

Hours long meeting – nothing much decided

The council's Transport and Environment Committee meeting went on all day. It began at 10am and finished just after 6pm.

It involves eleven councillors and many council officers. The point of council officers being present is that they can speak to their reports, and explain anything to councillors which is unclear before the elected members then vote on them. At the full council meeting councillors do not have the luxury of seeking any further information from officers. They have to rely on the content of the reports and perhaps any information from their colleagues who are on any specific committee.

Matters of huge importance have been discussed at the online meeting today – continuation or indeed cancellation of the Trams to Newhaven Project, introduction of and changes to existing Spaces for People measures, and lastly the East Craigs Low Traffic Neighbourhood.

Hours of discussion have however come to naught, as the Conservative Group has used the Standing Order process (which it has every right to do and this is unchallengeable) to delay the committee taking three of these decisions today. Instead, these matters will now be referred to full council – possibly next week, but more likely to be next month – for discussion and approval or otherwise.

The executive decisions taken by the committee are therefore stalled in council process, rather than making any real

progress which could benefit residents.

For example, there will be no safety measures introduced outside Craigmount High School. There will be no relaxation of Spaces for People measures on Warriston Road or Silverknowes Road North. No view has been taken on the continuation of the tram project. Well that is not strictly true – the committee decided to do all these things, but the council cannot actually do that until the full council endorses these decisions.

At one stage the Convener of the Transport and Environment Committee rebuked the Conservative Group leader for the use of inflammatory language when discussing the tram project, the Conservative Group Transport spokesperson for mouthing comments at the camera in the virtual meeting and said she was 'dismayed' by the Group's constant use of this standing order. Cllr Macinnes said: "I do not appreciate the kind of inflammatory language that's been used around this to talk about us 'going bust' over this.

"It's a quite clear attempt to find a headline, and I think it's irresponsible at this point, when we're attempting to make a decision. It ignores what the tram delivers for the city. We had a full comprehensive business case and it was a democratic decision by full council and not me alone. Democracy is important."

The Transport Convener also corrected Cllr Kevin Lang who had said the tram project was a £100 million raid on Lothian Buses. Cllr Macinnes said this is not correct.

With regard to the use of the Standing order in relation to the Spaces for People measures, Cllr Macinnes said that she was not surprised. She continued: "This is a tool in the toolbox being used frequently. I find this a disappointing move and it will cause enormous delay to what are temporary measures. I am dismayed as this now go to full council without

officer scrutiny.”

Cllr Ian Perry who was deputising for Cllr Scott Arthur today is one of the most experienced members of the council. He said: “It would save a lot of trouble if you tell us you are going to do this at the beginning so that we can truncate the debate. What we have done is just spent hours debating something that we will repeat at the full council meeting. So if you tell us at the beginning of the meeting of the meeting then we can truncate the debate!”

Cllr Iain Whyte said: “It is not our intention to move everything to full council just contentious matters that we want want to do that with. It happened at the Housing Committee recently as it was a contentious item. I can remember when Labour went into opposition against an SNP/LibDem coalition and every aspect of standing orders was used by Labour to extend debates. Council meetings went on to 11pm or midnight. Every member of the Labour group used to speak.”

The Tram to Newhaven update demonstrates a variety of scenarios, all of which could affect the council’s reserves, but the report confirms that in ‘all but one scenario’ the project will cost more to cancel than to keep going. The overall price tag remains at £207.3 million, but the council will now have to borrow all of the funding and cannot depend on the special dividend of £20 million from Lothian Buses which was factored in at the beginning.

This is a direct result of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing advice to avoid public transport if possible.

The project can however call on developer contributions to make up the sum of just over £7 million. In all cases the borrowing from reserves will be paid back. In the best case this anticipates repayment by 2027 and in the worst case by 2055.

The council has already spent £32 million on the project, and clearly by spending money on cancellation there would be no benefits to employment growth or economic growth which the business case showed would flow from the project.

The council papers for the full council meeting next week will be published on Friday 13 November 2020, although it is open to the Clerk to publish a notice of the meeting and the agenda at least 3 clear days before a meeting.