Chairman