We wave a sad goodbye to Newsletter editors Eric Roberts and Peter Trevelyan who have chalked up an impressive length of tenure in the job and seen the Society through some interesting times. Eric will continue as a committee member for the time being. We are grateful for all they have done and wish them both well.

The Annual General Meeting is currently in abeyance due to COVID-19 with the hope a date in September may be possible. Regrettably our speaker meetings, awards evening and proposed autumn visit to Royal Tunbridge Wells and Hever Castle have all been postponed until 2021.

Members not currently receiving the Society’s monthly digital Latest news from St Albans Civic Society emails are missing out on a lot of information and comment. To be put on the mailing list please contact the Membership Secretary at moraghormiston@waitrose.com.

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The St Albans City Centre Pollinator Project aims to make the city centre a more helpful place for bees as they go about their important job of pollinating. Strategically-located planters are being introduced to the area, funded by BID. The first can be seen at the Clock Tower.

Where is the Vision for St Albans?

The Council have now announced the winning design for the largest city centre project since the Maltings in 1983 and is to be congratulated for adopting the Civic Society’s proposal that St Albans deserves an architectural competition for the large, prominent police station site. It was a brave decision to move away from the original scheme for this site and to invite three leading architectural practices to submit proposals for a scheme St Albans can be proud of.

The Council took the proposals to the public with well-illustrated, explanatory displays that were taken around the district and made available online. These displays attracted a great deal of attention and animated discussion on the merits of the three schemes. It was obvious that people valued the opportunity to comment on the responses to the Council’s brief and those comments have influenced the Council’s selection of the preferred design.

Continued on the next page
Where is the Vision for St Albans? Continued

Whilst public input was important in making this decision, a vision for our city suited to the times we live in is just as important. A City Centre Vision statement exists but it is 11 years old. Since 2009 there has been a major change in how town centres are used and a shift in shopping habits resulting in a contraction in retail provision. St Albans has not been immune.

We urgently need a new vision to shape change in St Albans. Where do the Arena, Bricket Road car park and the Council Offices fit into an overall vision for the city centre? Without an updated vision statement it is foolhardy to pursue any new development.

We can see the result of allowing development without having a relevant City Vision in St Peter’s Street. Development is piecemeal. There has been no commitment to high design standards, no overarching view to influence the transformation of BHS into a hotel and there is no basis for managing the uncoordinated proposals to convert Poundland, the adjoining old Poundworld store and three shops beyond into retail units with residential on upper floors.

Until we have a new City Vision, planners are flying blind and we could finish up with a dog’s dinner of a city centre. The Government’s recent Building Better, Building Beautiful initiative offers good guidance here. This may be a mixed metaphor but it is not intended as a criticism of planning, rather a lament that there is no masterplan driven by a vision for any part of the city.

We need a new City Vision to outline our goals for St Albans and to frame principles that guide development and planning. Realising that vision requires public involvement. There is no doubt that the process of development should be led by people with an understanding of how towns and cities are evolving and who are skilled in landscape and architectural design but equally it is the people of St Albans who have the answers to the big questions: ‘How do we want to use the city centre?’, ‘How do we want it to work?’, ‘Does it reflect my idea of what the city should be?’. Planning has to deliver a city centre that works in the way people want to use it. If it does this, the city centre will be successful. If it doesn’t it won’t.

Peter Newby

Postscript: “By the time you read this newsletter the first stage in a process to draft a new City Centre Vision for St Albans will have taken place: an open virtual conference, organised by the Council, the Business Improvement District (BID), the Civic Society and Conservation 50, will have happened on 26th June. The next stage will involve public consultation, seeking citizens’ views about how they would like to see St Albans’ city centre in the future.”

Tim Boatswain

More trees please!

Trees are a valuable part of our culture, our economy, the environment. They are also home to all manner of wildlife. And they are beautiful. They enhance our sense of wellbeing and improve our mental health. Yet we take them for granted. Imagine St Peter’s Street without those beautiful London Plane trees.

Twenty years ago through the efforts of the Civic Society, as part of its Tree Sponsorship Scheme, and in partnership with St Albans Council, 33 trees were planted at a cost of £10,000. Since then the Scheme has raised almost £25,000 to plant trees all over the district. However, it can and must do more.

We know the world needs more trees if we are to combat climate change and this is where you can help. Whenever you want to create a memory or celebrate an occasion how about considering sponsoring a tree or trees? In addition to the tree planting, there is a special Tree Book of Remembrance organised by the Society with optional free entry for any sponsored tree. Each tree and any dedication is captured by an artist to mark or celebrate an event, organisation, anniversary or birthday. It is on display at the Council Office on the first floor opposite the lifts. They say the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago; well we did that, and the second best time is now. So be a part of this and please sponsor a tree, make a memory and help create a greener, cleaner St Albans and our planet.

The Tree sponsorship scheme continues to be managed jointly by St Albans Civic Society and St Albans Council. To find out more contact us through the Civic Society website www.stalbanscivicsociety.net or visit: www.stalbans.gov.uk/sponsor-a-tree. For an estimate or application form telephone 01727 819363 for the Council’s Landscape & Trees Section or email: trees@stalbans.gov.uk

Mary Conneely
Greening the City and Coronavirus

For the last three years, on behalf of the Civic Society, I have been organising a series of talks for the Council’s Planning and Building Control department under the umbrella of the Planning Training programme: annually, three talks for planners and one for councillors.

With the climate change crisis and environmental issues, there is a recognition that our urban areas have lost touch with the natural world, creating health problems for city dwellers. This is a worldwide problem which is only likely to grow worse, if no action is taken, with forecasts that urban areas will have expanded across the world by more than 2.5 billion people by 2050. It, therefore, seemed very appropriate to make the theme of the talks for 2019-20, Greening the City.

If the question is asked, ‘why green the city?’, the answer in the modern jargon really is a ‘no brainer’. Here are the main arguments as to why it is important to green our cities:
- improves the environment;
- ensures rich biodiversity;
- reduces air pollution;
- ensures water storage;
- dampens noise;
- helps cooling down in warm periods;
- essential for mitigating climate change crisis;
- crucial for sustainability.

The next question is ‘how do you go about making a city greener?’ Here are some key things that need to be achieved:
- electricity generation using renewable resources;
- investment in public transportation;
- encouraging cleaner cars and imposing emission standards;
- pedestrianisation – more walking;
- actions and policies to cut waste, reduce water consumption;
- tree and vegetation planting programmes;
- city government leads by example and encourages grassroots efforts.

The series of talks got off to a good start with a very interesting talk on The Landscape of the City by Johanna Gibbons of J & L Gibbons LLP. Unfortunately, the next two talks had to be postponed because of the General Election. Although there was a session for the councillors, in which John Milligan of Milligan Knight Architects (Trees in the City) and I (Re-greening the City) participated, the postponed talks for the planners could not be rescheduled as we were hit by the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown.

The Council, as many of you will know, has already recognised the Climate Change Crisis and has set up a cross-party Climate Crisis Response Working Group, which is developing ideas which do include greening St Albans and the District.

Furthermore, I have been invited, on behalf of the Civic Society and Conservation 50, to work with the Council and the Business Improvement District to revise and develop a new City Centre Vision. Much has happened since the last City Centre Vision for St Albans was published in 2009; for example, retail has undergone massive changes due to internet shopping and different spending patterns (as is evidenced by empty shops). St Albans needs to adapt and think to the future if the life of its centre and ‘high streets’ are to survive. A key element on any vision now should include environmental issues and greening!

There is now a unique opportunity, paradoxically caused by the Coronavirus emergency and lockdown, to expand radically the greening agenda and rebalance the city environment and alleviate many of the health issues that plague cities. These are my key things that should be on the agenda:
- the importance of a move away from car use in the city centre, while ensuring access to shops etc. – free ‘short-haul’ public transport;
- need for pedestrian space - reclaim the public realm for people - to reduce the risk of infections now and in the future but also for comfort and access - pedestrianisation of the city centre.
- importance of clean air to improve human experience and health - move to sustainability;
- need to support local businesses - a shift to localism providing resilience for the community (in the face of future crises);
- a more socially useful economy that protects small traders and local entrepreneurs;
- quality green spaces for relaxation, congregation and mental well-being - think about an urban forest;
- creating space for wildlife diversity, engagement and relaxation - mental health;
- urban planning based on social needs - so that high streets have a societal objective, as well as a commercial mission, and are not just left to market forces.

As we move into recovery from COVID-19 let’s be bold and seize the opportunity to make radical changes to the way our city centre operates and the way we live.

Tim Boatswain
Our city will be different

Coronavirus has changed a lot of things already, and looking ahead there will be further far-reaching issues and situations to come to terms with. Some crucial decisions will have to be made.

A big problem will be our city’s retail activity. Some shops will remain closed leaving empty premises. In previous years when stores like Woolworths closed, other brands came forward and stepped in. That’s doubtful this time. Many of the closed BHS stores have not been taken. Here we were lucky and a new hotel development is being built. But who will occupy the ground floor retail space and fill the hotel’s rooms?

The need for more, and even existing, office space will be questionable.

Lockdown has seen more people working from home. Conferences and business meetings have been conducted online. The trend will continue. What impact will this have on developments like the City Centre Opportunity Site South and other proposals remains to be seen.

Commuting and travel in general will be affected in ways we don’t yet know and for a city like St Albans this will have both economic and social implications.

The city’s wonderful pubs and restaurants face challenging times. How will they be allowed to open and adapt to the social distancing rules? A need to revitalise tourism will be needed here with a tourism officer and service restored.

St Albans Civic Society is a Registered Charity No. 200330. The articles in this newsletter express the views of the individual contributors and should not be taken as necessarily giving the policy or opinion of the St. Albans Civic Society. The Society welcomes contributions from members and readers. Designed by Roy Bellamy.