

STATES OF JERSEY



OUR HOSPITAL SITE SELECTION: OVERDALE (P.123/2020) – SECOND AMENDMENT.

Lodged au Greffe on 16th November 2020
by the Connétable of St. Helier

STATES GREFFE

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At the beginning of the proposition insert the following paragraph:

“(a) to request the Council of Ministers, prior to its acquisition of land or properties required to facilitate access to the preferred site for Jersey’s new hospital, to present to the States Assembly for approval a report on alternative access strategies designed to maximize sustainable modes of travel to and from the new hospital, and to minimize the impact on homes, leisure facilities and the surrounding environment of the access interventions currently proposed;”

And re-designate the existing paragraph as paragraph (b).

REPORT

Introduction

When Overdale was announced as the Government's preferred site for Jersey's new hospital there was a collective sigh of relief not only amongst St Helier residents but all Islanders, the majority of whom are in no doubt that People's Park is too important a green lung in the capital, ideal for recreation, exercise, festivals and the like, to be built upon. However, subsequent disclosures by those involved in the Our Hospital Project ("OHP") as well as various statements in [P.123/2020](#) and [P.129/2020](#) have caused those who have campaigned repeatedly to 'save People's Park' to wonder whether it will not prove to have been a Pyrrhic victory, given the serious depredations that appear to be necessary to secure an improved vehicular access to Overdale via Westmount Road.

Foremost among these is the demolition of people's homes, as well as the imposition of levels of nuisance, noise and air pollution and other impacts, both during the construction project and afterwards, on the occupants of the residential properties which are not slated for destruction, but who will find themselves living beside a busy new road; then there has been the surprising announcement that the Jersey Bowling Club will have to be relocated, in spite of its importance to the community in the course of its 108 year history and the investment which the club members have made to their premises down the years; on top of this are the as yet unknown incursions which the proposed road improvements will make into the park itself, with the loss of dozens of mature trees, which could well compromise significantly the quality of People's Park.

There is also the as yet unknown impacts upon Peirson Road between the Grand Hotel and Cheapside; there have been some initial meetings at officer level between the Parish of St Helier and the hospital team, but as yet no certainty as to what alternative parking arrangements will be found for those who make use of the spaces on the edge of People's Park, and how St Helier ratepayers will be compensated for the lost parking income.

The Deputy Chief Minister, Senator Farnham, is to be commended for engaging in a meaningful way with the residents from the area of Overdale and Westmount Road, in two meetings held in the Town Hall on Wednesday 28th October and Thursday 12th November, who expressed their concerns about inter alia:

- the impact of the proposed road widening works on the quality of life of the residents in those properties not slated for demolition;
- the effect on the property values of nearby homes;
- the likely cost overrun involved in such a major civil engineering project, especially given the historic issues concerning the escarpment

Meetings have also been held with the Jersey Bowling Club in an effort to explore alternative locations for the club, but these have so far proved inconclusive.

An alternative approach to the access problem

At the second Town Hall meeting the suggestion was made that the necessity of the major alterations to Westmount Road should be challenged, and that proper consideration should be given to the potential of making the road one-way at the bottom of the hill, i.e., from beyond the opening to Westmount Apartments to the top of the hill.

This would allow the existing road space to be maximized to permit the vital access by ambulances, buses etc to be provided with far less re-engineering of Westmount Road; there would still be scope to ease the tight bend above the 'Inn on the Park' site, both for the benefit of ambulances going up the hill and the extra wide Heavy Goods Vehicles ("HGVs") that may be necessary for the construction project (though we have seen no evidence that such HGVs could not approach the new hospital site from the other direction.) No properties would need to be demolished, nor would the Jersey Bowling Club have to leave its home, and quite apart from the benefits to home owners, such a traffic management scheme would cut many millions of pounds off the project cost.

It should also be mentioned (as there is no reference to this in the reports) that the alterations to Westmount Road, depending on their magnitude, may also involve a loss of heritage in respect of Gallow's Hill and the gathering place of the Jersey militia on the morning of the Battle of Jersey in 1781.

The purpose of this amendment is to ensure that an alternative approach to the access problem is given due consideration before another part of St Helier is given 'the Southampton treatment,' by which I mean, the imposition on the Island's road network of highway engineering interventions which may be appropriate on the mainland but which are alien to Jersey; these include the creation of the underpass and the so-called improvements to West Park roundabout and Victoria Avenue during the last round of fiscal stimulus spending.

The official line on access

The recommendation that the Island's new hospital is built at Overdale is made by the Political Oversight Group and the Council of Ministers in Section 7 of P.123. 'Access challenges,' we are told, 'can be overcome and provide opportunities to improve the road network to support wider health and wellbeing activity.' The penultimate bullet point goes further, arguing that the higher cost of Overdale when compared to People's Park 'will be outweighed by its contribution to the long-term health and care outcomes of Islanders over its lifetime.' What this means in plain English is that Overdale's hilltop location should be seen as an asset as it will lead to healthier Islanders: it's a stiff climb up from town as everyone knows who has chosen to walk up to the Crematorium, taking advantage of the flight of steps provided by the Parish of St Helier, which cuts the journey time by five minutes but leaves those of us who are less fit than we should be rather out of breath. Imagine doing the walk every day, or taking advantage of an ebike, cycling to the new hospital along the safe, segregated cycle route that could be provided without the kind of drastic roadworks that probably are required if Westmount Road remains two-way. Imagine a new walking and cycling access to the new hospital coming up through the trees from the Inner Road, allowing staff and visitors approaching from the west who are fit and able to use the more sustainable modes of travel to enjoy the woodland environment below the new hospital as they make their way to and from it. Imagine safe, segregated cycle ways and proper pedestrian facilities for those approaching the new hospital from the north, which would incidentally make life so very much easier for the students of Haute Vallee School, who currently brave the some of most unsatisfactory junctions and pavements on the Island. And imagine, for those staff and visitors unable to walk or cycle, a frequent, free, efficient and environmentally friendly hospital shuttle bus service connecting the new hospital with the town and its car parks including Pier Road which is largely empty for much of the time. The combined effect of an access solution for Overdale which placed sustainable transport at its heart would be to create a fitter and

happier population which would indeed save money in the long run.

Yet the Government of Jersey does not really believe in sustainable transport; it is still caught up in the ‘predict and provide’ and ‘car accommodation’ ways of thinking of the last Millennium, beloved by highway engineers and traffic consultants, as is clear when we turn from the visionary statements of P.123 to which I have referred to such details of the necessary roadworks as are provided in the Site Evaluation Report.

The Site Evaluation Report

The Executive Summary sets the tone of what is to follow in a report which for all its length simply repeats the assertion that for able bodied staff and visitors Overdale is too difficult to walk or cycle to and from, while it completely fails to explore the rich possibilities of a public transport solution for the site. It’s hardly surprising, therefore, that such ‘car accommodation’ transport planning will require major civil engineering works or ‘junction mitigation schemes’ as they are termed here:

‘The Overdale site presents challenges with regards to transport and access. The surrounding topography may discourage some to travel to the site by foot or cycle and significant infrastructure works could be required to provide a dedicated cycle route from the existing Jersey Cycle Network. Existing bus connectivity is also presently poor and ongoing investment is likely to be required to support a frequent shuttle bus service or extension of an existing service. Locating the OHP at Overdale is also anticipated to result in the need for junction mitigation schemes at several locations on the local highway network including impacts on People’s Park.

- Both sites require upgrades to the existing highways network. However, Overdale requires extensive and more costly engineering works to improve vehicular access to the site.
- Good vehicular access to Overdale can be delivered with significant engineering upgrade work.
- Costs associated with upgrading of vehicular access to Overdale is considerable
- Existing homes will need to be acquired at Overdale to enable road widening and site extension’

Section 4.3 of the Site Evaluation Report goes into more detail about what challenges exist in terms of accessing Overdale; it does so twice, in order to report on the initial and further evaluations, described as Hurdles 1 and 2, and begins with the following ‘Key Assumptions’:

- ‘Vehicle access would be taken directly from Westmount Road and roads to the north are not deemed appropriate to accommodate a significant proportion of hospital traffic
- Potential new vehicle access routes from the A1 to the west of the site are not deemed to be deliverable
- Land required to improve the alignment and gradient of Westmount Road could be acquired

- A significant highway mitigation scheme would be required between Westmount Road and Victoria Avenue
- In comparison to Jersey General Hospital, the proportion of journeys made to this site by walking, cycling and bus will likely decrease, whilst journeys made by car will likely increase.’

Walking and cycling opportunities

The first word of these key assumptions, ‘Vehicle,’ sets the tone of what follows in these sections of the report: it is all about cars. Given such a mindset it’s hardly surprising that the final key assumption is that walking and cycling to the new hospital will decrease. The initial survey rightly highlights the inadequate walking facilities to the north east of the proposed site while the environmental quality of Westmount Park and Val Andre to the south is clear from the photograph of this special place. However, the authors of the report see the topographical challenges as obstacles rather than opportunities:

‘To the south of the site, there are some permissive footpaths that provide access to the A1 St Aubin’s Road (shown in the photograph below) and People’s Park. Both routes are unlit and stepped (in some places steeply) and therefore not suitable for all users ... Given the site is located on the edge of St Helier, there is an opportunity for some patient, visitor and staff journeys to be made by foot, however the topography will represent a significant barrier for some. Forward thinking interventions could be explored to reduce the impact of the gradient, such as e-bikes and e-scooters. Many of the footways are also substandard and widening may require significant works ...

Given St Aubin’s Road is heavily trafficked in the peak periods and the topography challenges of Westmount Road, it is recommended that a segregated cycle route is provided between Route 1 and Overdale Hospital. However, even with a segregated cycle route, the topography is likely to be a significant barrier for many cyclists.

Whilst the site is located near St Helier town centre, the topography will likely limit proportion of journeys made to the site by walking and cycling.

Options such as funicular railway, Norwegian cycle lifts etc should not be discounted at this stage but any form of light transit would also need to consider departure and landing points, and the infrastructure and parking associated with the transfer of mode. There is also considerable financial cost attached to these items.’

As can be seen there is little ‘forward thinking’ here: we do not need to enter a cloud cuckoo land of funicular railways to give serious (and long overdue) consideration to improvements to the walking and cycling network of the Island’s capital which the Parish of St Helier Roads Committee has been asking successive Ministers of the Infrastructure Department for since 2005.

Public transport opportunities

The Site Selection Report, being a desk stop study, merely states the obvious in relation to current public transport connections to Overdale: ‘The existing hourly bus service is not deemed to be appropriate to serve a new hospital. Significant ongoing investment is therefore likely to be required to improve the frequency of bus services to and from Overdale Hospital. It is also recommended that the bus stop is relocated closer to the

site if not located internal to any new facility footprint.’ For an Island which has in recent years taken such bold strides to improve its bus service this is a completely inadequate approach to the Overdale access problem, a half-hearted nod in the direction of moving a bus stop here and there, and a gloomy forecast of significant ongoing costs. Where is the new shuttle bus network linking the site with the nearby car parks?

The report moves swiftly on to the engineering solutions that will be necessary to increase the vehicle carrying capacity of the roads around Overdale, before concluding, ‘dedicated car parking will need to be provided to accommodate all demand from patients, visitors and staff.’ There was never a clearer statement of the outdated and discredited car accommodation philosophy than this.

The above remarks are made in relation to that section of the Site Selection Report which deals with ‘Hurdle 1’. Little extra light is shed on the access problem/opportunity under ‘Hurdle 2’ as most of the further desk-stop study is focused on the carrying capacity of the roads and junctions around Overdale. The implication is clear: if no effort is made to change the way we travel to and from the new hospital there will be far reaching and costly consequences for the public realm to the west of St Helier.

Conclusion

It is no wonder that the Council of Ministers is proposing to submit a Planning Application for the access ‘improvement’ works ahead of the main planning application, because if the whole Our Hospital Project were to be considered in the round, including the impact of the car accommodation works on the surrounding homes and environment, it would make it far less likely to satisfy either the local planning process or the Planning Enquiry.

Given the sustainable transport policies which the States has adopted for over twenty years it is quite extraordinary that the consultants behind such a major document as this were given free rein to seek to foist such an expensive and damaging series of infrastructure interventions on our Island. One questions whether the States member(s) or officer(s) who wrote P.123/2020 with its opportunities ‘to support wider health and wellbeing activity’ had read the technical reports at all.

I believe that the Council of Ministers, prior to its acquisition of land or properties required to facilitate access to the preferred site, should present a report to the States on alternative access strategies designed to maximize sustainable modes of travel to and from the new hospital, and to minimize the impact on homes, leisure facilities and the surrounding environment of the access interventions currently proposed.

Financial and manpower implications

Financial and staffing considerations: while the amendment if accepted will require more work to be done on the Overdale access issue, the potential financial savings of this alternative approach would be huge, both in terms of avoiding much of the proposed purchase of land and property, the cost of relocating the Jersey Bowling Club, and avoiding some of the more extreme interventions in the road network, and also in the longer term health benefits to the community of providing a sustainable travel plan for the new hospital rather than a plan based on car accommodation.