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7th September 2019

Re: **Limerick City Centre Business Forum**
LUDROC – O'Connell Street Re-juvenation Project

Dear Joe,

I submitted the proposal from the Forum to the 'MyVoiceLimerick' website on Friday night, within the deadline.

It was extremely difficult and we were ages trying to submit the document. When we submitted it, the format of the presentation and layout got corrupted. The document I laid out in a format that is visually very clear with the key messages and recommendations in bold prints. Much of this format was neutralised when it transferred to the MyVoiceLimerick website.

So, I am sending you two hard copies of the correct presentation format.

With best personal regards,

Tadhg B Kearney

Convenor & Chairman
Limerick City Centre Business Forum



Limerick City Centre Business Forum

Submission to Limerick City & County Council

on

LUDROC – the O’Connell Street Rejuvenation Project

Prepared by

Tadhg Kearney

Convenor & Chairman
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&
Tadhg Kearney Jewellers

The Forums **VISION** is for a **Transformative** project that will release O’Connell Street’s potential to become a **World Class Public Realm Space** that become a **Destination** in itself.

The Forums **AMBITION** is that, having delivered a truly Transformative City Centre, Limerick will advance on a journey to become **One of the Outstanding Cities of its Size in Europe**.

O’Connell Street is Limerick city’s greatest untapped asset. It has the space, scale and proportions to be transformed into a 21st century re-interpretation of a great Georgian boulevard to stand alongside any outstanding mid-sized city centre in Europe.

To achieve these lofty goals, the transformation of O’Connell Street must prioritise pedestrians by putting people and their needs and their enjoyment of the city at the centre of the project. This does not mean excluding all vehicular traffic, but it does involve a fundamental change in the relationship between people and traffic – always putting people first.

By giving the city centre back to the people and creating a World Class Public Realm, Limerick City Centre will become a Destination of Choice. With an Amazing Quality of Life, it will become a Great Place to do Business, to Work, to Live, and to have Leisure and Fun.

Background

The Limerick City Centre Business Forum (the Forum) consists of a broad stakeholder group, made up of many of the city centre's key large-scale retail, hospitality, leisure and property businesses – who are key economic drivers, employers, ratepayers and citizens.

The constituent members of the Forum are listed in appendix A.

The Forum evolved out a business pillar stakeholder group assembled by Tadhg Kearney in 2015/6, at the request of Limerick City & County Council (the Council) officials, at the earliest stages of the development of this project.

Many years previously, when President of Limerick Chamber of Commerce in 1997, Tadhg Kearney developed and personally funded a concept design for the development of O'Connell Street and its adjacent streets into a European style pedestrianised Boulevard. Whilst very positively received by all stakeholders including the Council and business, twenty-two years later we are still debating the future of our main city centre thoroughfare.

Introduction

- Much of Limerick's City's Centre has been transformed over the last few decades from the derelict city centre of the 1970/80's.
- In the 1970's, significant parts of Limerick city centre were almost Victorian in their dereliction. Indeed, Limerick was a City in Distress – a City in Decay.
- The transformation of large areas of the city centre began in the early 1990's, under Tom Rice as City Manager, Jim Barrett as City Architect and Denis Leonard- founder and CEO of Limerick Civic Trust, with the support of members on Limerick City Council, and other committed stakeholders and citizens.
- An incremental transformation of the city has taken place in the intervening years.
- Most significantly, a City that had previously turned its back on its river was persuaded in the early 1980's to start turning the City toward its greatest asset, the Majestic River Shannon.
- Remarkably, this vision has largely been achieved with enormous and transformational improvements to the public realm spaces facing on to the river front and its built environment.

- The delivery of this vision has been driven and delivered firstly by Limerick City Council, and latterly, Limerick City & County Council (the Council).
- This transformed Limerick City Centre environs now has the potential to platform to a World Class small city with the ambition for Limerick to become ***One of the Outstanding Cities of its Size in Europe.***
- The city's main thoroughfare, O'Connell Street, remains the largest black spot at the core of the city.
- Now comes the challenge to turn the decades of incremental public realm enhancement projects into a Transformational Public Realm Achievement.
- That project is the reimagining of Limerick's O'Connell Street, as a vision of a world class Outstanding Public Realm Space at the centre of the city.
- Despite all the improvements, there is still a piecemeal element to the various completed public realm projects – a sense that the parts are greater than whole. The O'Connell Street project is the 'skewer' up through the entire city centre that will pull all the other completed projects together into One unitary city centre public realm space. And the whole becomes greater than the parts/
- It has been the consistent position of the Forum that:
 - *The O'Connell Street Project must be Visionary and Transformational;*
 - *We will not settle for an Incremental Project;*
 - *But we could accept a Transformational Project, delivered in Incremental Stages – provided that there was full buy in to delivering on an agreed detailed plan in an agreed timeline.*
- Sadly, the current proposals falls significantly short of their potential. They are:
 - Lacking in Vision,
 - Lacking in Imagination
 - Lacking in Ambition
- However, the Forum is also of the view that many of the elements of a great plan are either already developed or already in place.
- Hence, some key but significant modification to the current version of the plan will move it towards the vision of the kind of plan which the Forum believes will bring it into the realm of the Transformational Plan that Forum members as key economic drivers, employers, ratepayers and stakeholders have encourage over the last nearly four years.

The Wider General Context

- In the modern technological age, dynamic regions are driven by dynamic cities. And a vital ingredient of the dynamic city is a dynamic city centre.
- The successful dynamic city centre is a place where people, especially millennials, choose to Work, Play and Live. Daily commuting to and from suburbs is obsolete to their thinking. After decades of flight to the suburbs by two plus generations of the aspiring middle class, for their millennial children and grand-children, city living is back in fashion – big time. They see cities, especially city centres, as places to Live, Work and Play. Limerick city centre is not fit for purpose in this regard.
- There is also a popular misconception that bricks and mortar retail is dead. In fact, the experts disagree. They say *Boring Retail* is dead. And contrary to popular misconception, less than 15% of global retail takes place online. But for bricks and mortar retailers to survive and prosper, they must become much more experiential in their offer. To compete with the cosy atmosphere of shopping centres, successful retail requires a fantastic public realm environment.
- The modern view of successful city centres is that they are locations for *Midweek Convenience* and *Weekend Experience*.
- Midweek, city centres are for *Convenient* work and living with all the necessary ancillary support services.
- Weekends, the city centre is for *Experiential* leisure, entertainment and cultural activities. Indeed, weekend shopping is now categorised as a leisure activity.
- When the O’Connell Street project was first mooted in the 1990’s, there was no Facebook or social media, no iPhone or smart phones of any form. The world and how people interact has been transformed. A modern city centre should be tech friendly with free Wi-Fi and all the other facilities that modern global generation aspire to and expect.
- Development in lighting means that miles of colour lighting and laser can now be laid at nominal cost

The Limerick Context

- When compared to the city centre public realm of our closest competitors Cork and Galway - Limerick city centre, despite many improvements, is not fit for purpose. This is especially so when our main thoroughfare, O'Connell Street, is compared to Patrick Street in Cork and Shop Street in Galway.
- Specifically, in the retail area, Limerick city centre's biggest national competitor is not Cork or Galway but Kildare Village – where All is about the *Experience* – and accessed easily by motorway in seventy-five minutes of easy driving.
- The motorway between Limerick to Galway – and onto Tuam - has been a positive development. However, Galway is a smaller city with a smaller city centre than Limerick. Galway is also a city with probably the worst traffic congestion problem in the country with major access problems for its city centre.
- The proposed motorway to Cork is a different matter. It should benefit Shannon Airport, especially its Atlantic flights. It will certainly benefit the port at Foynes with its planned new access road linking on to the national motorway network on the new proposed Adare by-pass. It will also benefit transport companies and the large industries in the various business parks in Shannon and on the outskirts of Limerick city.
- But, unlike Galway, Cork is a much larger city with a larger and more diverse and developed city centre offer. People gravitate from smaller urban areas to larger urban areas for leisure and retail. Limerick city centre is not fit for purpose and with a new motorway to Cork, will haemorrhage business to Cork and get nothing in return.
- In that scenario, the real danger is that the completed western road corridor - linking Cork to Galway in around two hours - will hugely benefit the cities at its two extremes and Limerick city centre, with its tunnel and ring road, could be completely bypassed by the consumer.
- Galway city centre's Shop Street, pedestrianised for almost twenty years is about to have a second-generation repaving and redesign. Cork city centre, semi-pedestrianised for over fifteen years, is in the process of further developments to the public realm of Patrick Street. So, both cities main thoroughfares are having second generation rejuvenation and we haven't yet had a first rejuvenation project for our main thoroughfare.
- The point being, Limerick needs to develop a vision and plan for O'Connell Street that will not just match but **jump ahead** of the new plans for Cork's Patrick Street and Galway's Shop Street and Eyre Square - as well as matching and beating Kildare Village. That's a tall order indeed which the design for the new O'Connell Street comes nowhere near achieving.

- **Therefore, the Council's proposal for O'Connell Street, in not recognising that reality and in falling short of the vision and ambition to correct that situation, is not fit for purpose.**

- But by creating a world class transformed city centre which becomes a destination, this would massively increase footfall, which in turn will attract significant new investment for business, leisure and living, which will attract more footfall and investment – a virtuous circle.
- None of the issues raises here about the context and dynamics of successful modern city centres, is considered for mention anywhere in the development of the concept for O'Connell Street or in the draft Part 8 presentation to Limerick Metropolitan Council.

Conclusion & Recommendations

“People are saying it’s not good enough but at least it’s better than we have, but better is not always good enough” *John Moran*

Having had sight of several of the submissions where the detail of the Part 8 proposal are analysed in detail, and where many of the comments and recommendations are complimentary to the views expressed by the Forum over the years, it is not proposed to exhaustively mirror those reports but to say that they all have merit and in some cases significant merit.

Hence, taken with the general points of principal contained in this document and outlining areas where the proposal falls short of vision, ambition and imagination, we set out below several general and some specific points.

Transport

- Clearly, efficient transport is a key element of a successful city centre. But the current proposals for O’Connell Street is essentially a transport plan - favouring public transport - with some ancillary public realm enhancement. This is not the vision for the project that the Forum signed up for.
- Back in the 1990’s, when this conversation began, there was no tunnel and ring road. O’Connell Street and William Street were National Primary Routes. Their key priority roles were as national traffic routes transiting the city centre.
- Well, we have the tunnel and our key city centre streets are no longer key national traffic route. The city now owns these streets to use primarily for the needs of the city and its citizens and visitors. The fact that we are overlooking the true potential of our main thoroughfare in an obsession with primary traffic requirements first, is both an unnecessary tragedy and short-sighted.
- As set out very clearly in the LiveableLimerick submission the proposal from the Council fails in its own stated ambition and I quote from LiveableLimerick “It doesn’t matter how it is dressed up, a ‘movement corridor’ for vehicles is a road and not a destination. The proposal does not and cannot put people to the forefront while through traffic and vehicular modes of transport are a priority in the design. Shared surfaces/streets can work, but do not work in this design. The proposals for share-surfaces in this format are dangerous and a risk to the safety of our most vulnerable street users..... the (primary) function of this street remains therefore movement of vehicles and no amount of new paving, seating or water features will change that function.....(the) proposal appears to be driven by the requirements of the (National Transport Authority) to keep all the Council’s options open to use O’Connell Street as a transport artery. But this is our greatest street, one that should be a destination in itself.”
- The lack of specific detail regarding the two lanes of traffic is alarming. On close enquiry and questioning, we have established that the current proposal is not finalised and could change in its configuration and use as the plan evolves.
- Specifically, the current two lanes envisage both going in the same direction, one for public transport (busses), taxis and cycles, with the second lane for general vehicles. However, to our

understanding **this proposal is not final**. This could become two-way counter flow public transport (plus taxis) and cycles **OR** with the addition of separate cycle lane(s) - all the time eating into the public realm space.

- This level of vagueness after four year is alarming and goes to prove that the needs of the NTA (and its funding) is running this process not the needs of citizens and the Forum members, who are the key economic drivers in the city centre.
- **The Public realm space must have primacy and peoples' enjoyment of the public realm space must be the over-riding priority. The Council's proposal fails in this regard and must be reconfigured and reprioritised.**

Public Realm

The only area to be fully pedestrianised permanently in the current proposal is the section to the bottom of Thomas Street outside the side door of Brown Thomas (where some through vehicular traffic is currently allowed in the evening and early morning).

The proposed water feature opposite the Augustinian Church on O'Connell Street has already been halved in size but is still capable of being a public nuisance in its proposed location and too close to shop premises.

- **This interactive water feature should be restored to its full size as originally proposed and relocated to the proposed new fully pedestrianised zone at Lower Thomas Street and placed in a centre position on the street to maximise its attraction and keeping it well away from shop fronts.**

The Rugby Museum Experience will face onto O'Connell Street and lower section of Cecil Street. This will become a key destination in the city centre. Currently, it is proposed to only enhance the public realm on O'Connell Street in front of the museum but not the Cecil Street side.

- **The public realm improvement on O'Connell Street should be continued up Lower Cecil Street to incorporate the full side of the Rugby Museum and a short distance beyond.**

All the details regarding the pallet of materials to be used, street furniture, landscaping and tree planting are still provisional in nature and subject to various provisos. By whom and when will these be decided and what will be the criteria for their design etc.? There seems to be little distinctive design principals involved and they could be generic in nature, the same or similar to any public realm project in any town or city in Ireland or the UK over the last decades.

- **The detail of all public realm components needs urgent clarification and in minute detail. They must be distinctive in character and present Limerick city centre in a distinctive way from other urban renewal projects. The process for this must be open, inclusive and ambitious. They must be health and safety validated and their cleaning regime must be clarified as fit for purpose before their selection is approved.**

During the consultation stage, the issue of creating a unique Limerick city centre was discussed at length. The Forum has explored the concept of constructing a roof/canopy structure initially over two

blocks of O'Connell Street, the Brown Thomas block and the Augustinian Church/O'Mahony's Bookshop block and running from the William Street junction to the Roches Street junction.

The structure as provisionally envisaged would be over four floors high, to go above and slightly over existing building heights. This is not as far fetched as it might seem. The award-winning canopy structure over the Milk Market is a very successful example but probably the best current example is the beautiful roof structure recently constructed over the Apple Market area in Waterford city centre. This structure rises over three floors high and reaches over adjacent buildings. It is a beautiful structure, designed by an Irish architect and not particularly complicated or expensive to put in place.

Such a structure in Limerick city centre would transform the public space beneath it in its potential and, properly designed, would be distinctive and unique and matched by no other city or town in Ireland in its Scale, Vision and Ambition. It would set the tone for the whole future vision of Limerick City Centre.

In discussion with our Council friends and following our own investigations, it is envisaged that such a structure would provisionally cost somewhere in the region of €12m to €20m for the two blocks. The project has the potential to be eventually expanded to include other adjacent streets.

- **A feasibility study should be carried out to investigate the potential of constructing a roof structure over two blocks of O'Connell Street initially. Consideration should also be given to running an international design competition for the design of such a structure which would become the defining image of Limerick as a city of ambition with a world class vibrant city centre.**

The famous statue of Patrick Sarsfield funded by public subscription almost 150 years ago is still in a temporary home. The Unionist council of the time would not allow it to be placed in any public area in the city. So, it was given a temporary home in the grounds of St John's Cathedral in Cathedral Place.

- **It is time that the iconic statue of Patrick Sarsfield on its beautiful plinth was brought into the city centre and given a rightful home in the heart of our city centre. The centre of the fully pedestrianised Lower Thomas Street, or Bedford Row - are two potential locations.**

Finally, the development of the UL City Campus on the old Dunnes Stores site on an iconic location on the riverfront, the Opera Centre development, proposals for Arthur's Quay, Gardens International and the Butler development on the old ESB building on the riverfront, along with other future developments – will all have transformative footfall impact, and need public realm enhancements to anchor them to the new city centre.

- **So the new city centre O'Connell Street plan will also need to be flexible and adaptable to maximise new emerging opportunity.**

Let's seize the opportunity now presented to reimagine and recreate our city centre as a platform to ***Make Limerick One of the Outstanding Cities of its Size in Europe.***

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