

BCA Submission re Smart Hub Proposal

BCA thanks the council for the opportunity to comment on the proposal for a Smart Hub to be established in Braidwood. We are concerned that this proposal does not appear to be based on evidence of local demand; however, we can see the merit in establishing such a facility in this community.

The provision of enhanced access to digital technology for the Braidwood business community is commended. However, this should not be allowed to impact on other essential services provided by Council to the entire community. The impact on the structure of the Council building, formerly the Braidwood Literary Institute, is also a matter of great concern.

Providing digital services in a 19th Century Heritage building is a particular challenge, which we acknowledge. The current proposal seeks to make a major structural change to one of Braidwood's most significant buildings. We believe that Council has an obligation to preserve this building as closely as possible to its original form. The construction of a wall in the middle of the entrance foyer will significantly detract from its heritage value. In addition, the current proposal will remove the public access to this building from Wallace St. As it was built by the community, and has been an integral part of its cultural, social and administrative history since 1869, we believe this is unacceptable.

After considerable consultation with community members we would like to propose an alternative location for the hub.

Our suggestion is that the Smart Hub be located in the "Old Library" in Park Lane. There are a number of advantages to this location. It is self-contained with toilets and a kitchenette. The space is large enough to accommodate a number of uses, such as a smart hub and a small meeting space. It could also include a small enclosed space for phone calls to maintain privacy. Many businesses require instant and private phone access. The mezzanine floor allows for expansion of the usage if the demand increases.

We understand that possible objections to the Old Library proposal are that it is used from time to time for meetings, interviews and training. There are other spaces in Braidwood that would accommodate large meetings and training. The Braidwood Services Club has a suitable room for larger meetings and training. It has a bar and restaurant which add to the facility. The more the Club is used, the more the community benefits. The National Theatre is another very useful space for meetings, public consultations etc. The Old Anglican Hall, when renovations are completed, is another suitable space. The rental of this would again benefit the community by adding income to maintain the building. For council interviews and smaller committee meetings, the proposed community meeting room in the council building would appear to be suitable, as well as our suggested meeting room in the Old Library. The Braidwood Life Centre is another community building with a meeting space available.

The community has raised a number of objections to the Council's proposed restructuring of space within the main council building.

BUILDING HERITAGE STATUS

The building is a significant Heritage listed building, and is treasured by our community. The proposed wall blocking access through to the staircase and the library will destroy the architectural integrity of the interior of the building. This will surely require Heritage approval, but we are against losing the visual impact of the archway and staircase within the building. It is part of our social, cultural and architectural heritage. This building has been central to the life of the community since the 1860's, when it was constructed using funds raised by public subscription.

ACCESS

The proposed relocation of the access to the building from Wallace Street to Park Lane is potentially dangerous for our citizens. This narrow road is used by school buses, emergency vehicles (it's next to the fire station) and children and parents coming to and from Braidwood Central School. There is no footpath access to the Library entrance from Wallace St, without crossing Park Lane twice. There is very limited parking available in Park Lane, and to access the ramp, pedestrians including the aged, disabled and parents with young children need to negotiate around and behind the parked cars. The ramp itself is long, with a turn in it; it passes a public toilet with an open door, and there is a step into the library from the ramp. The doors are not self-opening, and this makes it hazardous for the elderly, walking frames, the disabled and young mothers with strollers and prams. The access from Wallace Street is safer and shorter and is seen as the preferred method of entry into the building, including the library.

CUSTOMER SERVICE AREA

The proposal to use the existing foyer to the library as the Customer Service Area downgrades the importance of this service to our residents. Citizens are entitled to acquire information using the best resources of both technology and personal interaction. This proposal also removes an important community space. The library foyer is an information area, an informal and impromptu meeting space and a place for phone calls for library users. It acts as an airlock for entry to the library. The external door opens to the west, which is the direction of the prevailing strong winter winds. If a large desk is included in that space there will be very limited room for people waiting for service. There is no room to queue, especially if you add a stroller, a couple of chairs, and a table for display of consultation documents. The wall space for display of information appears to be very limited. The proposed Service NSW self-service kiosk will take up even more space.

SHARED DESK ISSUES

The proposal for Library and Customer Service staff to share one desk is highly problematic. It is not clear where the desk will be and if there is any separation between the two areas. The

skills, equipment and technology used by the staff are completely different. The combining of the library and customer service area is completely inappropriate and contra-indicated. There is genuine concern about privacy and confidentiality when discussing personal matters with the Customer Service staff, including financial matters, in such a confined area. It is very important in a small community that people's privacy be respected and protected. There is no indication on the proposed plan of any private space for discussion of financial and planning matters.

ROLE OF LIBRARY AND LIBRARIAN

This proposal seems to devalue the role of the library and the librarian in our community. Our library is highly valued and very well-used by all ages. It fulfills many roles in our lives: educational, recreational, social, and technological. It's used for communication and research, by townspeople and those from more isolated parts of the region. Community groups use the computers and printer. Individuals also use them for employment applications, communication and other personal business. These people are not candidates for a Smart Hub which will cost money and will not provide the personal assistance and service available in the library. The librarians often help people with technology, and spend a lot of time assisting library users in many ways. The library is already often overcrowded and to take away space and specialised service from this facility is unacceptable.

SAFETY AND SECURITY

One reason given for this amalgamation of service and personnel is the safety and security of the staff. We are told that the full-time equivalent staffing levels are the same in Braidwood as they were when the council merger happened in 2016, and this is guaranteed to continue. Why then is security a major issue now? We suggest that an emergency button would be appropriate for staff security, especially in the library. CCTV cameras could also be used. Alternatively, more staff could be located on the ground floor, rather than being moved upstairs. There are many businesses in town which operate with only one person on the premises, while handling a lot of cash. If the access to the library from Wallace Street were to be maintained, then pedestrian traffic alone should improve the security of counter service. The glass security windows in the current office should be more secure than an open counter shared with the library.

We note also that security in the proposed Smart Hub has not been mentioned. Even with a card operated access, there is a potential security risk to users of the Smart Hub. Women alone may be very reluctant to use this space, especially after normal working hours.

In summary, whilst we support the establishment of a Smart Hub in Braidwood, we believe that more research is needed prior to any further planning. Research into the use and success of Smart Hubs in other areas should be undertaken prior to this proposal being approved. The location of a Smart Hub in the configuration suggested in the current plan will disadvantage the majority of residents in favour of a minority from one sector of the community. It disregards Heritage factors and the integrity of this very important building. It ignores the needs of many

residents who will find the Park Lane access difficult. It compromises the privacy of residents using the Customer Service Desk, and reduces the space and autonomy of the library. Wherever the Smart Hub is located, we do not wish our building to be compromised by any internal structural changes. We also do not want to see any adverse impact on the quality of service provided by the Customer Service and Library desks.

ATTACHMENTS: History of the Council Building and Statement re its Heritage significance.