

The Leatherhead Area Partnership Limited

25-29 High Street, Leatherhead, Surrey KT22 8AB

15 September 2007

Dear Paula

Church Street Enhancement Project

In your letter to the Leatherhead Healthcheck team and simultaneous email to a wide distribution list, you have raised many issues and questions. We will deal with them below. We will also comment, where appropriate, on other issues raised in discussions at the Town Centre Forum

However, firstly we must remind you that the design scheme as currently proposed is the result of extensive discussions and consultations, in some of which Leatherhead Ahead has participated, that have been on-going since the Healthcheck report of January 2006. The process has been disciplined and transparent. As with the other Healthcheck projects, it is this continuous process of further research and consultation that is turning ideas into tangible projects.

Hence, before dealing with your concerns we have some questions of our own to ask you. You claim in your email "Leatherhead Ahead and many other people are very concerned about the redesign proposals put forward for Church Street." We ask: How many people? When were they consulted? How did that consultation process take place, if indeed a formal consultation did take place? How were those consultations advertised so that as many people as possible could participate? Was any report produced on the basis of these consultations and, if so, is it available for inspection?

We ask because in the case of the Church Street consultations this information is readily available.

You say that the Healthcheck Report identified that people were calling for more parking, for free or cheaper parking and the opportunity for half hour "pop and shop" parking. This is true. You also highlight our objective TA5.4 "To work with Mole Valley District Council to provide more free "pop & shop" parking especially close to the Centre with Leret Way being one possible location." This is true. However, In a subsequent survey with regard to the waiting restrictions on the High Street in June, of the 279 who answered the questionnaires, only 27 recorded loss of 'pop and 'shop' facilities as a negative. Is it possible that part of the public response may be to do with the improved provision of parking in Leatherhead generally?

Since our report was published Mole Valley District Council has invested considerable sums of money to extend the Station Road Car Park and to redevelop the Bull Hill site, adding over 100 spaces, hence providing “more parking”. The Lidl site has been opened providing considerable 2 hour “free parking” close to the centre that can also be used for “pop and shop”.

You refer to problems with the surfacing materials used in the High Street. These are issues on which Highway Engineering and Urban Design professionals should comment and their comments will be forthcoming as part of the detailed project plan.

Both you and the Chamber of Commerce raised the issue of cost and, in the Town Centre Forum, questioned if the money could be used for other things. The answer of course is “yes”, as it would be for all other sums we have raised in the other projects for which we have submitted bids, such as SEEDA, The Leatherhead Trust and the Thomas Flack Fund and others. The question of competing priorities is not ours to assess - we are bidding for funds for the Leatherhead Area, and are confident that the assessment of conflicting priorities will be properly assessed by those whose responsibility it is to allocate the funds. In this case the bid is being made to Surrey County Council via the Mole Valley Local Committee.

You comment that the trading economy of Leatherhead is fragile. In our view there is anecdotal evidence that supports a different view - a comment from the Healthcheck interviews “those who are making the effort are reaping the rewards” - one retailer in town has grown 20% in the past two years and with increases in margins - and just look at the continuing arrival of new business of substance. We are disappointed that you do not share our confidence in the commercial abilities and energy of business owners to plan successfully for an event that is not planned to occur for fifteen months.

Referring to your other concerns:

We find it difficult to understand how the proposals can be seen to make access to the town more restricted. The open space in front of the theatre would remove in a simplified functional and flexible way a whole lot of clutter which currently makes the approach from the high street uninviting. As for the avenue of trees, these will be clear stemmed and at eye level will not obstruct views down the street.

In the Key Findings section of the Healthcheck we reported “People see the town both as a place to shop and as a place where they could meet and chat with their friends. So they asked for more seating and pleasant civic spaces. There were also requests to make the entrances to the town more welcoming”. There were requests for more events in the town which is linked to the proposed civic space and “to improve the appearance and usefulness of the area outside the theatre entrance in Church Street”. Elsewhere there were numerous calls for more trees. The trade off of five parking spaces was the downside of this scheme versus the alternative one on show. We did not set out to reduce parking. However, this was the choice by two to one, having left it to the public to decide.

The piazza is designed as a flexible space to be used for sitting and socialising, the increasing number of community events, street theatre performances, improved theatre spill out, perhaps the market and we are sure other uses will be forthcoming. Yes vandalism is a problem but the design is simple, particularly now the focal point feature has been removed on listening to the public doubts about it, and therefore should not be any more subject to vandalism than at the moment. Jacobs make the point that “key elements of the plan could lessen the potential for crime and disorder. The new space will be well lit, lights out of reach on wall mountings, with potential for additional CCTV on the corner of Barclays. Street furniture would be robust and seating would feature multiple arm rests to discourage sleeping and skateboarding. The proposal aims to encourage more usage which would develop a safe, self-policing space.”

The question of keeping what we have whilst improving the appearance of the area was hardly an option given the location and nature of the clutter at the theatre end of the street. To create a flexible and functional space requires the relocation and/or removal of the clutter.

We informed you earlier the manner in which we were encouraged ‘to think outside the box’ to embrace the whole of Church Street to the traffic lights in order to optimise the benefits within a more cohesive scheme.

With regard to the information requested:

1. The measurable benefits include removal of visual obstructions into the street, improved pedestrian facilities, more trees, more seats, creation of an open space for community events and socialising. The aesthetics are difficult to measure and are something individuals have to make up their minds about. We trusted the public to make their own judgements during the consultations. We believe that with this scheme in place Church Street will attract more people to the benefit of the current businesses and the theatre. With more footfall it may be possible to attract the wider range of shops asked for by many respondents to the Healthcheck.
2. The total estimated cost of the project as currently specified is £870,000. However, this includes a hefty £194,000 contingency to cover for the kind of unforeseen issues met in the previous High Street projects. There is a 6% inflation multiplier also included. The estimate has been reviewed by chartered surveyor Grove and Millican, our Project Manager. They advise this contingency “is considered to represent an extremely pessimistic view of what might be encountered, and hence likely to prove excessive.” With regard to Fees included in the total cost for design, supervision and client professional fees they say “ The16% allowance is considered excessive for the scope and complexity likely to be involved in achieving the works identified in the master plan.” “In summary the cost estimate prepared by Jacobs for the proposed Church Street urban improvement scheme is considered high...” Given past experience in the town we agree with the cautious approach adopted by Jacobs.

3. Dependent on budget approvals for 2008/09 and 2009/10, funding has been provisionally identified by SCC Highways and MVDC allocation of Section 106 funds. Should there be a shortfall from these sources there are local and national grant making organisations to which applications can be made for this type of project. They favour projects where funds have also been raised by the local beneficiaries of the project.
4. It is currently planned for work to start in January 2009 and finish in June 2009.
5. The question of access and parking during the works will be part of the construction plan developed with the appointed contractor and the District Council. It is too early to state specifically what these will be but you can be assured they will aim to minimise inconvenience to the Church Street residents, businesses and visitors.

Having considered the evidence presented we do not consider that it would be appropriate to deny the Mole Valley Local Committee the opportunity to debate this project, and the issues raised, at their meeting on 26th September.

Finally, and looking to the future, we would repeat our invitation to Leatherhead Ahead to become a Member of The Leatherhead Area Partnership Limited, with the rights and benefits set out in our Constitution, a copy of which you have.

Yours sincerely

Colin Langley
Chairman
The Leatherhead Area Partnership Limited