

Submission on the Encounter Bay Village Centre

The proposed Encounter Bay Village Centre represents a significant investment in Victor Harbor and its region. A commitment to invest such a large sum of money into the area is a tremendous opportunity to bring great benefits to what is one of the most attractive and valuable locations in the nation. Our specific concerns with this development are as follows:

1. The design of the retail centre – an enclosed mall fronted by an extensive car park – does not represent contemporary thinking on retail experience.
2. By simply placing a residential area adjacent to the shopping centre, the proposal does not properly address mixed-use or urbanist principles.
3. Other than the pedestrian entrance from the new residential area, the proposal gives the local population insufficient alternatives to driving to the centre.

1 The design of the retail centre

At various points, the PER describes the retail centre as having a “contemporary” design [section 3.3; section 4.6.9, bullet 1; section 2.2, bullet 3]. We believe that a more accurate term would be “conventional” and that it does not reflect the current thinking on contemporary retail experience. We wish to contrast the enclosed mall format with that of the traditional retail street; we assert that the traditional street not only shows greater appeal with the shopping public, but that it offers structural advantages in terms of adaptability to changing demand that the enclosed mall cannot.

Enclosed malls are a dated shopping concept

The United States is the birthplace of the mall, but it is now among the first to embrace an alternative they call the “lifestyle centre”. The lifestyle centre is a medium sized, open air development combining retail and entertainment, and are typically laid out as a traditional main street¹. In 2005, the CoStar Group’s research branch reported that lifestyle centres represent “more than 10% of the planned and new centers under construction [across the United States] ... In contrast only three enclosed regional malls are planned to open”². In addition the International Council of Shopping Centers report that lifestyle centres

¹ The International Council of Shopping Centers distinguish between lifestyle centres and main streets by whether or not the area has residential properties: without, it is a lifestyle centre; with, it is a main street.

² “Lifestyle Centers: Retail's Hottest Trend”, *CoStar Advisor*, Vol. 6 No. 2, <http://www.costar.com/News/Advisor/Archive/Article.aspx?id=EC00A7DC785D1AB22C28E13658A17904>, accessed Jan 21, 2009.

(and open air retail generally) generate greater sales per unit area than enclosed malls (\$298 per-square-foot vs. \$242 psf). Furthermore, they note that the anchor tenants in the lifestyle centres are paying almost six times as much in rent at a lifestyle centre as they do in an enclosed mall (\$11.11 psf vs. \$1.84 psf)³.

We believe that this is clear evidence that enclosed malls cannot be described as “contemporary design” for new retail areas, and that there is strong demand from the shopping public to support the alternatives. We are concerned that the proposed enclosed mall will rapidly become dated as the trend to new outdoor and traditional retail areas becomes more widespread in Australia, to the detriment of Victor Harbor. A region whose local economy relies on being a tourist destination will suffer more harm from such a perception than a larger urban centre would.

Enclosed malls do not take advantage of Victor Harbor’s climate

Victor Harbor boasts one of the mildest climates in South Australia, avoiding some of the extreme highs that Adelaide experiences during the summer while still enjoying mild winters. The PER notes the large proportion of Victor Harbor’s population that are “sea-change” retirees and non-permanent residents who hold holiday homes in the area – the local climate is a significant reason for this.

By comparison, the enclosed mall was pioneered in the United States in Seattle⁴, Detroit⁵ and Edina⁶ (Minnesota), all locations that share inclement weather with especially difficult conditions over winter. Considering how harsh the conditions are in those areas, we can understand the appeal of providing a sheltered, artificial climate there; it could hardly be claimed that Victor Harbor requires the same treatment.

An air-conditioned, enclosed mall fails to respond to this important component of Victor Harbor’s appeal – a climate that encourages an outdoor lifestyle. By contrast, a traditional area of retail streets makes far better use of these natural advantages.

Enclosed malls are harder to adapt to changing circumstances

A traditional street evolves over time. With multiple freestanding buildings it provides the ability for individual properties to be altered in response to changing demand, with limited interference for the surrounding properties. This gives the traditional street an advantage in the face of an unpredictable

³ “SCORE 2004—The Financial Side of Shopping Centers,” ICSC Research Quarterly, Vol. 10, No. 3, Fall 2003

⁴ Northgate Mall, 1950. Initially two strip centres set face-to-face, fully enclosed in 1974

⁵ Northland Center, 1954. The first centre to have climate control.

⁶ Southdale Center, 1956. The first fully enclosed mall.

future. Further, it can be built in a piecemeal fashion, at each stage adding enough to satisfy the present needs without having to predict a future that is a decade away.

By contrast, malls seldom change without a large-scale alteration to the entire complex. It is extraordinarily hard to repurpose portions of such a centre for other uses. The United States is seeing a growth in the number of abandoned malls that have been unable to adapt to changing circumstances, a trend that will likely accelerate in the face of a recession⁷.

A side effect of its inflexibility is that an enclosed mall must be built all at once. The PERs figures themselves acknowledge that once it is complete the centre will result in an initially negative impact on the other retail areas of Victor Harbor. The models then predict a return to growth by 2016. It is not clear to what extent this modeling reflects the present downturn in the economy; a model built upon the last 10 years of exceptional growth may significantly underestimate the impact of this additional supply and overestimate the rate at which the neighbouring areas will recover.

To the extent that the proposed centre requires being built all at once to provide sufficient “critical mass” to make it viable, we submit that this is evidence that its location is unsuitable for such a development.

The parking area does not provide an appropriate frontage on Waitpinga Road

Section 4.6.3 on the proposal’s impact on the area’s visual amenity places undue emphasis on the extent to which views of the landscape are affected and has insufficient consideration of the appearance of the centre itself. It appears that the extensive car park is being argued as a set-back to reduce the visual height of the centre; we feel this is rather perverse justification for its positioning.

We note that the downtown of Victor Harbor would not have been possible to build if it had to comply with planning guidelines that mandated views of the surrounding landscape. Its dense appearance, without its buildings set behind car parks, is an important part of its appeal. By contrast, the proposed centre is placed behind a 1600-stall car park; whatever effort is placed in designing and finishing the store frontages will be lost on anyone travelling down Waitpinga Road. It is not clear what would prevent the orientation of the centre changing in order to place at least some of the centre’s frontage directly on the road.

⁷ An extensive collection of essays on abandoned malls in the United States can be found at <http://deadmalls.com/>, accessed Jan 21, 2009.

2 The proposal does not properly address mixed-use or urbanist principles

Section 4.6.2 addresses how the proposal reflects new-urbanist principles and the benefits of doing so. While it is heartening to see what efforts have been made in that direction (for example, the mix of housing options), it is extremely hard to see how this proposal could be an example of urbanism.

The fundamental disagreement that we have with the proposal's urbanist credentials is its location. We cannot accept that a development built in a place that is not adjacent to any of the existing urban areas can make any claims on addressing urbanism irrespective of the specifics of its design. Connectedness between areas is a fundamental principle of urbanism; the proposed centre's only connection with remainder of Victor Harbor is Waitpinga Road.

The most important of the connections considered by new-urbanist design are those that can be made by foot. The isolated location of this development leaves it impractical to walk to except for the 177 properties in the accompanying residential area. There is a single pedestrian pathway to the centre from Waitpinga Road, facing the main entrance; we are curious to know how many people will be using that pathway, as it seems distant from the directions that pedestrians would approach from.

It also seems overly generous to describe the development as "mixed-use". While the development has both commercial and residential aspects, the two are still separated rather than mixed. If we may exaggerate for a moment, we might also describe West Lakes Mall precinct as mixed-use as the mall is surrounded by residences. A suitable definition of mixed-use would include a more complete mixture of the residential and commercial uses.

The proposal's location and layout do not match their references to urbanism or mixed-use. We note that the PER identified the site immediately across Waitpinga Road as being superior to the current one⁸. We likewise feel that this site would offer more opportunities to embrace new-urban design and mixed-use.

3 The proposal gives the local population insufficient alternatives to driving to the centre

As noted above, the location of the centre will make it impractical to reach by foot. Furthermore, the consideration given to other transport options seems scanty at best. By contrast, multiple pages of the PER are devoted to the requirements for parking and works required on Waitpinga Road.

⁸ Identified as "site 14" on Figure 1, Section 4.1.3.

Section 4.4.6 details the 120 bicycle parking spaces that will be provided, but does not address how safely these cyclists would be able to reach the centre. It appears that, at present, they would have to make use of Waitpinga Road along with the majority of the vehicle traffic, which neither appears to be appealing or safe for cycling.

Sections 4.3.6, 4.4.7, 4.5.2, and 4.5.12 all mention the possibility of a community bus or public transport to and from the centre, but nowhere is it shown where such services would connect with the centre. There does not appear to be a suitable place within the car parking areas for bus stops. Presumably they would have to be placed out on Waitpinga Road. The imbalance is all too predictable: if you drive you may park only metres from the door, but if you take a bus you will be out on the road.

We are particularly concerned with the options present for those working at the centre. The cost of owning and operating a car is an especially large burden on those at the lower end of the income scale; as it stands, it is hard to see how the 600+ people working in this centre would be able to avoid requiring a car to take them to and from work. We are also curious to know how many of the 1600 car parking spaces would be used by the staff alone.