

Dear Resident,

Thank you for your letter about the proposed Canal Corridor Development. Yours is one of a number of standard letters I have received; I hope you will accept to a standard response.

There do appear to be a large number of misconceptions about both what Centros Miller are proposing and the Council process for dealing with these proposals. I will deal with the points you make in your letter paragraph by paragraph. However, before I do so, It may be helpful if I set out some general points.

I do think the Canal Corridor North area needs redevelopment. It has been undeveloped for over thirty years following clearance of the terraced houses in the area. It was intended that an Eastern Relief Road was build there – a proposal that I think would have been disastrous and I have always resisted. A previous plan for redevelopment by developers Chelverton also failed. This was the original “retail box” scheme at the end of a road access. I also resisted that scheme as it did not provide the mixed development that I think is needed in the area. There was also very little prior consultation on the proposals.

It is my belief that the approach of Centros Miller is qualitatively different from that of Chelverton for reasons that I set out below.

The area has a planning brief that was widely consulted on prior to any involvement of Centros Miller and published in May 2002. This does envisage a substantial retail extension to the town centre, but it also envisages other uses such as housing, open space and enhancement of the cultural facilities. It is my belief that the proposals, as they are developed so far, have the potential to fulfil that brief.

There appears to be a widespread misconception that the Cabinet Meeting on 25th July is the final decision on the scheme. This is far from being the case. The meeting is primarily about developing further the framework of a financial agreement between Centros Miller and the Council about the terms on which land will be transferred. Any such financial agreement will be conditional on Centros Miller achieving planning consent. At the moment we are a long way from a formal planning application and there is a great deal of work to be done before one can be submitted.

One of the differences of the Centros Miller approach, and one that I do welcome, is that they are involved in a master planning exercise with public consultation in developing their proposals. Prior to taking the first approach of Centros Miller to Cabinet in March 2005, Councillor Bryning and myself consulted the Leaders of all five parties (or their representatives). They all welcomed the Centros Miller approach, particularly the master planning and public consultation elements, though obviously that committed none of them to the final proposals.

There have been three rounds of public consultation so far, and, although the form of the development within the site is broadly known they still have to develop this further. Crucially, they still have to submit their traffic proposals.

I enclose for your information a copy of a letter that I sent to them after their second round of consultation. [I have excised a paragraph that deals with particular individuals and businesses.] You will see that the concerns of "Its Our City" reflect my concerns. [I put it that way round since I shared my letter with "Its our City" prior to them contacting councillors and making a public statement.] However, unlike "Its Our City", I do believe that those concerns are capable of being resolved.

The two crucial elements of concern are traffic and parking, and retail capacity. These will have to be resolved prior to any successful planning application. You can be assured that, if they are not resolved to my satisfaction, prior to a planning application then I will oppose it. I deal with these in some detail below.

However, it is worth dealing with two assertions that have achieved currency but in fact are very dubious

The first relates to traffic. It is asserted that the development will generate an additional 10,000 journeys per day into the Lancaster City Centre. I understand this assertion comes from Councillor Whitelegg using the TRIPS model. It seems implausibly high to me given that there are currently in the region of 50,000 round trips into Lancaster each day by car and that a high proportion of these will be journeys to work or on non-retail related business. To get to a figure like Councillor Whitelegg's one would have to assume the development was phenomenally successful in attracting extra business to Lancaster.

The appropriateness of this method of calculating extra traffic has been strongly challenged by Centros Miller's traffic consultant. Basically their point is that in a shopping development with an anchor store like Debenhams, the different shops do not generate different shopping trips but people combine shopping at more than one outlet. Councillor Whitelegg's method of calculation does not take account of this and therefore leads to grossly exaggerated estimates of additional traffic.

Clearly there is a disagreement which needs to be resolved. I don't intend to rely on any of the above (including my own scepticism about Councillor Whitelegg's claims). It can only be done on the basis of detailed traffic modelling which is subject to independent appraisal. You will see below that this will be required as part of the planning process.

The second relates to retail capacity. The figure of a 60% increase in retail floor space is often quoted. It seems to depend on a narrow definition of what constitutes Lancaster Centre and some rounding of figures. On the figures available to me if B&Q and Sainsburys are included in the centre (as they surely must be for traffic generation purposes), then the retail expansion is 45% not 60%. This is still a substantial figure and needs to be justified. Again this will be required as part of the planning process.

I should also point out that the two arguments that there will be a huge additional traffic burden and that the development will empty the existing town centre tend to work

against each other. If there is extra traffic then there is capacity for retail expansion not just a shift in location.

To turn in detail to the points made in your letter:

1. The Cabinet meeting on 25th July 2006.

"I understand that the proposed Canal Corridor development is due to be discussed at the Council Cabinet meeting on 25 July. I am given to understand that the outcome of the discussion on 25 July will take the proposed development as outlined by Centros Miller further forward toward the planning application stage."

This is not the case. The primary purpose of the report that will be considered by Cabinet is to deal with financial and legal matters. It deals with the ownership of land; the terms on which such transfers may take place; whether the council will receive consideration as a capital receipt or as an income stream; and the amount of such consideration. Planning considerations such as retail capacity and traffic and parking will be considered as part of a planning application; this is still some way off. However, it will be a condition of any agreement that the developer obtains planning permission otherwise the agreement will lapse. Clearly if it is thought that planning permission could never be obtained there would be no point in going further. However the converse is not true. It is possible for Cabinet to consider financial details relating to land in the Council's ownership without assuming that planning permission will be granted, provided the financial agreement is contingent on planning permission being obtained.

2. Information about the development

"I am writing to you to express my concerns at the prospect of the proposed development proceeding any further forward on the basis of the relatively small amount of concrete public information provided by Centros Miller to this point."

"The only known facts about the proposed development are that there will be a Debenhams department store and a multistorey carpark at the heart of whatever Centros Miller builds on this land....."

As mentioned in (1) above, the development will not proceed unless planning permission can be secured. However, while the master plan is not yet complete, much more is known about the proposed development than you suggest. Centros Miller have given public presentations on the emerging master plan at the beginning of March and at the end of May and these have received some coverage in the local press.

In addition to Debenhams, the car park and the proposed retail extension to the town centre, the presentation at the end of May included, according to my notes, the following proposals:

- Some housing on Alfred Street opposite the existing terraced housing and some further housing near the corner of St Leonardgate and on the canal side. Roughly 30% of what is proposed will be affordable in line with our current planning guidelines.
- Dedicated space for the Musicians Co-operative; provision for some extension of secondary space at the Dukes allowing them to use two auditoriums simultaneously; foyer space for the Grand.
- A green open space at the end of Alfred Street climbing up to the canal side; open squares in the centre of the development and a hard landscaped area near the canal; opening up of the area near the fountain at Stonewell/Great John Street/Moor Lane into a public square.
- Some leisure use on the canal side (restaurant, cafes).
- A direct pedestrian footbridge to connect to St Nicholas Arcades.

3. Can the development go ahead without information on the traffic and retail impacts

"... I would very much appreciate it if you could inform me as to how the proposed development can possibly go any further forward without detailed information on the following points:"

The short answer is that the development cannot go ahead without adequate detailed study of its traffic impact and retail impact. Any information that Centros Miller provide will be robustly analysed as part of the planning process. I will deal with the individual points in turn.

I repeat my assurance that if they do not provide a satisfactory solution to traffic or retail impacts, I will oppose any future planning application.

4. Traffic

"Traffic: given that Centros Miller know exactly how big the new department store will be (100,000 square feet plus) there must be some analysis available which shows how many customers and workers per day will be required by Debenhams to sustain a store of that size. It surely must be possible to predict what impact this will have on traffic levels in the city. At the same time it must be possible for Centros Miller to be more precise about the size of the multistorey carpark they are planning to build to replace the carparks currently on the site and to take up the extra traffic generated by the development itself. Centros Miller have said during their public presentations that they are unable to answer these questions at this stage. When will they be able to answer them and why can they not answer them now?"

Centros Miller still have not completed the master plan. They have put forward details of what they propose on site including car parking. The multi-storey car park will replace the existing car parking and increase by it 400-500 places. I assume this is based on their knowledge of similar developments.

Centros Miller have not completed their work on traffic flows to and from the development. They have engaged a firm of traffic engineers and have done a considerable amount of work, which was reported to the May consultations. However, although they have made some suggestions about solutions involving off site works, they have not yet demonstrated that this is a robust solution. Detailed numerical modelling work needs to be done and this is not complete. A satisfactory solution will have to be found if planning permission is to be granted.

What they have done so far is to obtain the PARAMICS model from Lancashire County Council. This is a detailed computer model of the traffic flows into and around Lancaster Town Centre. They have done additional survey work to update the model to reproduce the current traffic flows as Lancashire were using data that was a few years old.

They have some ideas which they claim will stop a lot of the traffic going round the gyratory system, will reduce traffic flows on Bulk Road and will enable easy access to their car park. Until these are numerically tested it is impossible to know whether they will work. However any work that they do do on the PARAMICS model will be independently scrutinised.

5. Retail impact

Impact on Lancaster and Morecambe city centres: As I am sure you are aware there are many empty retail units in both Lancaster and Morecambe. Centros Miller are proposing to build more retail units in addition to the department store as part of the development. I am very concerned about the impact that this will have on Lancaster and Morecambe. What hard evidence have Centros Miller provided to show that the proposed development will not see the closure of even more shops and businesses in Lancaster and Morecambe?

The Council have, independently of Centros Miller, commissioned a study of the retail capacity of the district from White Young Green as part of the Local Development Framework. This was done jointly with South Lakeland Council so it considered the position of Kendal also. A copy of this can be found on the Council's website. This concluded that a substantial increase in retail floor space is needed merely for Lancaster to retain its market share. It noted the threat to Lancaster's position by the proposed Tithebarn development at Preston (which would dwarf Centros Miller) and the continued expansion of the Trafford Centre. It is clear that the Council will have to plan an expansion of retail capacity if the viability of the existing town centre is not to be threatened. This isn't just about more shopping opportunities, it is also about providing jobs.

Subsequent to the publication of the White Young Green study the Regional Spatial Study has identified Lancaster and Carlisle as service sector growth points to serve Cumbria. This would tend to suggest that retail restraint elsewhere in Cumbria would suggest further expansion in Lancaster beyond the WYG figure.

However, Centros Miller are proposing a large expansion even if it is not as large as is sometimes suggested. Clearly there will have to be a robust case made in terms of retail impact as part of the planning case. The presence of a popular department store will weigh on one side of the balance, the size of the expansion on the other.

6. Consultation

Consultation: Are you as a member of the Council Cabinet happy with the consultation process that Centros Miller and their public relations company have conducted so far? Do you think that this process has been unbiased and fair? Do you agree that the City Council should itself fully consult the public city-wide about what they think should be done with the canal corridor before the proposed Centros Miller development of the site goes any further forward?

The answer is yes. There has been a great deal of public consultation. The planning policy guidance was only adopted after city-wide public consultation carried out by the Council before Centros Miller came on the scene. Centros Miller are consulting as part of the master planning process. The Government Office of the North West are scrutinising the consultation process as it progresses. There will be further consultation if a scheme goes to Planning Committee.

I am sorry for the length of this response. You can be assured that I am taking this process very seriously.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Barker

Leader of the Council



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27 February 2006

Dear Steve,

Thank you for your informative presentation about the emerging master plan for the Canal Corridor North on 14th February. Obviously this is a very important proposal for the ward I represent, so I thought it might be worth putting down some reactions to the presentation. At this stage the proposals haven't been seen by Cabinet or by members of Planning Committee or the Planing Policy Liaison Group, so I am responding in my role as ward councillor rather than Leader.

I am encouraged by the approach. The plans are much better than those by a previous developer for a site dominated by "retail boxes" with very little thought given to other uses, or to the earlier plans for an inner relief road. I am also encouraged by the fact that you are consulting residents and stakeholders and assessing opinions before you make final proposals.

The scheme as proposed does include an arts quarter, housing and public open space as well as retail development. For me, those are prerequisites, so I am pleased to see them there. You also mentioned at the meeting on Tuesday that you hoped to make proper provision for small businesses that may be displaced by the scheme; again I welcome that.

So having given a cautious welcome to what you are doing, I would like to raise some concerns.

Traffic and Parking

It is an advantage of the scheme that the “rat run” along Edward St, Alfred Street and St Leonardsgate will no longer exist. That should bring some relief to residents on Alfred Street and other nearby streets who won’t have to suffer the nuisance from standing traffic outside their front doors.

However, I am concerned that we might be creating a similar problem on Bulk Road if we can’t solve the problems of access. It is very important that we find a way of accessing the site from Back Caton Road rather than Bulk Road. This is particularly so if you are hoping to intercept some of the traffic that currently ends up on the gyratory system. Bulk Road is already used to bypass the one way system rather than for local traffic and I would not want to see any further increase. You indicated that studies were underway which you find encouraging. However, you gave no details.

You also said that a multi-storey car park on three or four levels would be adequate both to replace the lost parking and to provide for new demand generated by the scheme. You said that such a car park would not be dominant when seen from the residential part of the site. Again, I think the detail was lacking. A larger car park would exacerbate the problems of access and be harder to absorb in the site, there wasn’t the information to convince me that the one proposed would be adequate and would not lead to problems elsewhere.

Do you have a date for when you expect to complete and present traffic and parking studies?

Alfred Street and Open Space

As mentioned above, I like the idea of taking through traffic off Alfred Street. However, residents of that street and the adjacent terraced areas will naturally be concerned about a possible over dominant development. It’s crucial that the proposed housing on the eastern side does not dominate the existing terraces and that neither is dominated by the proposed multi-storey car park.

I like the idea of providing Alfred Street and the nearby terraced housing with some open space. However, the planned open space on the sawmill site looked a bit of an afterthought to me and didn’t look as if it would be “owned” by existing housing. Could you look at this? Is there any way of making it more integrated with existing housing?

Arts Provision

Again its encouraging that you have provided for the Dukes and the Grand in a positive way and have identified a location for an expanded Musicians Co-op with performance space on the site. Did you say you would cater for the dance school too? Obviously, what seemed to be proposed is a big step forward for the Musician’s Co-op and may be financially very demanding for them. Do they feel comfortable with what is proposed?

I am not sure that the arts zone hangs together that well. The Dukes, the Grand and the proposed building for the Co-op on St Leonardgate seem to look outwards to me, so I can’t get a feel of how this is an integrated arts quarter. I am not sure how the linking public space will bring things together. Can you give more details?

Affected Individuals and Businesses

Town Centre Shopping

I share your belief that the provision of a major department store in Lancaster will retain trade in Lancaster that is currently or potentially being lost to Preston and Manchester and will help trading conditions overall. However, there is a limit to how much additional floor space can be accommodated before it adversely affects the viability of the rest of the Town Centre. No one wants to see significant numbers of empty shops there. Have you any clear idea of what that limit is and have you got evidence to present on that point?

I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,

Ian Barker
Leader of the Council