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Wellington City Council  
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## **RE: FUTURE OF THE CENTRAL LIBRARY CONSULTATION**

### **ABOUT THE CHAMBER**

The Wellington Chamber of Commerce (the Chamber) has been the voice of business in the Wellington region since 1856 and advocates for policies that reflect the interest of Wellington's business community, in both the city and region, and the development of the Wellington economy as a whole. Through our three membership brands, the Wellington Chamber of Commerce, Business Central and ExportNZ, our organisation represents around 3,600 businesses across the central and lower North Island. This includes 1,300 businesses located in the Wellington city area.

Our organisation is one of the four regional organisations that make up the Business New Zealand family and is also accredited through the New Zealand Chambers of Commerce network.

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Chamber welcomes the opportunity to submit on the Wellington City Council's *Future of the Central Library* consultation.

The Central Library plays a concomitant role as part of Wellington's inner-city, surrounded by the central business district. As the representative body for businesses in the Wellington region, we are not as fixated on the option selected, but more concerned about how it will be funded, the process taken, and the information considered, to make the final decision.

Council must make a decision mindful of its role as a 'prudent steward' of ratepayers' money, and any decision taken must ensure efficient and effective use of Council's resources, including the future management of its assets.

Given the nature of the library services, we believe that that it is the responsibility of the residential ratepayer to cover the bulk of the cost of Central Library.

As such, our submission will not advocate for one specific option but does ask several key questions we feel need to be addressed as part of the consultation process, that Councillors must satisfy themselves of the answers, before a decision is finalised.

## CHAMBER POSITION

Although the Chamber is not advocating for a particular proposed option, we write in support of four overarching principles that need to be considered;

- Safety must be an absolute priority with community buildings
- The need for a library/public space in the inner-city
- Do it once, do it right
- 'User pays' funding models

While the closure of the Central Library in March 2019 was disappointing, the Chamber believes it allows the city the opportunity to re-invent the library into a more attractive space and ensure it is fit-for-purpose for generations of Wellingtonians to come.

Therefore, we offer the following questions to the Wellington City Council to be addressed in detail before they finalise a decision on the future of the Central City Library. Our objective with these questions is to ensure that every option is taken into account, we want to be part of a constructive and objective process, and hope that all issues from the business community's perspective are addressed.

## CAPEX, OPEX AND PROJECT FUNDING

- 1) The Consultation document states that the cost of the Central City Library will be met by Council borrowings and this will *"increase the rates paid by Wellingtonians and is shown as an average increase in residential rates"*. **How will Council ensure that this increase in residential rates does not impact the amount paid by the commercial**

**ratepayer**, given the commercial rates multiplier is affected by any change in the general rate? The business community supports 'user pays' models of funding and given that businesses have funded the majority of Tākina Wellington Convention & Exhibition Centre, we believe a similar funding arrangement should be implemented. We would support some funding from the general rate which would enable some commercial contribution, but the bulk should be a targeted rate for the residential ratepayer alone, given there is little to no economic benefit demonstrated, other than the initial cost of construction.

- 2) **Why has a sale and lease option not been considered more thoroughly by Council?** Given the considerable price tag of Option C (the preferred option), it makes absolute sense that Council ought to consider all funding options to lessen the financial impact on the ratepayer. We would expect it to be included as part of the options being put to Councillors and forming part of the public consultation. We are mindful that the economic impact of COVID-19 means that many Wellingtonians are expected to have some economic hardship over the next few years and an already heavy rate increase forecast for the 2021/22 financial year.

With so many other need to have, rather than nice to have, CapEx projects that also need to get underway; Let's Get Wellington Moving, Three Waters system improvements, resilience projects, it makes sense for Council to source others funding options where they can.

A sale and lease option should also be considered given there is already strong interest from local property developers to work with Council.

- 3) **How will Council ensure that the expected cost of the project does not balloon beyond the forecast cost given in the consultation paper?** Projects like the Omāroro Reservoir, the Town Hall, and St James Theatre have all seen project costs rise beyond the initial figures given, much to the surprise and dismay of ratepayers.
- 4) Each option put forward in the consultation document states the expected increase for Average Residential Ratepayers for each option. **Does this expected per annum figure include OpEx for each option or is that just the expected CapEx cost (repaying debt funding of the library)?** We would also like to understand Council's expectation for the appetite of ratepayers to cover this cost given expected rates increases and the cover of other large infrastructure projects.

5) **What is the heritage 'value' of a 30-year old building and what precedent would we be setting should the Library be protected for said heritage 'value'?**

**FIT-FOR-PURPOSE**

- 6) **Is a "library" fit for the purposes outlined in the consultation document?** The *Future of the Central Library* Consultation document outlines a place as a "safe and reliable place to go", "our city's living room", a space that has "provided a safe, warm, no-obligation place where people can spend time, particularly our most vulnerable". These and similar phrases have also been expressed in public meetings and other documents and articles. However, if you remove the word 'library' from these sentences, you imagine a community service centre where Wellingtonians can access services and assistance, not a library, by definition. While the former Central City Library is beloved and remembered fondly for providing this kind of space, the Chamber believes the current problems are an opportunity to refocus the space.

More consideration needs to be given on what the purpose of the space is and ensure it is fit-for-purpose for the next generation of users. It would be a misnomer to call it this otherwise.

We must understand how the building, whatever option is confirmed, will be utilised now and in the future. This needs to be the key factor in deciding how the City proceeds regarding the options given in the consultation document. While the document looks broadly at what the inside of the library could look like, we believe Council needs to make a firm decision on what will be in that space. How the space will be utilised is an important consideration when deciding which of the four options is the best choice.

Furthermore, we were surprised that there was little to no mention how the space would operate in a current or post COVID-19 world.

The space can accommodate more Council services, but there are opportunities to attract and inspire Wellingtonians. We trust that Council are looking at examples of modern libraries around the world for ideas to best utilise our space. For example;

- Helsinki's Library, Oodi, devotes only a third of its floor space to books (100,000 volumes on the shelves at any one time), instead ensuring that their other 3.4 million other volumes are accessible through a distribution system.

- Calgary's New Central Library is integrated into its transport system for easy accessibility, and hosts a digital learning lab, and audio recording, video recording, and production studios.
  - Closer to home, Christchurch's Tūranga links into the neighbouring Performing Arts Precinct, and includes a 200-seat community arena, as well as exhibition space.
- 7) The floor space of the library is 11,500 sqm and currently serves around 3,000 people a day. Adding to our thoughts above, we ask **does Council believe this is adequate utilization of the floor space?** We would argue that more could be done with the floor space given the average daily occupancy rate, the move away from physical books and magazines to e-books and the use of electronic devices, and our thoughts in question three regarding other services and amenities that can be provided for.
- 8) **What is the future for the three temporary libraries and has any thought been given into continuing their use?** The Chamber supports the three temporary libraries (Arapaki, He Mataphi, and Te Awe). Arapaki and Te Awe, in particular, are great uses of empty 'ground floor' parts of the city, and the locations of the three libraries create small halo effects for neighbouring businesses.

As the central city business community continues to recover from the COVID-lockdowns, getting people into the city supporting both retail and hospitality businesses will continue to be important. Initiatives like spreading Council services and libraries out around the city are a simple way to encourage Wellingtonians to visit nearby shops and eateries while spending time in the libraries.

The Chamber would be interested in knowing more regarding the rates of use of these libraries and **if there is the opportunity to continue operating them. How will the decision on the temporary libraries affect Council's vision and plan for the 'ground floor' of the city?**

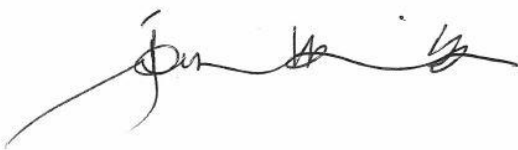
- 9) **Has the Council considered the opportunities for the available space above the library?** There is an opportunity to better utilize the location and bring new life to the Civic Square precinct. Council needs to consider the best mixture of Council services, residential property, and commercial space to take advantage of the opportunity presented to them to better use the space. This includes the possibility of building above the current height of the library.

## CONCLUSION

The Chamber is committed to being a constructive part of the Future of the Library consultation process. We want Council to consider all the opportunities and think big with the available space. The Library is a chance to re-invigorate the Civic Square precinct; however, we do not think Council is looking at all available options or opportunities. These questions and the answers that will be provided should assist the Council in making better thought-out decisions.

The Chamber would like to thank Councillors and Council officers for the opportunity to submit. While we do not need to submit orally, we would like to organise a session to discuss the questions and answers with Councillors and officers.

Ngā mihi nui,



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