



RESPONSE TO 'PENRITH NEW SQUARES' CONSULTATION

as of 15th October 2009

- Introduction

Penrith Action for Community Transition (**PACT**) is a **Transition Town** group formed by members of the local community during 2008. The group is part of the rapidly-growing worldwide **Transition Network** which seeks to develop community-led solutions to the challenges posed by diminishing oil reserves and climate change.

In just 18 months PACT has gained considerable momentum, with a growing membership and profile in the town. PACT has already held a series of public events on a range of subjects including film showings, talks, gastronomic events working with Eden businesses to celebrate local seasonal food, and a campaign working with local traders aiming to drastically reduce the number of plastic bags used in the town. As part of the Cumbria Green Build Festival, PACT recently staged a Home Energy Fair, to promote practical cost-effective improvements which can be made to reduce the energy consumption of Eden housing. These examples are all part of PACT's enthusiasm to make a positive contribution to the short and long-term health and vitality of the town, and the community that it serves.

At the core of the 'Transition' process is the need to develop an 'Energy Descent Action Plan', moving towards a more 'resilient' community, lifestyle and economy which are far better placed to deal with the very real challenges that lie ahead. On a global scale these main challenges are:

- Rapidly growing world population, estimated to reach 9 billion by 2050.
- Rapidly growing demand for the world's increasingly scarce resources, including energy, food, water, and raw materials.
- Peak oil – the fact that the global discovery and supply of oil has already passed its peak, and that a move towards an alternative non-oil-based energy economy is urgently needed.
- Climate change – there is now an overwhelming consensus amongst the world's scientific community that manmade climate change is occurring at an escalating rate. It is now widely held that we must reduce our current CO2 emissions by 90% by the year 2030, if we are to have any chance at all of bringing runaway climate change under control.
- Even setting aside the science, the evidence that the world is increasingly living far beyond its means is clear and irrefutable to any observer.

These global challenges will test the resilience of communities worldwide, and will require massive changes in the way the world operates. **Here in Eden, Penrith will face the same challenges,** particularly testing the security of our local supplies of vital commodities such as energy and food, and our ability to cope locally with increasingly severe conditions such as economic upset, unstable weather patterns, and energy shortages. As small recent examples of what is ever more likely to occur, the effects of the UK fuel protests in 2000 and the wide-scale floods in 2007 exposed the fragility of the way in which many key services are delivered to parts of the UK. These included direct impacts on food supplies, given that currently most supermarket supply chains are totally reliant on long-distance 'just-in-time' deliveries to maintain stocked shelves. Such 'shock' situations are likely to become more frequent, prolonged and extreme in nature, as a direct consequence of the global issues referred to above.

The prospects for the next twenty to thirty years mean that the transition which needs to be made is inevitable, whether forced or willingly. This transition can be exceedingly painful, or it can be eased by engagement and wise decision-making at all levels from the outset. It is vital therefore, that both the community and the elected leadership of the district come together to recognise these changes, and plan for a more resilient and sustainable future for Eden.

- **Analysis of the problem**

PACT does recognise that the Council faces a dilemma. Penrith already has the appearance of a community in decline. The commercial and business areas of the town look dowdy and tired, with poorly-maintained buildings, shop units closing, and littered streets.

Following the current demise of the New Squares development, something has to be done to make safe and - as a minimum - landscape the abandoned site. Even this minimal work will cost money and critically deny the Council an ongoing income stream. The current precarious state of the Council's finances and the ongoing financial pressures that the Council will face are acknowledged, and we thus appreciate why the Sainsbury's scheme with its financial "get of jail card" seems so attractive. **However we believe that there are alternatives**, some of which we have listed below.

- **Alternatives which seek to resolve the above issues**

The primary need is to **minimise costs and generate additional income.** We believe this can be done by a combination of the following:

- **Allow Booth's** to build their new supermarket. It is better located to support the existing town centre, it is of a more appropriate size and will thus not threaten existing income streams from business rates within the town, and it will generate some additional income. Its policy of buying local will also help local business to grow,

supporting employment and thereby income streams into the future.

- **Build more houses on the New Squares site** rather than flats, in conjunction with Housing Associations but as part of an holistic eco-development which looks at the energy efficiency of particular housing types and micro technologies. The homes would be linked to an educational and training centre which uses real-time data from the different houses to help visitors identify their best options. This could be a real draw for visitors to the town as energy efficiency moves to the top of the political agenda and would, if properly undertaken, become the Centre for Alternative Technology in the north, drawing interest from as far afield as Manchester, Glasgow and the north-east. This footfall would in turn encourage the establishment of firms building and selling these technologies and thus generate additional business rate income and employment.

The secondary requirement is to make existing businesses more profitable and distinctive, and to invest in the existing town centre, using the following examples:

- **Provide better public transport provision** - encourage community-run transport and 'car clubs'; introduce a 'Park and Ride' scheme.
- **Enhance the existing town centre** - through the introduction of street furniture and trees. Close Devonshire Street to vehicles, initially on market day, Saturday and during the peak holiday season.
- **Enhance the market with an emphasis on locally grown and made products.**
- **Create more green spaces**, plant many more trees, encourage allotments, enabling Penrith to be promoted as 'The Green Town of Cumbria'.
- **Actively support existing shops** through training, business support, and subsidies for new shops. It is also critical for the Council to

actively seek to attract “niche market” shops to Penrith with the same enthusiasm as it pursued the New Squares development.

- **Promote Penrith** as a sustainable tourism hub for the Eden Valley and the Lake District, and as a destination for bus tours, cycling and walking routes, adventure holidays, etc.
- Require shops and owners of town centre properties to **maintain buildings in character**.
- Do much more to **remove litter** and to penalise individuals for dropping litter; combat noise pollution, especially from cars and motor cycles.
- Run more **cultural and public art events** over the summer, and identify activities that cater for those in their teens, and for older people; explore ways to ensure that the additional footfall generates money for the local economy.
- **Prioritise communication with local organisations, stakeholders and individuals**, in conjunction with the ‘Vitality of Penrith’ group, to create and promote a programme of active participation in the corporate care of the town, from litter-picking to improving the many existing ‘grot spots’, the external cleaning and painting of buildings, increasing and helping to maintain planted areas, etc., fostering an ethos of shared responsibility and the attendant civic pride that this will engender. PACT does not see these problems as the sole responsibility of the Council, and would welcome the opportunity to work in partnership with the Council and others, to strengthen the community relationships that will be necessary to achieve these ends.

Conclusion

Our current analysis means that PACT cannot support the New Squares development as proposed, because we do not believe that it is either sustainable, or in the best long term interests of the town. We recognise that whilst the proposals suggested above do not give the immediate cash injection to the Council' budget deficit offered by

Sainsbury's, they do give a better long term solution which will preserve and enhance the essential character of Penrith. The proposals will also create new homes, businesses and enterprise and thus generate additional income for both the Council and the local economy. Critically however they will also help to position Penrith so it can face the challenges posed by climate change and life in a post-oil economy, with greater confidence.

For more information on PACT, please visit our website
www.penrithACT.org.uk