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Background

Background

The Ballarat Council is proposing to demolish the Civic Hall Building at 300 Mair Street and build a new Council facility on the site, a multi level car park (261 parks in stage 1), deliver three potential commercial development sites and a public square and an access pathway to the public library.

Council has proposed to fund the project by selling 2 buildings and borrowing up to \$30 million. The Town Hall could be returned to the community once Council vacates the ground floor.

The Civic Hall Building was built in 1950 (approx) and was used as a function venue by the Ballarat community. In the 1990's Council began to consider future use of the building. A range of options have been considered by various Councils and several private sector proposals for the site have failed. In 2002 Council closed the building and it has remained closed since then.

This research aims to identify the key perceptions and attitudes within the Ballarat community towards the proposed new building and obtain suggestions on alternative uses for the site.

Methodology

- A focus group methodology alongside a CATI survey methodology was recommended and accepted as most appropriate for the study. This report is for the focus group methodology only.
- Roy Morgan Research conducted two focus groups on the 14th of December 2011.
- The participant recruitment process was conducted by Roy Morgan Research, with the sample obtained by random calling.
- Ten eligible respondents were recruited for each group with a \$75 participation incentive offered. All recruits were residents in Ballarat.
- Recruits received a telephone reminder 1 day in advance of the groups.
- In total, 16 people attended the groups – with 8 participants per group.

Methodology (cont.)

Group	Gender	Age	Time
1	4 Females 4 Males	2 – 18-34 year old 2 – 35-54 year old 2 – 55-64 year old 2 – 65-70 year old	14th Dec 6PM
2	4 Females 4 Males	1 – 18-34 year old 3 – 35-54 year old 2 – 55-64 year old 2 – 65-70 year old	14th Dec 8PM

Qualitative Restraint

Focus Group discussions evolve creative ideas and generate hypotheses.

They are not intended to be a precise and definitive index of what is expressed in the community.

This report should be interpreted with this constraint in mind.

Main Findings

Proposed New Building

Proposed New Building – Design and Visual Appeal

- **A large number of respondents found the proposed new building visually unattractive on first impression however most understood that the drawings probably didn't do justice on the actual design.**
- **Negative views expressed were:**
 - **Visually Unappealing**
 - *Garish, looks like something in Bahrain.*
 - *A glass monstrosity.*
 - **Not visually compatible with surrounding architecture**
 - *It sticks out like a sore thumb.*
 - *Just too much there. You look around and there are all old buildings with that same heritage look.*
 - **Not compatible with Ballarat's heritage architecture**
 - *I think it's an ugly building. I wouldn't want to see a multi-storey modern building. Ballarat isn't really that sort of place. We pride ourselves on our heritage.*
 - *People come to Ballarat for two things, one for the heritage and one for the slower pace of life.*
- **Ballarat isn't ready for something like this**

Proposed New Building – Design and Visual Appeal

- **Although a minority, there were some counter views.**
 - **Visual Appeal**
 - *It's got the modern look. I like the city square part of it...the fun part of it. I think we need something there where people can congregate and socialise.*
 - *I like new things. It looks cool. It has a very Melbourne look, like we're trying to invite people from Melbourne to Ballarat.*
 - *I feel that we do need something that is a talking point as well as something that startles, as well as something that is functional.*
 - **Diversity of architecture within Ballarat**
 - *If you drive around, there is a diversity of architecture everywhere really, and that's the beauty of a city, the diversity. The Civic Hall to me, is a lovely looking building, and I also admire the very modern building they are proposing there. I do like modern architecture and I think it would fit in beautifully.*
 - *We have a range of architecture here and it is what makes Ballarat a nice place to be so it wouldn't be as difficult to fit it in.*
 - **Example of modern buildings in a heritage area**
 - *It can be done. Look at the Bendigo Bank Building. It's very modern, been built in a heritage area. I think it can be done if it's done properly.*
 - *The Louvre in Paris. They built in an enormous glass structure and there was an uproar about it but that is just an accepted thing now.*

Proposed New Building – Purpose and Use

- **The main underlying issue is the perception that the building has been designed by and for, the Council and its own requirements.**
 - **Council Use and not Community Use**
 - *So for \$40 million dollars, the Council is going to get a brand new set of offices, some of the space is going to be hired off for retail development, and the public is going to get a little square and a walkway?*
 - *I don't mind the Council getting new office space but NOT at the expense of the community.*
 - *It's just for the Council... not a lot of use for us.*
 - **Respondents don't see any direct benefit to themselves or the community of Ballarat.**
 - **The other components – the three commercial developments, a public square, car park – were generally seen as 'add-ons' to assuage community anxiety without firm commitments by the Council to deliver. Questions were asked:**
 - *...how could they fit in a public square?*
 - *Where would it go? It would have to be tiny.*
 - *What type of commercial developments? Ballarat is currently littered with vacant retail outlets. Who would want to lease a shop now in Ballarat?*

Proposed New Building – Purpose and Use (cont.)

- Respondents are not convinced that the Council needs more space.
 - *Why should we spend all our money on them? I don't think they need it.*
- The prevailing view seems to be that there is a 'vast amount' of unused space in the Town Hall precinct (e.g. the old ballroom). This space could be restored and used for Council office space or better still, used by the community as a ballroom and for receptions.
- One option suggested was for the Council to move into the two buildings they are considering selling.
 - *Instead of selling the buildings, why not move staff into there?*
- Although there is a degree of cynicism expressed regarding the Council's need for more space, this prospect was not completely ruled out. Respondents appeared to be saying they might be more responsive to arguments, based on 'facts and figures', by the council to justify its needs to expand.

Proposed New Building – Purpose and Use (cont.)

- **Another option suggested was for Council facilities to be relocated elsewhere other than the Town Hall.**
 - **There was other anecdotal evidence of Council owned properties in and around Ballarat that could be used by Council if it should decided to locate some of its services away from the Town Hall Centre.**
 - *Why not buy the Bunning's warehouse, sub-divide that into office space and you'll have all the room you need?*
 - *They would be better to put some of their staff into the old Wendouree Shire offices out in the west...the Telstra call centre...be far easier for parking too.*
 - *The idea of computers. Do they all need to be onsite? Can they work in different areas? Does it have to be in the city centre? Technology can be helpful in this respect. You need a centre but do all the people have to be there?*
 - *You have a central hub where people are accessible but have outlets elsewhere for other people to pay their rates.*

Retaining and Restoring the Civic Hall Building

Retaining and Restoring the Civic Hall Building – Reasons in Favour

- **The main attributes of the Civic Hall revolve around its history. Most respondents in both groups could relate personal events that gave them warm feelings about the Civic hall – their own, their daughter’s or their son’s debutante balls, music and singing eisteddfods, sporting and gymnastic events, receptions etc.**
 - *Back when it was in use, everyone’s Deb Ball was at the Civic Hall. It was the only place to go.*
 - *I saw Jimmy Barnes at the Civic Hall Building.*
- **Historical/Architectural Significance**
 - *It’s an important building, built by a well-known Ballarat architect. There are very few buildings of that genre existing. It’s of some architectural significance, and part of Ballarat’s heritage.*

Retaining and Restoring the Civic Hall Building – Community Usage

- **It was broadly agreed that the Civic Hall Building be retained primarily for community use.**
 - *Whether it be a new building or retaining and re-using the old one, I'd like to see it predominantly used for the community.*
- **Suggested community uses are:**
 - Function area
 - Weddings
 - Deb Balls
 - Musical Functions – Her Majesty's Theatre is currently overflowing/overused
 - Markets – market days
 - Trash & Treasure
 - General community meetings
 - Art and craft exhibitions
 - Tourist/Information Centre
 - Meeting the needs of various cultural and ethnic groups in the community

Retaining and Restoring the Civic Hall Building – Dual Usage

- **On the assumption that an acceptable argument could be made to the community for increased space, both groups indicated that they would be happy to see an architecturally compatible addition made to the Civic Hall restoration to accommodate Council staff (i.e. dual use). This prospect was seen as a ‘win : win’ for the community and the Council.**
 - *I wouldn't have a problem with the Council being in there as long as there is public space also.*

Retaining and Restoring the Civic Hall Building – Current Conditions

- **The land envelope on which the Civic Hall stands is considered prime real-estate which belongs to the Ballarat community. Therefore in the minds of respondents every effort should be made to retain this land and building for community use now and in the future.**
- **Respondents are all aware that the Civic Hall isn't the most attractive building in Ballarat and would require large scale restoration and visual enhancement before it could be used again by the community.**
- **However, respondents do not know the current state of the Civic Hall Building and the extent to which it will require work.**
- **The prevailing view in both groups is that feasibility study should be done ASAP on the current condition of the Civic Hall and what would be needed - building requirements and budget - to restore it an acceptable standard for community and possible Council uses.**
 - *Is it structurally sound?*
 - *How much will it cost to reignite it to what it once was?*
 - *In order to make an informed decision, we need to have all the facts on the table.*
- **The results of a feasibility study should be clearly communicated and discussed within the Ballarat community.**

Retaining and Restoring the Civic Hall Building

- **If the Civic Hall Building can be restored, respondents were generally happy to have further structures added to it.**
 - *If we were to retain the building, there is a possibility of extending the same look and perhaps diversifying it a little more. Add to it somehow, visually and functionally.*
 - *If we are able to add to the current building with a modern extension, I would go for this option.*
- **If restoring the Civic Hall Building is not a viable option, the majority of respondents would prefer a new Civic Hall Building be built, with a design that is in line with the general heritage of Ballarat.**
 - *If the old building gets knocked down, I would like to see a modern version of the building with provision for Council.*
 - *If you had a building that had more of a 'Ballarat feel' to it, I reckon you would get a lot more people to support it*
 - *Like McDonalds at Bakery Hill – some middle ground that's a bit modern but still fits in.*

Demolish and Use for Non-Council Purposes

Demolish and Use for Non-Council Purposes

- **The general perception was that this option has been suggested and tendered several times without success and a lot of money was lost in the process.**
 - *There have been development suggestions over a period of time that we thought were almost through but they've fallen through six or seven times so to me, that is a problem.*
- **Respondents did not like the idea of loss of public community space.**
- **The idea of the Council as a developer was rejected**
 - *I don't think it is the role of the Council to be a pseudo-developer. It's not their expertise.*
 - *The Council is paid to govern, not develop.*
- **However, if the site was sold and redeveloped, alternative uses could be:**
 - Cafes/Restaurants
 - Retail Shops
 - Shopping Centre
 - Hotel
 - Car parks
 - Convention Centre

Cost of this and other Community Projects

Discover your edge

Cost of this and Other Community Projects

- Respondents were clearly uncomfortable with the amount (\$40 million) that would be required to fund the proposed new building.
- The biggest concern was the amount of debt the community will be in and the time it will require to pay off.
 - *We know that \$40 million means we're going to be paying the rates for a lot of years.*
 - *It's the young people that will have to pay it in the end. We're leaving behind a legacy of debt...again.*
- Assuming the money will come from:
 - **Rates**
 - *Everybody's scared that their rates are going to go up sky high.*
 - **Budget Cuts**
 - *Our infrastructure is bad enough now. We can't afford budget cuts.*
- However, the negativity towards this amount appears to be tied into respondents' rejection of the proposed new building and the perceptions that it is for Council use only. Respondents were able accept that to restore or re-build the Civic Hall would incur a large cost but only if it is for community use.
 - *We would be a lot more understanding of the debt if it is used for the community.*

Perceived View of the Council

Perceived View of the Council

- **Although negativity regarding Councils and bureaucracies is often easier to recall than positive examples respondents did not convey a lot of faith or confidence in the Council's ability in managing projects for the community.**
 - *They haven't got the skill...they can't even look after the streets.*
 - *They couldn't organise a kick in the footy factory.*
- **Some examples provided by the respondents:**
 - **Lake Wendouree**
 - *When the lake was dry, a contractor offered to clear it for the soil. The Council wouldn't allow them and now they're paying to dredge it.*
 - *They were offered a free dredging. Why wouldn't they accept that? I can't follow it. Nobody I know can follow it. There was no reasoning for it.*
 - **The Great Southern Swap Meet**
 - *The Great Southern Swap Meet. He (the Operator) was right. The Council was wrong. Now he's gone and left and we have lost a major attraction to our town.*
 - *Strikes me that there is little common sense in the Council.*

Questions for the Council

- **Questions respondents had for the Council regarding the Civic Hall Building and proposals:**
 - What is the \$40 million being spent on? (A breakdown of the costs and expenses)
 - How is it going to benefit the community?
 - If two buildings are to be sold to fund the project, what two buildings?
 - What is the current state of the Civic Hall Building?
 - Why did the Civic Hall Building fall into disrepair in the first place?
 - Why do something now?
 - Does the Council really need space?
 - What is wrong with the Council's current offices?
 - Can we see some simulated images of what the Civic Hall Building would look like if restored?
 - What are the costs of restoring the Civic Hall Building? (A breakdown of the costs and expenses)
 - What would be the impact on rates? (i.e. ongoing costs of upkeep and maintenance)

Conclusions

Conclusions

- **There is a strong preference among respondents to retain, restore and re-use the Civic Hall Building for community purposes such as Deb balls, functions and other social and commercial uses etc.**
- **If a feasibility study shows that a restoration is not feasible, the findings indicate that a new building that is more in sympathy with the heritage of Ballarat would have stronger community support; or a building that shows some ‘middle ground’ between modern and heritage (McDonalds in Bakers Hill was suggested as an example of ‘middle ground’); or a modern version of the current Civic Hall building.**
- **On the assumption that an acceptable argument could be made to the community for increased space for the Council, both groups indicated they would be happy for the Civic Hall to be used for dual purposes, for both the community and the Council. Extensions could be added to the current structure to accommodate everyone.**
- **While there were concerns about the cost of the project, this appeared to be predominantly tied in with the perception that the new building is for Council use only, paid for by the community.**
- **In the minds of respondents there appears to be a clear lack of information provided by the Council. Respondents received the majority of their information from the media and craved accurate ‘facts and figures’. A comprehensive report regarding the current condition of the Civic Hall Building and the costs of each option (to restore or to build new building) disseminated to the general public would assist in gaining community support for Council proposals and decisions.**