

Councillors reject luxury hotel plans for former Royal High School



It has been a long day at the City Chambers but remarkably the whole proceedings went very much according to the timetable set by the planning convener.

Everyone had their say and it is pretty clear that whichever camp you are in, the views are held very passionately.

The building in question is an important one. That point is not in doubt. The doubts arise about the proposals to turn it into a luxury hotel and whether these plans amount to over-development, with the large wings envisaged at either side. The President of Rosewood Hotels, Radha Arora, came from Hong Kong to attend the planning meeting today as an endorsement of his company's good intent to invest millions in our city.

He must have been rather put off by some members of the committee who appeared disenchanted with the kind of people who frequent Rosewood or other luxury hotels, and who do not seem to want them in our city.

Gordon Dewar the CEO of Edinburgh Airport explained earlier that they are well used to high net worth passengers coming through their doors. He said they sell a £10,000 bottle of whisky each week in duty free.

Councillor Lewis Ritchie admitted that he had never set foot in a six star hotel. That, with some respect, was not really what he was recently elected to talk about today. The decision before all members of the committee was whether to allow a development promising inward investment and economic benefits

that other cities might give their right arm for, or to accept the officers' recommendations that this building was too big and in breach of many other planning rules.

Whether or not anyone in the room, except perhaps Radha Arora the President of Rosewood Hotels, (who started off in the hotel trade as a waiter) has ever, or will ever walk through the doors of such a luxe establishment is irrelevant. What we need is a plan for the future of a building which has been empty for 47 years and which is on the Buildings at Risk register. That point was also agreed upon by many of those who spoke, both for and against.

Councillor Eric Milligan was at his most entertaining, very much playing to his role as grandfather of the City Chambers, producing a book about the school and explaining that in supporting the plans he did not want to live in a city of monuments. Read more of his and other contributions on our liveblog [here](#).

We would love to tell you who exactly voted for and against but at the end of the day our list is incomplete. Certainly Cllrs Milligan, Blacklock and Howat were in favour of the development. Councillors Ritchie, McVey, Child, Keil, Robson, Perry, Mowat and Bagshaw were in favour of rejecting the proposal, but we are unsure about the remainder and how they voted.

Convener Councillor Ian Perry granted us the first interview following the marathon meeting which you can listen to here:

MSPs Alison Johnstone and Sarah Boyack were both very much against the plans for architectural and heritage reasons, but both were very much of the view that 'something has to be done' about the former Royal High School.

Reacting to news Alison Johnstone, Scottish Green MSP for Lothian, said:

“I’m so pleased that members of the planning committee were not seduced by arguments about economic benefit, instead recognising that much of our visitor economy is based on the carefully cherished landscape of our city: an inheritance which this development would have squandered.

“A perfectly feasible alternative is waiting in the wings in the shape of a new music school which much more respects the building and setting. and is more likely to widen public access. Let’s get to that quickly.”

After the meeting Sarah Boyack MSP told us: ““Today was an important landmark decision. The proposed hotel would have damaged one of Edinburgh’s finest A listed buildings and the panoramic views of Calton Hill were at stake.

“The proposal represented massive over development and councillors were right to refuse it.”

Commenting on the planning committee’s decision to reject the Royal High School hotel development, John Donnelly, Chief Executive Marketing Edinburgh said: “With all planning applications, there is an enormous responsibility. I know the City of Edinburgh Council, working alongside Historic Scotland and Edinburgh World Heritage, is acutely aware of its significance, and today’s considered decision was not taken lightly.

“As head of the organisation tasked with promoting Edinburgh as a world leading city to visit, invest, live, work and study, I passionately believe a peaceful and symbiotic relationship between Edinburgh’s World Heritage status and future developments can be found in order for our city to grow and succeed. As a global destination, Edinburgh will continue to build on our existing assets and there’s no escaping that the city is in critical need of new largescale luxury five star hotels to meet demand from leisure and business visitors, especially from China and North America.

“We as a city will move forward and agree a future solution that lets Edinburgh embrace change and innovation, while celebrating our rich, vibrant heritage. We can have the best of both worlds.”

So where does this leave us? Surely having invested some considerable time and money the developers will appeal the decision?

Do we allow the economic benefits of some 260 jobs when the hotel is built, countless jobs during construction and economic value of tens of millions per annum to be outweighed by retaining the status quo? Is the status quo good enough and will we just allow the building to fall down? Many of these arguments were rehearsed today during the seven hour meeting but the eventual decision was firmly to reject the application. You can watch the recording of the meeting online [here](#).

The company Duddingston House Properties under the leadership of Bruce Hare are still in the preferred developer chair as a result of the competition which they won, so will they take the plans and rehash them with a view to an appeal? Most probably we think, although David Orr of Urbanist Group was simply too exhausted at the end of the day to offer any real plan of action to us. Watch this space.

During the day we ran a Twitter poll asking what you thought of the hotel plans and whether the council should approve them or not. There was an overwhelming majority in favour of rejecting the proposals for most of the day.

We appreciate this is not a scientific poll but it does give us an idea of what you think!

You can still contribute on Twitter until tomorrow!