

Dear Minister

I am writing to you in support of the current Coffs Harbour City Council project developing a new Cultural and Civic space for the LGA. I understand that this is a long-wanted project for the Coffs Harbour region having previously gone through several failed incarnations and configurations.

The planning processes

This version of the Cultural and Civic space has seen the CHCC consult widely and provide information to the general public, community groups that may be affected by the project and, to local businesses. Over the past few years I have attended public meetings, heard discussion on local radio and read many articles about the project in the free, widely distributed, Coffs Coast Advocate.

Over the past 3 or 4 years I have seen the Cultural and Civic project progress through logical planning processes. Firstly, what should the project house and what are the project needs. Secondly, where should it be located? Thirdly, what should be the project scale and ambition be? Fourthly, commission design concepts, and fifthly, combine the best design concepts into the current design plan. All these stages have been openly consulted on, with community members able to provide input to the project.

The planning process has come up with a reasonable concept, housing local museum and gallery facilities in one place, incorporating a modern library and housing a modern council administrative centre. It is the incorporating of council facilities that seem to be the most contentious of inclusions, however for anyone who has sat at the community pool and watched the stream of council workers traipsing between the two current council administration locations it makes much sense.

The location for the new Cultural and Civic space is located on a decrepit site within the centre of Coffs Harbour. Along with other recent retail and office development in central Coffs Harbour, the Cultural and Civic space will help bring further urban renewal to what was a dying city centre. The

Cultural and Civic site is close to the city's geographical centre, a city public transport hub and public car-parking, making it a logical spot for the city's cultural and administrative hub.

Opposition to the project

It seems to me that much of the opposition to the Cultural and Civic project is from groups that may have vested interests, historical preconceptions, or, have come late to the planning process.

The Bachrach Naumburger Group is one of the most vocal opponents of the new Cultural and Civic space being built in the Coffs Harbour city centre. This opposition is an attempt to shore-up patronage to the Bachrach Naumburger commercial enterprises at Park Beach and Coffs Jetty where they have significant commercial and development interests. A re-invigorated Coffs Harbour centre could impact negatively upon their future commercial plans in other areas of the city, hence the company's objections.

Another vocal group are those in support of City Hill, an area away from Coffs Harbour's commercial hubs. City Hill was selected about 30 years ago as a site for a civic/cultural precinct, however any mooted project plans have never progressed. The site has fallen out of favour with the local government which now promotes urban consolidation and city renewal. City Hill is not central. It is more than 1km from the nearest shopping hub, has no other commercial infrastructure, is not a hub

for public transport and has limited onsite car-parking. The sole occupant of the City Hill site is the Bunker Cartoon Gallery which, at present, is heavily dependent on government funding for its survival.

The final group of dissenters are those who have come late to the Cultural and Civic space planning process. This group of people did not engage during the public consultation period, or when it was discussed on radio or in the press. They have become involved following Council's decision to proceed with the project. This group of people have been roused by those with vested interests, the ex-State MP for Coffs Harbour, who is a City Hill supporter and, an active campaign of misinformation through social media. The social media campaign will deter the supporters of the Cultural and Civic centre, being particularly vile, with bullying and trolling of proponents of the project.

The need for the current Cultural and Civic design

There are many in the Coffs Community that hanker, or demand, a replacement for the old Town Hall, a performance/dancehall, that was demolished when the new CEX site was developed. While a performance area was mentioned in the early consultations regarding the Cultural and Civic space, the size of the desired auditorium precluded its inclusion with other cultural spaces. As a result of this conclusion, a performing arts facility is being investigated as a stand-alone facility.

The current Cultural and Civic concept design houses a Regional Library, Regional Gallery, Coffs Harbour Museum, Coffs Council Customer Service, meeting/multipurpose spaces and Coffs Harbour City Council Administration offices.

The planned library is much larger than the existing Harry Bailey library, which is woefully small. It is not uncommon for all the research and working desks in the current library to be full. The current library has no room for expansion to include modern library concepts such as digital research hubs,

creative digital spaces and community group meeting and learning spaces. There is also little space to house collections in languages other than English that would cater to the large number of refugees that are calling the Coffs Harbour region home.

The current Regional Gallery is currently housed on the ground floor of Rigby House, one of the council office buildings. The gallery is not much more than a large room, about half the size of the Harry Bailey Library which is opposite. There is not room for a permanent collection, visiting collections and local art competitions, necessitating complete vacation of the gallery after each showing. This reduces opportunities for art in the Coffs Harbour region and increases the logistical workload of gallery staff.

The Coffs Harbour Museum is currently housed away from any of the town hub regions, I assume that by bringing it closer to other cultural facilities there is a hope that visitor numbers will increase and staffing issues will be easier.

Multipurpose spaces have been included in the Cultural and Civic project design. These will be areas that used for meeting spaces, temporary displays, community or government use.

The inclusion of Coffs Harbour City Council customer service and administrative sections will consolidate a workforce that is presently spread over two buildings a block apart. Currently there is a constant stream of workers walking between the two buildings to attend everyday operations of the council. Many council operatives now spend much of their time out of the office, can work from

home and require minimum time in the office. The new building will incorporate the latest modern business practices such as hot-desking, online storage and electronic sharing of documents, improving productivity of facilities and personnel.

There has been some criticism of the lack of parking in the Cultural and Civic space design, however there is planned basement parking for council staff and the building is attached to the existing Castle St public carpark. The central location of the new Cultural and Civic space will encourage pedestrian access from other city parking areas, or the use of public transport to the city hub.

Support of process and summary of need

The Coffs Harbour Cultural and Civic project has the hallmarks of a much-needed public facility.

- The project or similar has been put forward repeatedly over an extended period of time.
- The need for new council, library and gallery facilities is obvious and well documented.
- The public and interested parties were publicly informed and had the opportunity to engage in the planning process.
- Experts in their fields were consulted and the facility planned through a stepped consultation process.
- The project has an element of urban consolidation and renewal.
- The project is centrally located, close to existing and planned transport hubs.
- The project should have a synergistic affect on the surrounding area.
- The project will have a beneficial effect on the social, educational and artistic sectors of the Coffs Harbour community.

All that is needed now is for the Coffs Harbour Cultural and Civic project to be completed so that the general public can enjoy and make use of a facility that they have been requesting for many years.

Today, 30/10/2019, Coffs Harbour State MP Gurmesh Singh has called for the Coffs Harbour Cultural and Civic project to be paused. But what is a pause? a halt. Yet again it looks like acquiescing State and Local politicians are bowing to vocal public pressure. What is to be lost? Millions of taxpayer's dollars. Time. Thousands of hours spent on planning and consulting.

Yet this much needed Cultural and Civic project would come around again, probably in a similar form. Every time this happens the public loses. The only winners? the designers and consultants. Millions of dollars are wasted on a project that could have been built with use of past, wasted, taxpayer funds. At some point this cycle needs to be broken.

A stand needs to be made. The Coffs Harbour Cultural and Civic project has risen, then died, in similar forms for many years. The need and support for a Cultural and Civic space has been demonstrated over many years. The confusion sown by vested interests and those dissatisfied with the planning process needs to be overcome to stop this destructive cycle. Other projects need to go through their own planning processes. It is time for gumption and fortitude to be shown in regards the Coffs Harbour Cultural and Civic project, lest millions more taxpayer dollars be wasted.

