

Canal corridor question time

The plans for the Castle View development in Lancaster city centre have caused much discussion among residents, particularly those living in the Freehold area of the city. The scheme, which involves the building of retail, housing, leisure and cultural outlets on land bounded by St Leonardgate, Moor Lane, Stonewell and Edward Street, has raised many issues. Here, Lancaster City Council leader Ian Barker answers some of the most frequently asked questions about the plans for the development

[Has the city council cabinet given Centros Miller the go ahead for their development?](#)

No. Like all developments the canal corridor will have to obtain planning permission. Since this is a major application, Government Office North West is being kept informed and there will, in all probability, be a planning inquiry if the city's planning committee approves the application.

However, there is a lot of work to do before Centros submit a planning application. The idea that Centros have been given the go-ahead without a detailed study of the retail impact on Lancaster city centre or Morecambe, is complete nonsense. So is the idea that they will not have to do a lot of work on traffic and parking issues.

In reality, they will have to submit detailed studies, which will be independently scrutinised, on both retail and traffic impacts as part of the planning process. So far what has happened is that the city council has agreed a draft development agreement. This is a legal agreement, which is mainly about site acquisition and the terms under which the city will put the land that it owns, principally car parks, into the development. The key point is that if Centros Miller don't get planning permission the development agreement is void. So they have to get the retail and traffic impacts right.

[Is it true that Centros Miller have been offered a 250-year lease and does this mean that the city council will relinquish control of the development?](#)

Yes to the first part, but no to the second. At present the city owns about 40% of the proposed site. If the development goes ahead the council will own the freehold of 100% of the site and Centros Miller will have a 250 year lease.

In previous developments such as Kingsway or Marketgate, the city did not retain the freehold, so we have more influence over the future of the development in this case, not less. This will be done through the terms of the lease. For example, we can approve the initial tenants and we wouldn't, for example, allow a key city centre retailer to close down in the city centre and open up something equivalent in the new development.

[What about the retail impacts? Doesn't the size of the development exceed the recommendation in the council's own retail study? Will it threaten Morecambe and the existing city centre?](#)

There is no doubt that this is a large retail expansion, though in percentage terms it's not as large as is sometimes claimed. As I have already said, there will have to be a separate retail study as part of the planning application. This will look at the impact on the city centre and Morecambe as well as other centres. It will have to demonstrate that the expansion is sustainable in retail terms.

However, I do think that a lot of what has been claimed about retail impact is highly misleading. We do know, for example, that Lancaster is already the preferred centre for people from Morecambe and Carnforth for major non-food purchases. These centres have a more local function. So the development of additional Lancaster non-food retailing is unlikely to threaten them.

We do need to avoid a development that is so large that it damages the existing centre. But doing too little also has its dangers. These include the decline of Lancaster as a retail centre, as more and more people are prepared to travel to Preston or the Trafford Centre to shop. And of course what these centres have, which Lancaster does not, is a major department store.

The promise of a Debenhams is a key feature of the development. We also know that further major retail expansions are planned in Preston and the Trafford Centre as well as at Blackpool and Kendal, so the threat will only increase.

This is where the White Young Green (WYG) retail study commissioned by the council comes in. It's wrong to say that WYG made a single recommendation about how much additional retailing the district needed. They put forward a number of scenarios and what would be needed to realise them over the next five and ten years.

If we are to maintain our existing market share, let alone regain what has been lost recently, they suggested that more than 30,000 square metres of extra retail floor space would be required by 2016 – about what is being proposed for the canal corridor. They also say that in a confined historic city such as Lancaster it couldn't happen gradually and that the council would need to intervene to bring it about.

[What about the traffic and parking? Can the city's one way system take it?](#)

In my view, this is the biggest hurdle Centros Miller will have to overcome if they are to get planning permission. Although I believe that the estimate of the objectors about the amount of extra traffic generated is wildly exaggerated, nevertheless if it is a successful development it will generate more traffic.

To plonk such a development down in the canal corridor without making some major changes to the traffic system would inevitably make things worse. But of course that isn't what is proposed; Centros Miller recognise that they will have to do extra work off-site if they are to deal with traffic flows.

Since their plans are not finalised, there isn't much point in describing them in detail. However, they hope to separate traffic for the rest of the city centre from traffic to their car park by redistributing traffic between Back Caton Road and a reverse flow along Parliament Street. In this way they hope to reduce the load on the gyratory system. They also intend to reduce the use of Bulk Road as an access route to the city centre. All this remains to be tested.

What is clear however, is that it requires detailed numerical modelling using a model based on actual traffic flows in Lancaster, not figures plucked out of the air on the basis of comparison with very different developments. This is precisely what is being undertaken using the county council's PARAMICS model of Lancaster traffic.

[What about rat running? Will traffic be displaced to residential areas such as Freehold from Alfred Street and Edward Street?](#)

Undoubtedly some of the traffic currently using Alfred Street is rat running, but not all of it. Some of it is just accessing the car parks and a different entrance to the new car park will remove this. The important point is to make any other routes through Freehold unattractive.

Centros Miller have committed themselves to a further traffic survey of all the rat runs and to works designed to do just that.

I have long supported extra traffic calming in Freehold and Newton so that they can qualify for 20mph zones. This is something I am continuing to press on the county council which is now wholly responsible for such issues.

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