

**THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS MET AT
HENTY HOUSE, LEVEL 4, CHARLES ST., LAUNCESTON, ON FRIDAY, 4 JULY
2008**

NEWSTEAD COLLEGE, CYPRESS STREET, LAUNCESTON

Ms CATH PARKER, MANAGER, CAPITAL PLANNING AND DEVELOPMENT,
Ms LIZ BANKS, GENERAL MANAGER, LEARNING SERVICES NORTH, AND
Mr GLENN SMITH, GLENN SMITH ASSOCIATES, WERE CALLED, MADE THE
STATUTORY DECLARATION AND WERE EXAMINED.

CHAIR (Mr Harriss) - I welcome the witnesses. We will start with your presentation.

Ms PARKER- The Department of Education is seeking approval for the construction of the new student residential facility on the site of the existing Newstead College in Cypress St., Launceston. The submission before the committee details the proposal to replace the existing City Villas hostel with a new purpose-built facility in the grounds of Newstead College at an estimated cost of \$4.3 million.

As background to the proposal and as outlined in the submission, I can advise that the Department of Education currently operates three student hostels located in Hobart, Burnie and Launceston. Students also have access to three TAFE hostels located in the three regional centres. Currently a limited number of year 11 students from rural and isolated areas of northern Tasmania are accommodated at a property known as City Villas located in Elizabeth Street, Launceston, while undertaking studies at Newstead or Launceston Colleges. As the Villas placements are limited to 21 students only, additional placements are needed to cater for the number of students needing accommodation. The villas are also not considered ideal in regard to the current condition and amenity of the building, the limited opportunity for expansion and its location adjacent to a major Launceston city hotel and bottle shop outlet.

In October 2007 the Minister for Education and Skills, the Honourable David Bartlett, announced that a new student accommodation complex catering for up to 50 students would be built in the grounds of Newstead College for occupation during 2009. This will be an important element in the establishment of the new Tasmanian Academy, Tasmanian Polytechnic and Training Tasmania organisations under the Tasmania Tomorrow initiative. It will provide student residents at the facility with access to the broader Newstead College campus that offers active exercise equipment, tennis, basketball, extensive grassed spaces and passive recreation spaces for dining and socialising. The facility is located within walking distance of the Newstead shopping precinct offering most services, and is located on a trunk bus route enabling access to other education facilities and services.

You will see that there are four main accommodation requirements to the overall facility. There is manager's accommodation, supervisors' accommodation, students' accommodation and common area facilities. Each of these functional areas will cater for different people in different ways in response to the individual responsibilities and needs.

Since presenting the submission to Parliament some weeks ago, an issue has arisen in relation to the access proposed for the site to be used during construction and by students and others in the longer term. As highlighted at the site visit this morning, an appeal against the condition imposed by the council to prevent access via Sherriff Street is currently before the Resource Management and Planning Appeal Tribunal. While this does not directly impact on this hearing and gaining approval for the project to proceed, I will be happy to answer further questions in relation to this issue as part of this morning's proceedings.

In summary, the facility has been designed to provide a safe, healthy and comfortable living environment for all residents, students and facility management. Given the large number of younger students, with many living away from home for the first time, the accommodation will provide a homely ethos and support students in a personal, social and educational sense through its planning fabric and management. It has been designed to encourage a sense of community and a sense of belonging. We are happy to answer any questions that the committee members might have.

CHAIR - Is there any other presentation from an architectural perspective, or would you prefer us to ask questions on any issue that might arise.

Ms PARKER - Yes, we would be happy to do it that way - to answer questions as they arise.

Mr BEST - I have a daughter who attends Newstead College and we went through this whole issue of accommodation last year. I think this is a fantastic project and I can see great merit in placing it at the college. The numbers will increase from 21 to 50 - is that right?

Ms PARKER - Yes.

Mr BEST - How did you arrive at those figures? You have to predict these things, I know -

Ms PARKER - For quite a few years that there has been a demand that we haven't been able to fill in relation to student accommodation, and we have been restricted in our capacity to provide that. The numbers on waiting lists indicate that we will be able to support a population of 50 students. The nature of the students has also been broadened out and we will be accepting part-time students, which we have not been able to provide for in the old accommodation facility, and also students attending TAFE.

Ms BANKS - I was at Scottsdale a couple of days ago. They have 60 grade 10 pupils this year, so it is a really big issue for them. They are really looking forward to the opportunity, so I think it will make a big difference. Fifty will not overextend it and also the way it is configured allows for all sorts of stages as well as permanent full-time, which will suit not only the current older students but also the people doing bridging programs and short courses. That flexibility will support the ongoing enrolment of about 50 in that setting.

Mr BEST - On the design: to me it looks like a huge improvement on the current accommodation which is very dark and very enclosed - almost as though you are locked in for the night. This looks like a really open plan - nice and sunny. The floor plan is multipurpose and of course you are looking at having a family as caretakers. Perhaps you would like to talk about some of those features.

Mr SMITH - The initial brief had set down a number of different configurations such as three-, four- and five-bedroom complexes - and that was done prior to our engagement - plus the two supervisors units plus a manager's unit. The numbers were sort of pre-determined. The site lends itself for separation of those units into certain groups so that we have the three-bedroom and manager's units at the front of the site. In the middle we have the four-bedroom and at the rear we have the five-bedroom complexes. They are basically separate blocks so that they can be built as separate complexes. We have also tried to maximise the solar aspect of the site, letting in good sun and light to the units because they all face the north or the north-east and the central courtyard not being overshadowed. So the distribution of the units is along the lines of an environmentally-friendly approach so that we get the maximum use and the benefits of the site.

The materials have been generally similar but not identical to the Newstead College complex so that we have brick up to first-floor level then lightweight construction above that in some form of cladding. It marries in with but is not identical to the college. The roof shapes are different and the colours will be different, but it has a family relationship, if you like, without being identical. It was important that the street frontage be very similar in scale to the adjoining properties so that it has a more domestic approach. While it still has a large number of students, we are trying to break it down so that it is much more homely than an institutional block. That is the central thrust of the design.

Mr BEST - That is good.

Mr SMITH - The early analysis of the site selection took into account the location of the flood line and also the imposition of additional costs for building elsewhere on the site. While there is a lot of space at the Newstead College site, it is very restrictive as to where you can build permanent buildings. If you build a complex like this down in the paddock you really have to build it up high, fill et cetera so that it will comply with the council requirements for the 100-year flood line. That would have added considerable cost to those alternatives.

Mr BEST - There are things that happen on the school campus during school holiday periods, so would the campus still be available for programs for students and people from outside the college? Are we looking at opportunities there?

Ms PARKER - Yes, it has been planned in such a way that with those flexible arrangements we could open up just small units depending on the size of groups, and the business model will be developed as to how we can best optimise the use of the college with the hostel accommodation during down times.

Mr BEST - With the changes resulting from the polytechnic and the academy, will this go across both - that is, Launceston College as well as Newstead.

Ms PARKER - Yes, it is designed to accommodate not only students attending Newstead. As City Villas caters for a larger group, this would also cater for people doing other courses or coming in for a week if they are studying externally or things like that. It will be a much more flexible arrangement than we have been able to offer so far.

Mr GREEN - You have the supervisor living on site - does the supervisor have a broader role in the overall site, or is their responsibility specifically for the accommodation?

Ms BANKS - Can you clarify that for me, please Bryan?

Mr GREEN - Will a person be living on the site permanently as part of the supervision role so that they would be there effectively 365 days a year?

Ms PARKER - Yes.

Mr GREEN - So they have a broader role with respect to the college campus as a whole?

Ms PARKER - Mow the lawns, do you mean?

Laughter.

Mr GREEN - Just to make sure that the college itself is okay when the students are not there. Do they have a broader responsibility for the site as well, or just for the accommodation?

Ms BANKS - I think that would be part of the business plan, and it really depends on the skillset of the people who are interested in the position. This is new work, so I think it will be firmed up by what we have learned from the other hostels, the mistakes that we have made along the way and the needs of the students. Obviously the older group will not need the same level of support and supervision as the younger ones, especially kids coming from isolated areas, who have to deal with all the trauma of a new environment, a new school and new subjects. We think in principle that the support for the students in the hostel is the number one game, but that does not mean that other things -

Mr GREEN - What I was thinking of was where you have a situation where people are hanging around the school, rather than the specific site that the person has responsibility for. I wondered whether they would have broader responsibilities.

The other point is that this increases the amount of accommodation that will be available in the future. Was any thought given to possible expansion of this facility in the future? If there is such a requirement, is there a suitable site at Newstead to accommodate that?

Mr SMITH - A logical extension would be around the corner where we walked this morning. You could relocate part of the car park and expand the spine around the edge -

Mr GREEN - Go into the 100-year flood line -

Mr SMITH - You would probably have to do some fill.

Mr GREEN - But there is the -

Mr SMITH - There is the potential to do it there. The network of services and the pedestrian access spine could continue around the corner for another block or two if it became necessary. It is physically possible to do that. I would have thought that you would not separate them; otherwise you have to provide another set of supervisory components and so on. It would be possible to expand the spine so that it wraps around the corner

towards the car park. If we needed to add to the car park, that could go on the end because that is not subject to the flooding.

Ms PARKER - Just the way the units are designed gives us quite a lot of scope to pick and choose if it had to be expanded. One of the things in planning for that sort of design, the steering committee, before Glenn Smith Associates came on board, had looked at a number of hostels. They looked at the way TAFE hostels are set up and the university hostels, and picked out the best features from both of those. We did not want something that looked like an institution or a boarding house with bedrooms off a central corridor. The idea of homely cottages lends itself to extension.

Mr GREEN - Obviously it is fairly close to the centre of the city - is it within easy walking distance of the centre of the city, do you think?

Ms BANKS - Yes. But I am not a local!

Mr SMITH - It is probably about 2kms. It is not far.

Mr GREEN - But what about public transport on weekends?

Mr SMITH - There would be a bus service on Elphin Road. I don't know what the frequency would be, but there is a bus service which passes about two blocks up the street - where the lights are.

Mr GREEN - Has there been a rising trend in people wanting accommodation in recent times? Has there been an upward trend in students requiring accommodation or preferring to have accommodation?

Ms PARKER - Yes, I think most certainly, and Mr Best's experiences are a case in point. At the end of the year there is a rush to find accommodation for the following year and many students finish up boarding or making alternative arrangements.

Mr GREEN - I am thinking more about the cost of fuel and so on. People may have thought more about travelling in the past but with increasing petrol prices do you think there is likely to be a requirement for more accommodation on campus?

Ms PARKER - The way the price of petrol is increasing that is probably very likely.

CHAIR - Cath, for the purposes of the record, can we discuss that matter of Sherriff Street and the challenges that that might pose to the construction phase of the project if, indeed you decide not to use that Sherriff Street access. I understand that you have the legal right to use it, but in terms of neighbour friendliness you may decide not to do so. I presume you would prefer to use it at the very least during the construction period, otherwise you will have heavy vehicles coming and going in areas where there is a lot of pedestrian movement.

Ms PARKER - Let me just read for the record the situation as we see it. Then I will hand over to Glenn to explain the options that we have in mind for it.

I would like to draw the committee's attention to the statement on page 15 of the submission under the heading 'Existing Conditions'. The second paragraph proposes that the existing access road, car park and pathway will be removed and relocated and future access to the main car park will be from the Sherriff Street entrance. This submission was written and lodged prior to the condition that was imposed on us by the council, so the Launceston City Council in issuing a planning permit for the hostel development has imposed a condition that the Sherriff Street access should not be used during construction and, indeed, it should be permanently closed off. An initial mediation meeting has been held between council officers and representatives of the Department of Education on 23 June. Legal advice on questions of ownership, title and right of access is currently being sought by both parties. Preliminary advice received by the Department of Education through Crown Law has indicated that there is no legal hindrance to the department being able to use the Sherriff Street access.

It is important to note that the removal of this access will not prevent the project from going ahead. The Cypress Street access will continue to be used as the main entrance to the school and the hostel should access from Sherriff Street be permanently closed. I will hand over to Glenn and he can explain those options that we would consider because we do not want to create any dissension between the neighbours and the college.

Mr SMITH - Our initial planning application did not have the connection between the entrance and the car park. We preferred to go through Sherriff Street to the student car park. During initial discussions with council officers, they were happy with that, but during the development application process other departments within the council raised the issue. They then canvassed comment from local residents, bearing in mind that this was a permitted-use project, not a discretionary use. They opened this door and they received some submissions. Therefore in their wisdom they put in this condition of not being able to use Sherriff St at all. That was of concern to everybody, so we went down the path that Cath just explained.

The consequences of not having access through Sherriff St are that it becomes very difficult to build the project in a timely manner because we have to relocate the road before we can start normal building construction. During the mediation we canvassed the concept of access via Sherriff St during construction to enable us to have more flexibility for builder access and, ultimately, student access during that period. That has not been formalised but the door has been opened in discussion. Subject to legal argument, we may get another forum to clarify the situation of construction access. Apart from long-term use of the site, my only concern is that it makes it very difficult to build within a timely fashion if we do not have access from Sherriff St during construction. That was where we got to with mediation.

CHAIR - Appreciating the timeliness, will there be a cost impact?

Mr SMITH - We have accepted that we have to build the connector road anyway. The builder would be more restricted in when he can do certain aspects of the job. It would virtually require him to build the new road before he could get access to the site because the road access goes through the middle of the site at the moment. That would be a disruption to the program. I can't tell you about the cost, but usually if a project goes for longer then there is an associated overhead cost.

CHAIR - Would you want to facilitate access to the carpark through Sherriff St as well during construction or just for your construction vehicles?

Mr SMITH - Ideally we would like to have student access through Sherriff St to the carpark so that they do not have to go near the building site for access. That has to be a negotiable situation with local residents and council.

CHAIR - Construction vehicles are likely to use Cypress St, aren't they, for straight access to the site?

Mr SMITH - There will be times when they would need to crane things in; it is quite restricted otherwise. It makes the builders' life a bit easier and hence a more productive site.

CHAIR - On current legal advice there is no prohibition against the department using the Sherriff St access. If that is what you want to do then you can.

Ms PARKER - Yes, that is the preliminary advice we have received.

CHAIR - If the project is approved, are you still looking to begin construction in August?

Mr SMITH - It depends on when the approval is because then we have a three-and-a-half-week tender period. Then we probably have two weeks to commission a builder, so we are probably looking at early September at best.

Ms PARKER - There has been some slippage in the program because of difficulty in deciding on the access. Anticipated commencement was August 2008, so we expect it now to be September/October.

Mr BEST - You would want this completed for the polytechnic/academy changes and everything else.

Ms PARKER - Most certainly.

Mr BEST - Earlier we were talking about the greater numbers of Scottsdale students, so you would need a larger facility. It is important for education in Launceston to get the project underway.

Ms PARKER - With the best will in the world I suspect it won't be ready for February 2009 - though as soon as possible.

Mr BEST - The existing facility holds 21 and this will take it to 50. Will you construct in phases, so you might have a section complete so that some students might be accommodated?

Mr SMITH - One other implication of this road access is that if we don't have construction access from Sherriff St then we have to build differently, which means it is difficult to hand over in stages. Using Sherriff St and building from the other direction we can have the units commissioned and still be building up at the back.

CHAIR - The committee resolved some years ago that there is no restriction on a department calling tenders during the process of committee deliberation, recognising that there are risks with that. If it is desirable to call for tenders, with that caveat so that anybody tendering is well aware that the project might not be approved, then you can close some of those gaps. We have made that clear to other departments, specifically for large projects like road construction and larger capital building projects. That is an option you might like to consider for this project in order to gain a couple of weeks in the event that the committee does approve it.

Ms PARKER - That might give us a little more leeway. I knew that the Department of Health and Human Services did so on occasion, but I thought they were breaking the rules.

Mr GREEN - Even though we deliberate and make a decision, the report still has to be written, the final report ticked off and so on, so the wheels still have turn even though we have given approval to that point. The Chair makes a very good point, given the questions asked by the committee.

CHAIR - Thank you for the presentation and site visit.

THE WITNESSES WITHDREW.