

Draft summary notes of Evidence of Jos Coolen, Urban Designer

47 The Esplanade, Petone, HCC, Billboard hearing 18+19 June 2024

1. I have assessed the urban design effects of the proposal for the Council. I am quite familiar with the area. In the past I worked a number of years in an office on Victoria Street, around the corner from the subject site of this proposal.
2. I would like to use this time to briefly highlight the two key points that form my main considerations, the effects on existing character, and the effects on planned or anticipated future character.
3. **Firstly**, the effect of the proposed billboard on the **character of this section of the Esplanade both in daylight and in the dark**. I disagree with the statement that was made in the applicant's evidence and yesterday's summary that the proposed billboard would not be out of character in this area.
4. I generally agree with the description by Mr Knott of the existing character of the Esplanade and his breakdown of this in 4 areas¹.
5. There is one exception to that, and that is with the description of Area 'A', and the role of the new Waimarino building. It is being described as 'highly illuminated' and obtrusive². In my opinion, the building in its current form sits respectfully in its context and I did not think that the lighting at night, during my site visit was obtrusive. I think it performs well by illuminating the Māori patterns on the facades. The lighting does have an effect on the character of the area, not only in a spatial/physical way but also by reference to its cultural context. In my opinion quite different to the effects that a luminous digital billboard will have on the character of the area.
6. In my opinion, the proposed billboard has to be treated as the introduction of new type of element into the character of this area. It is different enough from any of the existing signage to say that it will actually change the character of the area.
7. Billboards are not an inherent part of any commercial zone. There are places where billboards can be appropriate, if it is well integrated, and even contribute positively to a character. However, I consider that it would stand out on the Esplanade, and that it would affect the experience of users of the area.
8. There are a number of differences in characteristics between the existing signage and the proposed, including the:
 - a. Size;
 - b. Shape;
 - c. Freestanding as opposed to attached to a building
 - d. The fact that it is effectively two billboard faces in a V-shape vs 2d;
 - e. Type of illumination;
 - f. Brightness;
 - g. Dynamic/changing content – with varying colours;
 - h. And finally, the fact that all existing signage is associated with the businesses on the associated sites with a clear wayfinding purpose whereas the purpose of the proposed billboard is advertising and fully independent from the site it is located on.
9. I note that the applicant, to some degree, references the existing Bunnings sign and the sign associated with the Waitomo fuel station. I do consider drawing parallels with these signs largely irrelevant. There may be some similar characteristics, such as size in the case of the Bunnings sign, or brightness in the case of the Waitomo sign, all other character attributes that I mentioned before are

¹ Statement of Evidence Mr Knott; paragraphs 2.1 - 2.9

² Statement of Evidence Mr Knott; paragraphs 2.2

different from the proposed billboard. Both the Bunnings sign and the Waitomo sign have a clear relationship with the site it is on and they provide a wayfinding purpose.

10. In the case of the Waitomo sign it is located in an area of different character, as described in Mr Knotts evidence characterised as Area 'D', and I quote: "where car parking and buildings become a more common feature, and where users are significantly more aware of the immediately adjacent urban environment³."
11. Because of the wide range of different character attributes that this billboard would introduce I consider that it would look out of place in the existing environment, which is particularly the case after dark.
12. I recommend visiting the area at night, and also to drive the Esplanade in its length to experience the changes in night time character as it is at the moment. The areas characterised as Areas A, B and C in Mr Knott's evidence are relatively dark with regularly spaced street lights being the main type of illumination. Lighting as a result of existing signage is sparse to non-existent. Yet, from my experience and knowledge of the area, as well as my recent night time visits, I witnessed numerous people walking and cycling along the road and the footpaths in the area, walking their dog or coming from the train station walking home. An illuminated billboard, with an area of 24m², will stand out, attract attention and affect the experience of people visiting this area.
13. I do not agree with Mr Knott's conclusion in his evidence that the existing character of lighting and signage along this section of street would be maintained after the proposed installation of this digital billboard⁴.
14. Yesterday it was mentioned that the proposed billboard would contribute to the vibrancy of the place. When, in urban design when we talk about vibrancy, in the way how it was introduced by Jane Jacobs, we talk about places where people come together, healthy, lively places that are full of diverse activities. The main target audience for this billboard is vehicle traffic along the Esplanade. I don't consider that it will make the place more vibrant, it will not change people's activities or behaviour, but rather reinforce the fact that the Esplanade primarily is vehicle dominated traffic route.
15. **Secondly**, the effect of this proposal in its relation to **any planned or anticipated future character of this area**.
16. As outlined in the Operative Hutt City District Plan, a range of activities is anticipated for this area. Regardless of the type of activity, it states that developments should not degrade the quality of the environment. The Esplanade is a gateway location, and is a main entrance into the City. Any development fronting the Esplanade should be of high standard design and contribute in a positive way to the experience of people using this road and the Petone foreshore. In my opinion, that is not about buildings, but any type of development that can affect the experience people have when using this route.
17. As we've seen over the recent years, this is an area in transition. And from looking at current and future plans I consider that it might stay an area in transition for some time. So, in that case, what is actually appropriate in this future context?
18. Well, there are a number of documents that help to understand what the likely or desired environment is in this area in the future: The Petone2040 Spatial Plan, the Petone Mixed Use Design Guide (which takes into consideration the Petone Vision to 2027) and projects that have the potential to have an effect on the Esplanade such as Te Ara Tupua and the Cross Valley Link. And even if these plans and projects are related to a **potential** future, none of these describe a future environment in which I consider a digital billboard such as the proposed to be appropriate. I have not seen any future

³ Statement of Evidence Mr Knott; paragraph 4.46

⁴ Statement of Evidence Mr Knott; paragraph 5.7(a)

plans, strategies or visions that describe a desired environment in which I consider a digital billboard in this location to be appropriate.

19. The Petone Mixed Use Design Guide, which in my opinion is relevant, sets out a clear vision and expectation for the future of the area: transition to a place to live and work with attractive development of good quality, with high architectural standards. It talks about the use of a landscaped setback from the Esplanade to provide for open space and soften the presentation of the buildings towards the street and the beach. Additionally, it should contribute to an interesting and comfortable environment for pedestrians⁵.
20. Additionally, the current government has prioritised the Cross Valley link road and Petone to Grenada on their transport programme. This potential future connection would take away a lot of the current traffic off the Esplanade. As we've heard from Mr. Tripp yesterday, a reduction in traffic would provide also the opportunity for improvements to the amenity of the Esplanade and create a more pedestrian and cyclist friendly environment⁶. I consider that the proposed billboard would not be compatible in that context.
21. The area is an area in transition, but based on the suite of existing plans and vision documents it is clear there is a focus on improving the character and quality of the Esplanade to a more friendly environment with higher amenity levels than exist at the present.
22. In my opinion, the proposed billboard does not satisfy any of this desired character. It does not soften the edge between the coast and the built edge, but in my opinion it rather has the opposite effect of bringing built elements closer to the coast.
23. **In conclusion**, the proposed billboard would stand out in the current context, both during the day and in the dark, and in any anticipated future context. It would go against Council's vision for the Petone foreshore to transition into a more attractive, high quality, people friendly environment in the future.

⁵ Petone Mixed Use Activity Area Design Guide (2013)

⁶ Cross Valley Transport Connections Business Case (2020)