

## **Plan for offices must go ahead, Canal Trust insists, but the Friends of the Canal call it a ‘dreadful missed opportunity’**

Units 3 & 4 Maclaines Warehouses are the last remaining substantial buildings on the waterside at Exeter Canal Basin that can be returned to uses connected with the canal.

They are a vital asset as a hub for reviving the waterway and basin as well as a much-needed site for community activities on the west side of the river Exe.

But a developer has applied for planning permission to turn the buildings into office space. This was before the Covid-19 lockdown. Now businesses are uncertain and looking for new ways of working including more working from home, and office space is not in demand.

To remove the warehouses from potential waterway and community use would be a dreadful missed opportunity and a setback to Exeter’s future as a city where great things can happen.

On Monday 6 June the Friends asked the landlords, Exeter Canal and Quay Trust, for a breathing space for reconsidering the warehouses’ future. They outlined their vision in ‘Maclaines Warehouses—The Future’ together with a proposal from a top firm of consultants for a ‘Route Map’ for exploring the scheme’s feasibility. ECQT, meeting behind closed doors, later gave their reasons for refusal. They are in full:

“The Trust on Monday gave detailed consideration to the alternative proposal for the Maclaines Warehouse put forward by the Friends of Exeter Ship Canal. They also considered the request from the Friends for funding towards a road-map for the future of the premises and were advised of the papers submitted by Nicola Dyer, Associate Director at Greenwoods Projects.

“Unfortunately, I must advise that it was not considered appropriate to entertain alternative suggestions at this stage and therefore the Trust will be proceeding with the existing proposals.

“Given the past difficulty over many years in generating interest in these premises and the advanced planning and commitment to the proposals of the two interested parties, Trustees were unanimous in feeling that any change at this stage would represent an unacceptable back tracking. It was also considered that it would also be highly inappropriate to renege on its original commitment given to these parties. There was concern too, regarding possible reputational repercussions for both the Trust and the City Council.

“In reaching this conclusion, they had regard to the recommendations of an independent surveyor who advises the Trust on property matters who states that ‘both of the current purchasers have spent considerable time and financial resource in seeking Planning and Listed Building Consent, for their proposed uses and refurbishment works. While at their own risk, this has followed the Trust’s agreement in principle to sell to them and shows their own commitment’ and that ‘a delay to reconsider now will see nothing concrete come forward for some time’.

“I am sorry that the Trust is unable to provide a more positive response, however, it was noted that should the current proposals not proceed, the Trust would be mindful of engaging with the Friends on the future use of the building.”

The Canal Friends are now looking at what to do next to save the building for the waterway and the community. “We also call on ECQT and the city council to start to work together on strategy, business planning, heritage protection, and marketing for the canal and basin,” John Monks, Friends’ chair, said.