

12 July 2010

Craig Kenny  
Director Community Programs  
City of Yarra

Dear Craig,

We are writing on behalf of former members of the Abbotsford Convent Coalition (ACC). The ACC was the community group that conceptualised and initiated the currently operating community based redevelopment of the former Abbotsford Convent. As you would be aware this use is now internationally acclaimed and has proved to be very successful. The Abbotsford Convent is regarded as a very significant and important community facility for the City of Yarra, wider metropolitan Melbourne, and some may even say the State of Victoria. The Abbotsford Convent redevelopment has been so successful that it was recently admitted into The European Network of Cultural Centres-Historic Monuments (ACCR).

As part of the process to determine the current uses that were adopted for the convent site it was necessary to demonstrate the inappropriateness of a previously proposed redevelopment of the convent site for residential uses. In opposing and overturning the proposed residential use of the convent site, the ACC established a landmark precedent for a community group by not only opposing a development proposal but also by initiating an alternative use for the site. To do this there was an extensive planning, feasibility and Business Case preparation process to demonstrate the viability of the proposed community uses (arts, education and cultural tourism) of the convent site. This process was undertaken over seven years and involved representatives of State Government (Departments of Premier and Cabinet, Planning and Community Development, Treasury and Arts) together with Yarra City Council, Melbourne City Council, professional advisors and the local Abbotsford community. Two of the key factors in successfully crafting and negotiating the final outcome were

1. A set of compatible, harmonious related and acceptable activities for the convent site
2. The demonstration and acceptance by all players that 'the highest and best value' of the site would be achieved by the current successful community model which excluded residential use in favour of open space, arts, education and cultural tourism uses

We feel very strongly that the residential uses currently proposed for the former Lourdes site are in total contradiction to the above principles that were extensively debated, tested and agreed upon by all participating parties.

### **Compatible, Harmonious, Related and Acceptable Activities**

During the planning and business case development process a wide range of possible uses was considered for the convent site (the convent site included the land on both the north and south sides of St Heliers Street). The importance of compatible uses which included mutually supportive activities rather than activities which introduced inherent conflicts i.e. public versus private, noisy versus quiet etc was explored and finally endorsed as a key principle for the site development. 'Mutual support' was deemed as providing benefits of patronage, income generation, shared facilities and the creation of a sense of place.

It is our view that the proposal to include a child care centre on the former Lourdes site is consistent with the above principles and the successful outcomes which have been achieved to date, but the introduction of residential activities are clearly contrary to these principles and are likely to be detrimental to the current successful operations which have been achieved by the Abbotsford Convent Foundation. We note that the residential uses proposed are for 'affordable housing units' and whilst we support the need for such housing in our community, we feel very strongly that this is a totally inappropriate place for this or any other form of housing, because of inherent conflicts that will be generated with current active and public uses of the site.

## **Achieving 'Highest and Best Value'**

During the planning and development process that led to the establishment of the Abbotsford Convent in its current form the need to achieve 'the highest and best value' for the site was an imperative of the State Government and in particular Treasury. In recent years 'highest and best value' has often been seen to be achieved through residential development. This was certainly the presumption in the early stages of development of the Abbotsford Convent business plan, but this approach was later shown to be incorrect and based solely on a commercial property developer's short term perspective. A radically different approach was developed and applied by Spiller Gibbon Swan (SGS) a firm of economists and planners who were engaged to input into the development of the Abbotsford Convent's business plan. SGS identified the economic and financial value of public open space. In particular public open space that contributes to cultural and tourism activities and further supports and enhances the liveability of adjacent dense inner suburban residential areas and indeed the wider metropolitan community. In the case of the Abbotsford Convent business plan, the existing open space associated with the Abbotsford Convent site and adjacent Yarra River was demonstrated to have a greater medium and long term economic and financial benefit to the City of Yarra, metropolitan Melbourne and the State of Victoria than the proposed residential uses.

It is our view that minimising the level of development and building bulk on the former Lourdes site, and thus retaining the maximum perception and reality of public open space can be demonstrated to be responsibly achieving the highest and best value for the site in harmony with the current Abbotsford Convent uses and previously prepared business plan. The current government policies that are driving the increased densification of Melbourne and the projections of major population growth will increase the economic and social value of public open space within our city.

We would recommend that Council review the previously prepared economic analysis, feasibility plans and business case for the Abbotsford Convent. Yarra Council were important participants in the preparation and acceptance of these studies, plans and agreements. We suggest that copies would be found in your archives. We also suggest that you consider discussing with SGS the manner in which Council can demonstrate that they can achieve the 'highest and best value' for the proposed development of the Lourdes site without requiring the introduction of residential uses and by minimising the built form proposed.

In summary, we believe the current proposal to include residential uses in the 'Community Hub' being proposed for the former Lourdes site is totally inappropriate, unnecessary and may prove to be in conflict with the current activities, ongoing uses and development required to complete and ensure the financial sustainability of the enormously successful and acclaimed Abbotsford Convent model.

We urge that you rethink your conceptual model for the redevelopment of the former Lourdes site to exclude any form of residential use and to ensure a revised model is consistent with the work previously undertaken that has proven so successful in the development and operation of the Abbotsford Convent.

We would be happy to discuss this further with your Council.

Yours sincerely,

Charlotte Allen  
Susan Bannerman  
Margot Foster  
Nicole Fraser  
Jo Kinross  
Tony Lee  
Nigel Lewis  
Anna Linstad  
Hilary Rankin

Sally Romanes  
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