



FRIENDS OF EXETER SHIP CANAL

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The following letter from the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal was sent to Alan Williamson, Chair, Exeter Canal and Quay Trust; Cllr Philip Bialyk, Leader, and Karime Hassan, Chief Executive, Exeter City Council on 13 July 2020

Dear Alan Williamson, Philip Bialyk and Karime Hassan

Proposed sale and conversion to offices Maclaines Warehouses Units 3 & 4, Exeter Canal Basin

The Friends of Exeter Ship Canal are calling on Exeter Canal and Quay Trust and Exeter City Council to reconsider their decisions on the proposed sale for office development of Units 3 & 4 of Maclaines Warehouses at the Canal Basin and the proposal to determine the planning application by delegated powers without public or council scrutiny by the Planning Committee.

We do so for the following reasons.

The plan for office development is unwise and uncertain in the present financial and business climate while the Covid-19 pandemic is still active and the building could deteriorate pending eventual regeneration.

Units 3 & 4 Maclaines Warehouses are the last substantial buildings on the waterside at the Canal Basin that can be returned to uses connected with the waterway. They have the capacity to be a maritime hub for reviving the canal and basin as well as a centre for community activities west of the river in St. Thomas, Exwick and adjoining neighbourhoods. Their future is a matter of public interest and should be openly discussed.

To disregard such potential benefits at this point would be a wasted opportunity when an alternative scheme that would fulfil these objectives is ready for investigation.

The plan for office development is unwise and uncertain

Recent surveys, locally and nationwide indicate a sharp drop in demand for office space as a result of Covid-19. Indications are that it is unlikely to change in the short to medium term.

The proposed developers Forward Space, of Frome, while specializing in up to date conversions of heritage buildings for studios and hot-desking workspaces and meeting rooms for start-ups, freelancers and small businesses, have still been unable to deliver a similar heritage regeneration project, the listed three-storey Barnicotts collar factory near Taunton cricket ground, which they bought for the same purpose in 2008. Complaints in the press last year indicated that the building was becoming increasingly dilapidated. Post-Covid there must be additional requirements for all such buildings that will affect occupancy and viability.

Although ECQT negotiations with the developers on Maclaines are advanced and commitments apparently given, they were always subject to risk. Totally unpredictable

circumstances now appertain that require a reassessment of the whole situation. This is not 'back-tracking' or 'reneging' as ECQT has put it, but a timely review.

The sale of the Maclaines buildings is not in the public interest

ECQT received its valuable property portfolio from the City Council. It is the major landlord in the canal basin and so is inextricably part of any future policy by the Council for reviving the canal and an expanding boatyard. The basin is the canal's focal point and base for its activities.

If Units 3 & 4 of Maclaines are sold they pass from public ownership and control. Their future will be unpredictable. They will not be available for canal regeneration now or in the future. Under private ownership they could stand empty and dilapidated when markets dip.

Although ECQT failed to find uses for Units 3 & 4 after the Maritime Museum closed more than 20 years ago, it built up large and sound reserves from other rent income while still maintaining the fabric of the warehouses. Despite this long-standing expense, their sale is against the public interest now when the revival of the canal and basin into a livelier working environment and their economic and social contributions to the city are under active review following the appointment of a Harbour Master.

An alternative proposal in line with ECQT objectives is ready for investigation

An alternative proposal, 'Maclaines – The Future', developed by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal since the beginning of this year is ready for active assessment. On 6 July, ECQT rejected the Friends' request for a breathing space to reconsider the warehouses' future, despite the Friends' submission of a proposal from a firm of consultants for a 'Route Map' for exploring the feasibility of the scheme.

In line with the Trust's charitable objectives of civic pride and educational and other cultural activity, 'Maclaines – The Future' would turn the buildings into a working maritime and community hub with adaptable work and meeting spaces. These would – for example – be for boat building; skills training with weekend courses for people of all abilities and backgrounds; flexible spaces and workshops for maritime businesses, clubs and organisations; craft and art studios; and shops and produce markets encouraging produce landed by water. These all add social, cultural, civic and educational value. The office proposals are at variance with these objectives.

While the Route Map and subsequent development of the project would be completed in as timely a manner as possible there is little to suggest that the project would be any more delayed than the present office proposals in the current climate.

The current procedure lacks openness and transparency

The future of Maclaines is being determined totally behind closed doors at ECQT meetings when the issues are of public interest and concern one of the city's most valued assets. No consultation has taken place with water users or the local community on how the long-empty buildings should be regenerated. No opportunities have been encouraged to explore ways and funding to take on local heritage buildings through social enterprise.

The Council's intention to decide the planning application using delegated powers without public scrutiny is also undemocratic and inappropriate in a case that has wide implications and is a matter of public interest. It is the opposite of promoting greater public involvement and participation.

We believe there are also difficulties in the decision making process because some members of the Planning Committee are Council-nominees on the board of ECQT, which is a separate

limited company. It is difficult to see how a councillor on the board of ECQT which is supporting this development can take part in scrutiny of the planning application.

The Trust's constitution gives councillors the majority of trustees, so the council is recognised as being in a position to influence ECQT's decisions and directions of travel within its charitable objects. We call on the Council and ECQT to recognise and resolve the anomalies of this relationship. A co-operative and jointly consultative way of working on Maclaines and the preservation, management and revival of the basin and waterway as a whole, would neither compromise the Trust and its aims as a registered charity, nor the City Council's position as holder of the majority of seats on the board.

We urge the City Council and ECQT to work together now on strategy, business planning, heritage protection, and marketing for the canal and basin. We call on the two bodies in this light to reconsider the Friends' proposals for Maclaines as a way forward that benefits the future use and revival of the canal and basin and contributes to the Trust's charitable objectives.

We will be very pleased to meet to discuss any of the above matters.

Sincerely

John Monks
Chair
Friends of Exeter Ship Canal

Documents submitted to ECQT –

- 'Maclaines – The Future', proposal by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal.
- Accompanying letter of 22 June to ECQT.
- Tender for a Route Map in respect of a maritime and community hub at Units 3 and 4, Maclaines Warehouse, by Greenwood Projects, prepared by Nicola Dyer, Associate Director.
- Case study of the regeneration of Underfall Yard, Bristol Docks, by Nicola Dyer, Project Manager.