

Submission to the City of Perth Western Foreshore Indicative Concept Plan

Monday, 29 November 2004

The Western Foreshore plan represents, in my opinion, an exciting opportunity to capitalise on the beauty of the Swan River, making it available in new ways both to local residents and to tourists. Generally speaking, the proposal has my full support. However, a number of important points must be kept in mind if any development is to be successful. Addressing these issues early may well help to avoid public criticism at a later stage.

Preservation of the City Skyline

It is not a coincidence that a great many postcards for sale in the city's tourist shops feature the Perth skyline. The mostly-pleasant appearance of the CBD, however, is easily damaged by a careless lack of planning for constructions on the foreshore.

The Perth Convention Exhibition Centre is an important example of this. Aside from general criticisms of the building's design, the gross failure of its architects to consider the appearance of its roof has resulted in major damage being done to the view of the city as a whole from Kings Park. While the view of the Convention Centre from the courtyard atop the Busport is certainly acceptable, the blank white slab that is visible from the State War Memorial is hardly so.

Any development on the waterfront, particularly the western foreshore, will be highly susceptible to similar problems. It is crucial that builders and architects participating in this development be made to consider the appearance of their structures from all directions. This must include consideration of the roofs of foreshore buildings, since these roofs will be prominently visible from Kings Park.

Similarly, the view of the city from the South Perth foreshore is an important concern. It is worthwhile to place height restrictions on foreshore buildings no greater than that of the existing Convention Centre, and perhaps lower, to preserve the balanced appearance that results from our CBD having small glass buildings in front of much taller office towers. Altering this symmetry results in an alteration of what is effectively the face of Perth, so height considerations are of great significance. When formal plans of the buildings to be constructed are available, these should be made open for public comment immediately.

Cultural and Artistic Significance

Recognition of the traditional Aboriginal significance of the area – by more than just a token acknowledgement – would provide a strong indication (both to Perth residents and to visitors) of the importance of Aboriginal history to Perth and its river. Public art, for instance, should feature prominently in any people-oriented foreshore development, and it would be highly appropriate for at least some of this to be Aboriginal in character. Most of the rest of the city lacks appropriate recognition of the land's traditional owners, so it would be fitting to compensate for this in a foreshore development, since any such development will become one of the city's most prominent regions.

The Western Foreshore proposal also creates the possibility of bringing more culture to the river, as an alternative to the failed 'performing arts precinct' proposal for Perth's new theatre complex. Depending on the alignment of other buildings, it may be possible to use part of the developed area as a public space for the performing arts. Drama or live comedy, for instance, would be well complemented by a beautiful foreshore setting, and such a performance space would be a strong tourist drawcard.

As mentioned, the foreshore is also an ideal site for public art, so sculptures and other installations should be an important inclusion. Other forms of visual art are also worth consideration – the riverfront would make an ideal location for a gallery, for example.

Public Accessibility

It is vital to ensure that all areas of the development are equally accessible to all people. The proposal allows for a waterfront hotel on a pier; although this is a reasonable suggestion, exclusive access to the pier by hotel guests should be avoided, and the hotel should not detract from public access to the river. The proposed pier could also be home to facilities for fishing, for instance, and publicly accessible restaurants or cafés.

It is also crucial to consider public transport access to the development. Pedestrian links to both the Busport and Esplanade Station are vital, and these should not require visitors to negotiate traffic. Equally important is access via the CAT service, which already runs near that area. It would be highly appropriate to install a CAT stop to allow for ease of access.

In the same manner, pedestrian access to the foreshore from other popular areas of the city is vital, particularly if its tourism potential is to be realised. In addition to a pedestrian link to the Busport, the foreshore development should strengthen pedestrian links to Kings Park and the parks along Mounts Bay Road, to ensure that all of the major tourist destinations around the CBD are easily accessible to people travelling on foot.

Another important accessibility consideration is the ability of the development to cope with large crowds. Already, nearby regions of the foreshore are popular destinations during the Australia Day fireworks, so it is almost certain that any foreshore development will draw large crowds during these and other events on the river. Planning should take into account the fact that at times, the western foreshore will have to accommodate large numbers of temporary visitors, who will need (among other things) an easy means to get there, places to sit or stand, and facilities such as toilets and rubbish bins.

Recognition of Environmental Concerns

As a concluding note, it is utterly vital that the health of the Swan River be maintained as a crucial concern. One of Perth's strongest advantages over other cities, from a traveller's point of view, is the relative cleanliness of our air and our river. This, however, is the result of a fragile balance that is all-too-easily disrupted. Rubbish, outflows from foreshore buildings, and areas of stagnant water (in which organisms such as algae can thrive) need to be prevented and monitored.

Consideration of the environmental impact of each part of the development is crucial, and detrimental effects should be avoided. No one will want to visit a riverside location when the river looks dirty or smells unpleasant.

Hourann Bosci
29 November 2004