

Opera Centre is on song

By CLODAGH O'LEARY

CITY councillors this week backed plans for the proposed €200m Opera Centre shopping complex in the city.

While a decision has yet to be made by the planning department at City Hall on the application, the majority of councillors supported the plans at a meeting in City Hall with Belfast-based developers Regeneration Developments.

The 400,000 square foot Opera Centre—named in honour of Limerick's famous rags to riches 18th century soprano Catherine Hayes—will create 1,000 full-time jobs in the city, and an additional 300 to 500 construction jobs.

And the centre, when complete, is expected to bring an extra 100,000 to 110,000 people into the city centre every week.

"We anticipate a huge return to the city centre," said Regeneration Developments CEO Suneil Sharma.

The most striking aspect to the designs of the Opera Centre are the two modern glass fronted entrances—one facing the river at Bank Place and the main entrance on the junction of Patrick Street and Ellen Street.

Mr Sharma said the entrances will be instantly recognisable and will in time become synonymous with Limerick city.

The development will consist of four storeys—basement, ground level, first floor and mezzanine—and will make use of natural light through windows in the roof.

There will be two anchor stores—details of which will be announced later this year, numerous retail outlets and a food court.

Currently, there are 18 objectors to the five-acre development.

In response to Cllr Kevin Kiely's question about how they expected to deal with them Mr Sharma responded: "We have dealt with all people involved honestly, and I have made myself available to everyone. I have met with all objectors at least once, if not twice, and with some individuals three times, but we are pretty confident that we can allay their fears."

"We gave got to the point now where most of the interested parties have agreed, but there are still one or two minor details to work out," he said.

The developers plan to demolish the "odd building" including a number of premises on Rutland Street and Ellen Street, in addition to the Cahill May Roberts building at Bank Place, Workspace on Michael Street, the AIB bank on Patrick Street and Eurosurf



An artist's sketch of the proposed Opera Centre at Patrick Street

Internet cafe.

The exterior will consist of glass and stone, making use of materials salvaged from the demolition of buildings. Much of the old facade on Patrick Street will remain, with the new development behind, combining the old and the new.

And Catherine Hayes' birthplace on Patrick Street will be restored and turned into a museum, at a cost of €2.5m to Regeneration.

At Monday's Economic Policy Development and Future Planning Strategic Policy Committee meeting, Brian Lambe of Lafferty Project Management—who are also responsible for Dundrum Town Centre and Childer's Road Retail Park—gave an overview of the development.

"We want the new architecture to stand the test of time and prove that Limerick is a modern city of the future," said Mr Sharma.

Planning consultant Simon Clear, Colin Robinson of architectural firm Ostick and Williams and retail advisor Peter O'Meara of Hamilton Osborne King all outlined their roles in the development.

Mr O'Meara alluded to "medium-sized" outlets such as H&M, Zara and Next which are all based in the suburbs.

"For any city, these stores would generally have a two store strategy, one in the city centre, one in the suburbs. But there is not anything like they would require in Limerick currently," said Mr O'Meara.

"This development will strengthen the city centre, otherwise there

will be a big pull to the suburbs, with people stopping to visit the city centre," warned Mr O'Meara.

Other plans include the building of a stand alone three storey cafe / bar and restaurant with landscaped plaza and decking at Bank Place.

Another stand-out feature to the development is the "Sky Bridge", a glass and steel pedestrian bridge, which will link a new multi-storey car park on Denmark Street with the centre at Ellen Street.

Two extra decks will be constructed on top of the car park enable it to link with the Opera Centre, providing an extra 150 car spaces.

Cllr Kieran O'Hanlon pointed out that this would not be adequate for an extra 110,000 people a week.

Mr Sharma replied: "We have carried out a very detailed analysis on parking, no matter what we do we can not achieve full requirement for parking, but as a result of our detailed analysis, we have found that there is under-utilisation of car parks further away, and when I say further away, I mean 300 to 400 metres away, which will help these car parks."

Cllr Kiely described the development as "excellent"; Cllr Jim Long said the developers showed the vigour and courage required to revive the city.

"I would welcome this development, and I am sure that common sense would prevail," said Cllr Long.

Cllrs Pat Kennedy, Cllr Michael Hourigan, Cllr Lily Wallace, Cllr Joe Leddin, Cllr John Gilli-

gan, Cllr Kieran Walsh and Cllr Maria Byrne all welcomed the development.

Cllr Kathleen Leddin asked if the entrance at Bank Place could be altered to blend in more with the surrounding buildings.

Mr Sharma said that in line with their plans, Bank Place and the main entrance at Patrick Street / Ellen Street would be "instantly identifiable".

"This will be the first thing that people travelling from Dublin Road

will see," he said.

"The impact of this will be substantial. We are very proud of it, I have been coming to Limerick for the past five years, I feel as though I am a fully paid up citizen at this stage," said Mr Sharma.

A decision on the development cannot be made until information requested is provided to city planners. If the information is sufficient, a decision on the planning permission must be made within four weeks.

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