

West Pier Trust Newsletter – May 99

Introduction

We are still chasing a moving target - and 'chasing' properly reflects the feelings of the staff. However, compared to the situation faced at the time of the previous Newsletter in January, we are gaining on the target and there is less fog between us and it. In January we were concerned about the declining physical state of the pier following the winter battering, and we lost our private sector partners (BPR); the latter resulting from their design for the new build having been rejected by English Heritage (the history and handling of that design will be an interesting story in the second volume of Fred Gray's book).

The 1999 Works

The principal achievement since the low point has been the programme of works (code-named Phase O) now being undertaken on the structure of the pier. In February, we agreed with the Heritage Lottery Fund on a £560,000 funding for those works (75% from the HLF and the Trust finding the other 25%). Activity commenced in March and will be completed by July. The programme combines the most urgent works needed to secure and strengthen the sub-structure with activity designed to facilitate the full £14m Phase One. On the basis of the first two months of the programme, the Engineers are confident that even if Phase One does not commence until next year the sub-structure should now be secure through another winter. We are also finding that the piling is in a better state than some predicted, and the restoration of the sub-structure will make more extensive use of the original piles. There has been recent local media coverage of two aspects of the programme i.e. the height of the deck above sea level and the dismantling of the buildings on the pier. The Trust is totally committed to the authentic restoration of the West Pier in a manner which will ensure that it survives at least through the 21st Century. The raising of the deck level simply reflects environmental changes since 1866 and predictions on sea rise over the next Century. It results from work done by the Trust itself and it is likely that the deck will be raised by approximately one metre for those reasons, but the increase in height will hardly be noticeable in the perspective view. In regard to the buildings on the pier, it is not yet clear whether the frame of the Concert Hall will have to be dismantled; we hope to avoid that, but it might turn out to be necessary. However, it is near certain that the Pavilion (not 'the theatre' as it has been called in the media) will have to be dismantled. In the case of every building on the pier, the Trust will restore their structures, using as much original material as possible, to their 1920's external appearance. Their interiors will depend upon the usages yet to be agreed with private sector partner; but, in the meantime, Brighton & Hove Council has kindly agreed to make an interest-free loan to the Trust to cover the cost of our contribution to the works.

Private Sector Partners

On the loss of BPR in January, the Trust reverted to negotiations with the consortium which had come second in the 1997 tendering; the Trust having wisely kept in close touch with that consortium, of which Chris Eubank is the most well-known member. By March, that consortium had been strengthened by the Prestbury Group plc and re-named 'Eugenius' after the designer engineer of the 1866 pier. The negotiations have not yet been concluded and we are awaiting HLF approval of Eugenius. Hopefully, we will be in a position to report fully to the AGM in July on securing a private sector partner and on the Development Agreement with it. However, whilst we are doing our utmost to conclude an agreement with Eugenius, I add that the Trust does have a reserve position to progress the restoration should the current negotiations fail.

Programming

The experience with BPR, and now with Eugenius, confirms that no partner will be willing to conclude contractual arrangements or to commence Phase One until they are confident that the full scheme (including the new build on the Lower Esplanade) will be both commercially viable and acceptable to all of the authorities. Similarly, Brighton & Hove Council is reluctant

to conclude the transfer of the Lower Esplanade land until those same conditions have been met. Thus, the concept of sequential phasing of the restoration is no longer appropriate; once a scheme is agreed, the implementation will be 'Big-Bang'. We are now in a situation with Eugenius identical to that last December with BPR i.e. the proposals for the new build having to be put to 'the Planners' for a green or red light. The timetable for that process means that it is unlikely that the full scheme for the restoration will be agreed in time for implementation to commence before Spring 2000AD. I recognise that is a major disappointment; when Sir Lindsay Bryson and I joined the Board of the Trust in the Summer of 1995, we expected that the restoration would be complete by Spring 2000 AD, so no-one is more frustrated than us. On the other hand, we are addressing the problems of a structure constructed in 1866, a pier which has been closed for a quarter of a Century, and putting together a deal for that pier to be restored and healthy for a further Century; the delays are frustrating but minor on those timescales. Further, the delays have not shaken or reduced the joint commitment of the Trust, the HLF, English Heritage and Brighton & Hove Council to achieve the restoration.

Conclusion

I would have wished to report more progress, I am pleased to have reported some progress, but the supports remain in place (physical in the 1866 piles and political in our public sector partners) to allow me to continue to have the confidence that I will one day report that the full scheme for the restoration of the West pier has been set in contracts. Meanwhile, I think the rest of the staff of the Trust for coping with the 'downs' on the rollercoaster process of putting that deal in place.

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Chief Executive

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