

Towards a high standard of Urban Design in Commercial Business Zones

Issues and Options report

1. Background

The Selwyn District is experiencing considerable population growth. The Urban Development Strategy directs growth predominately to Rolleston and Lincoln, and Prebbleton to a lesser extent. Smaller townships within the district, but outside the UDS area, such as Darfield and Leeston are still expected to experience some growth. With the increase in population comes a demand for more facilities and the upgrading of existing ones.

Recent structure plans have aspirations for attractive multi-use town centres and (in the case of Lincoln and Rolleston) new neighbourhood centres. They are envisaged to be pleasant and lively places, where trips can be made for a variety of purposes and which can be accessed by a variety of modes of transport.

New development is an opportunity to achieve these lively centres. With the District's centres set to expand, it is important that high quality development takes place from the outset, or the opportunity to achieve vibrant, attractive and successful centres may be lost.

There are many advantages of high quality development including economic (where different businesses support each other by attracting customers who make multi-purpose trips) and social (where people enjoy the benefits of an attractive centre, have casual encounters with their neighbours and friends and can take advantage of the variety of goods, services and leisure opportunities).

This report explores the urban design issues that are likely to arise in relation to commercial business activities and centres and discusses options for addressing them.

2. What is high quality commercial development?

A high quality commercial building, complex or town centre can be defined as that which:

1. Acts as, or forms part of, a community hub and structuring device
2. Provides the goods and services that people want
3. Is functional and viable
4. Is accessible to all
5. Forms, or is part of, a safe and secure environment
6. Is attractive and compatible with its context
7. Has a low impact on the environment
8. Supports multi purpose trips to the township centre

3. Location of commercial activity

Within the Selwyn District there are a number of commercial zones (Business 1). These are in the centres of the larger townships (Darfield, Rolleston, Lincoln, Prebbleton, Leeston, Southbridge) and at Dunsandel. In addition there are three small spot zones, acknowledging existing businesses (2 in Leeston, 1 in Lincoln). Elsewhere there is no specific commercial business zone, but small scale commercial activities occur, primarily along the main street of smaller townships such as Springfield and Tai Tapu. Retail activity is also present in the industrial (Business 2) zone at Leeston and the University (Business 3) zone at Lincoln (New World supermarket). Other commercial activities exist such as kindergartens in residential areas and plant nurseries in the rural zones.

Within the Business 1 zones there are non-commercial activities, such as the District Council offices (Rolleston, Leeston and Darfield), libraries, medical centres and residential properties.

4. District Plan provisions

The District Plan includes objectives and policies relating to the location and nature of commercial development, for example:

Policy B4.3.4

"Encourage new residential or business development to occur on vacant land in existing Living or Business zones, if that land is available and appropriate for the proposed activity."

Policy B3.4.4.

"To provide Business 1 zones which enable a range of business activities to operate while maintaining environmental quality and aesthetic and amenity values which make the zones attractive to people".

Policy B3.4.22

"Allow people freedom in their choice of the design of buildings or structures except where building design needs to be managed to:

- *Avoid adverse effects on adjoining sites; or*
- *Maintain the character of areas with outstanding natural features or landscape values or special heritage or amenity values."*

Other policies relate to specific aspects such as shading, noise, glare and reverse sensitivity.

The method of implementing these policies is through District Plan zones and rules and other methods, such as advocacy.

While the Business 1 zone has a number of rules relating to issues such as glare, dust, noise and vibration, those relating to building and site design are limited to height, recession planes and landscaping. That part of the Rolleston B1 zone containing the Selwyn District Council Headquarters has additional rules which do not allow retailing and control the site coverage and building set backs. There are also some additional controls relating to the Business 1A zone at Castle Hill.

Dwellings are permitted in the Business 1 zone, providing they comply with the zone rules.

Most types of business are permitted to locate in Living zones providing they comply with the site coverage, height, recession plane, setback and section size rules for the zone, have a maximum floor area of 300m², employ no more than two full time staff who do not live on site, do not generate high levels of traffic and meet conditions relating to noise, lighting, vibration, hours of operation and storage of materials.

Commercial uses can also locate in the industrial Business 2 zone (with some restrictions at Izone, Rolleston) and the university Business 3 zone.

There is control over signage in both the Business zones and the Living zones.

5. Issues arising

1. The need to capitalise on the 'place making' characteristics of commercial development

A town centre is comprised of a mix of uses. It provides a focus for commercial activities and also a civic heart for a town, a place where people go for a number of reasons and a place people can meet and be,

Business has a vital part to play in creating a civic heart as it attracts people to a town centre who may then use that centre for other reasons, such as visiting a library, having a coffee, or sitting on a bench reading the paper. The more people in a town centre, the more vibrancy it will have.

A vibrant centre will benefit businesses as there are more customers in the centre who are able to make convenient, multi-purpose trips. The various businesses and facilities support each other.

As such, there is a need to harness the potential for commercial development to create vibrant centres.

There is a need to integrate the private and public realms to create this vibrant mix of uses. Development which is entirely private (like a car-focussed mall or square) will not provide the non-commercial needs of a town centre and the result may be that these are not provided, are squashed into spare corners, or provided on the edge of the

centre (as at Rolleston). A traditional centre provides this through a main street, where shops face a public area directly.

Demand to expand commercial facilities is an opportunity to improve existing township centres. Infilling in centres which lack continuity, expanding ones which lack a critical mass and rationalising centres which have developed in an ad hoc fashion, can all be achieved when there is the opportunity (due to an increase in demand) to build new shops and services.

In new development areas, neighbourhood centres will have a vital role in creating a new community rather than a series of subdivisions. They need to become the hub of the community, providing a centre of activity. The new centre can give structure to the neighbourhood layout, by acting as a local landmark and orientating feature.

Development can be designed in such a way that it builds on the local character and sense of identity. Picking up themes and characteristics which are typical of the local area and making reference to past history. In some locations a rustic rural character might be appropriate, while in others a more modern, urban character could be developed.

2. Commercial uses locating outside a Business 1 zone

The District Plan controls are quite liberal in relation to the location of commercial development. This means that new development can be located where it is separated from existing businesses so that it splits or changes the focus of a commercial centre. This has occurred at Lincoln, where the new supermarket is located in the Business 3 zone and further commercial development is permitted in the same zone. It is conceivable that as large format retail uses (such as The Warehouse, Bunnings, Mitre 10 Mega) become more viable they will seek to locate alongside State Highways, in the Business 2 zones, or the Business 3 zone.

This could have serious consequences for the establishment of town centres by attracting customers away. The establishment of significant retail outside township centres, would undermine the vitality of the centres because some or all of the principle reason to visit the centres would be lost. This has been seen throughout the country and in particular in the centre of Christchurch.

Another possibility could be campus style office developments in attractive rural settings. This would have some implications for the creation of vibrant multi-purpose town centres.

Where new businesses locate in residential zones, such as child care establishments, they can upset the established residential amenity. This may be due to more activity, with associated noise and increased traffic and/or buildings and outdoor spaces that are incongruous in the domestic environment. Furthermore other businesses may be attracted to locate in the same vicinity.

Where existing businesses are located in residential zones (e.g. Meadow Mushrooms at Prebbleton) or in a spot business zone surrounded by residential uses (e.g. Airborne Honey at Leeston) the current uses may be compatible with the neighbours but changes may occur (e.g. new or intensified activities, new buildings) which are less acceptable.

3. Piecemeal development

Commercial development can occur on a site by site basis with little consideration of adjacent land uses. This can result in multiple accesses, inefficient car parking and servicing and adjacent buildings and spaces which are poorly related to each other. It can be difficult and unpleasant to walk from one group of shops to another (e.g. Rolleston town centre). Piecemeal development usually occurs because there is fragmented land ownership and adjacent owners act in isolation, despite the fact that there could be mutual benefit in working together.

4. Car orientated development

Commercial developments can be designed so that they primarily cater for people arriving by car. Typically this means siting car parking in front of the building. On large sites this can result in a 'sea of cars' which are visually obtrusive. It also means that it is necessary to walk through the car park to the shops. This can be difficult and dangerous, particularly for children, disabled and elderly customers. Focussing on the car can mean that access to the site by pedestrians is overlooked, requiring shoppers to walk out of their way to enter the site or find a way through perimeter fences and landscaping. In the future access by public transport will need to be factored in.

5. Poor site layout

The way in which development is laid out on a site is very important to its success, in terms of its function, its appearance and its compatibility with adjoining uses. A poor layout may have unsightly service and storage areas in high profile locations. Lighting or noisy activities (generators, delivery vehicles, waste removal) may be located where they disturb neighbouring residents. Large buildings may be located where they appear obtrusively out of scale, overbearing or cast excessive shadows. Buildings can be arranged so that they form uncomfortable spaces between them; they may be cold and windswept or feel unsafe due to a lack of casual surveillance. Car parks and vehicle circulation may be laid out so that conflicts between vehicles or vehicles and passengers occur. Developments might be designed to be inward looking turning their back on the street or other public spaces.

6. Poor building design

Buildings may occur that are unattractive or are incongruous within their context. This can be due to them being large and bulky, having blank or monotonous facades (which attract graffiti), being of garish colours or of a style or design that looks out of place in a rural district. Entrances can be unclear, there can be hidden recesses that attract

wrongdoers, features that are easily vandalised or difficult to maintain and ATM's, toilets, cycle stands, etc. can be poorly positioned.

7. Poor design of outdoor space

If commercial areas are to be popular and pleasant places to be, careful attention needs to be paid to the outdoor areas, which should include greenery, sheltered places to sit, meet and gather, childrens play areas etc. Often the space around commercial premises is entirely hard surfaced and used for vehicle parking and manoeuvring. This not only looks unsightly and discourages people from staying a while, but also increases the quantity of storm water run off.

Paving, planting, lighting, seating and other street furniture all needs to be chosen to be attractive, robust and functional.

8. Signage

Commercial activity is usually accompanied by signage and advertising, either attached to the building or free standing. While a certain amount of signage and advertising is appropriate it can become obtrusive. Signage can be large and bright, it can present a cluttered and untidy appearance or there can be excessive amounts (particularly where establishments start competing).

9. Residential uses

Existing residential uses within the Business 1 zones are primarily older stand alone houses. There is scope for medium density housing within some zones and for residential units to be built above shops. Encouraging housing in commercial zones will provide a further housing choice and help to enliven centres outside business hours. If commercial and residential units are to co-exist the differing requirements of each need to be successfully married together.

10. Other uses

As the district grows there is likely to be further demand for other non-residential uses such as community and health facilities, offices, leisure and entertainment premises, each of which has their own peculiarities in terms of building design, traffic generation and parking requirements, compatibility with adjoining uses etc.

6. Options for addressing issues

The following methods for addressing the issues are available:

1. Do nothing

This would not require any staff effort or Council resources, but instead rely on the market to establish the standard of commercial development. This approach would be unlikely to address the issues.

2. Changes to Selwyn District Plan

Currently the Council has some ability to control the issues arising, through the District Plan. However, the provisions are insufficient to ensure the outcomes identified in paragraph 2 above. Changes will be necessary to the policies, rules and possibly zoning if good urban design is to be achieved. To address all of the issues around business development would mean a substantial overhaul of the District Plan.

3. Outline Development Plans

Where new commercial development is identified as part of a structure plan exercise (as has occurred at Lincoln and Rolleston) design requirements could be incorporated in the subsequent Plan Change, perhaps as criteria for an Outline Development Plan. These would only be applicable to new freestanding neighbourhood centres or newly zoned business areas.

4. Masterplans for township centres

Comprehensive development plans or masterplans could be developed for township centres. These would enable site specific issues to be addressed and could explore opportunities for developing overall themes, rationalising land ownership boundaries, providing shared parking provision etc. They would provide a vision for the community and a framework for individual developments. They would not have any statutory weight unless accompanied by a Plan Change.

5. Informal discussion with developers and owners

Another measure which can be employed is informal discussion with developers and owners. This relies on stakeholders being willing to discuss their proposals and Council staff being pro-active in approaching them (assuming that they can identify potential commercial developers in advance of them carrying out their development). It also requires Council staff having sufficient knowledge to be able to make practical suggestions.

6. Commercial development design guide

A design guide could be prepared which would set out principles and best practice examples for achieving good commercial outcomes. This would act as an educational tool and ensure consistency of advice, however it would not have any statutory status and therefore could not be enforced.

The table below summarises the options.

Option	Advantages	Disadvantages	Comment
1. Do nothing	No time or cost implications	Would not address the issues	
2. Changes to District Plan	Would address many of the issues.	Likely to be an extensive and costly exercise. May be other priorities for District Plan changes. Good design cannot be achieved merely by complying with rules.	Could be restricted to partial changes, e.g. introduction of new rules in the B1 zone.
3. Outline Development Plans	Mechanism and process already in place	Only applicable to new neighbourhood centres or new business zones	
4. Masterplans for township centres	Can provide a community vision Tailored to specific circumstances	Could be ineffective as only advisory.	Masterplan proposed for Rolleston Town Centre
5. Informal advice	Makes use of existing resources	Unlikely to be effective unless stakeholders can see a real benefit. Staff may not have requisite skills. Inconsistent advice may be given.	Could be accompanied by upskilling of staff and publicising request for stakeholders to consult Council.
6. Design guide	Does not need to follow statutory process. Therefore quicker and less costly than a Plan Change. Could address all of the issues.	Could be ineffective as only advisory.	Could be used to educate staff and to provide a consistent Council position
7. Design guide in combination with changes to District Plan	Likely to be effective, flexible and easy to understand		Could be used in combination with options 3, 4 and 5

None of the Options 1 to 6 above would address the issues in their entirety, however a combination of the methods could be used (Option 7). This would involve the introduction of a design guide as the first step, followed by its integration into new plan policies and rules. The design guide could be used to assist the formulation of Outline Development Plans for new commercial areas, masterplans for township centres and as a resource for Council staff.

7. Recommended Option.

The recommended approach is the development of a design guide with amendments to the District Plan where appropriate.