

Prof. Tim Boatwain.
Chairman
Civic Society,

Dear Tim,

The Civic Society newsletter arrived just before Christmas and I have now had time to read it. Thank you for your article on CCOSS, which explains the Planning process so far. As I was unable to attend the members meeting on September 23rd, this was very helpful. I was, however, very concerned about your first paragraph, which I re-read several times. To my mind, it is very misleading particularly in its very guarded remarks about the charette.

I attended the first St Albans charette about the development of the Old Museum site, now called Oak Tree Gardens. This charette was a very unusual, new and exciting exercise in consulting individuals in our city about the possible new development. It was a very open process and anyone in St Albans could apply to attend. A cross section of people spent a weekend discussing the development and experimenting with possible layouts. It WAS NOT in any way a committee. Out of those discussions, plans were, very properly, drawn up by an architect, and were presented to the original people present and the plans certainly reflected the views of those who had participated. The whole process was supported financially and organisationally by the then Conservative administration, as you know. The resulting development was residential rather than commercial and was built of materials and on a scale sympathetic to the Victorian housing behind it and the Almshouses opposite, both decisions reflected the views of the charette. This development is regarded by many to be one of the better developments in recent years in St Albans.

The Civic Society decided not to participate in this process, though individuals could have attended and expressed their views as members of the community. The society would also have been better informed about the process. I did not participate in the second charette on CCOSS, but I presume that it was a similar process and it is hardly surprising that the same facilitator was used. I cannot comment further.

The Civic Society has performed a valuable service to the community in trying to monitor planning applications but this has always been through a fairly closed process. I am glad that the Society have now developed a more transparent structure for consideration of planning applications in the form of PAG and DAG. Is there a list of the members of these groups? I wonder why the Council did not support the idea of a design competition for CCOSS? You do not give reasons. DAG and PAG will need all their expertise and strength to influence decisions. I hope that the Society will continue to have members meetings on important issues so that the council will be aware of wider views. These carry weight in the current political climate – we live in populist times and the people of our city need opportunities to make their voices heard. Thank goodness that the first plans for CCOSS were eventually rejected after your objections and the strength of the general meeting. I spent a whole afternoon going through these plans at the Council offices and I was shocked by what I saw. Let us hope that something more in keeping with this gem of a cathedral city can be created for the long term. With increasingly limited resources, we cannot afford to make big mistakes.

I hope that you will be able to publish my reply to your article.
Good wishes,
Helen Bishop