

## Press Statement

Bach Homes Locarno Limited (BHL) has today published a factual account of the last 10 years efforts to regenerate the Locarno site in Old Town. The full detailed account is available to view on the security hoarding in front of the Locarno or [www.thelocarno.com](http://www.thelocarno.com) or the websites of the Swindon Advertiser and Swindonweb.

Steve Rosier a director of BHL said,

"We decided to produce and publish the factual account after reading the Old Town Conservative Councillors 2011 election leaflet. Under the heading "Locarno Update" Councillor Mike Bawden says.

*"This is the most significant historic site available for redevelopment in Old Town. We must find the solution for the benefit of local residents, businesses and Swindon generally"*

A somewhat surprising statement given he has been championing the Locarno cause for the last 10 years. Councillor Mike Bawden did after all say on 20 November 2001.

*"We've got the Old Town area motoring very nicely at the moment, so we can't afford to miss this opportunity to finally sort this one out and it is better to do something with the Locarno now than let it get even more rundown."*

The Councillors election leaflet goes on to reassure the public.

*"Following the recent refusal by the Planning Committee of the latest proposal to develop this site, Fionuala Foley, Brian Mattock and Mike Bawden will continue to seek a solution to redevelop this area in line with the expectations and aspirations of the Swindon community."*

Another remarkable and purely political statement; with no mention of the solution which secured planning approval in September 2008, or the hotel based scheme (the recent refusal) when the planning appeal succeeds, or why they have not communicated with Gael Mackenzie the owner of the building following their latest "U" turn in January 2011, or why after 10 years a new design brief is required which will be the third one since they started, or why BHL are suing SBC.

The expectations and aspirations of the Swindon community are pretty obvious; everyone wants to see the area regenerated without using public money and as quickly as possible. The public deserve to know why after 10 years of involvement these Councillors have failed Swindon. Hence we are releasing the facts regarding the Locarno over the last 10 years.

BHL became involved with the Locarno in late 2006. We are aware of the importance placed by the people of Swindon on the Locarno. It is after all just like the Mechanics Institute one of the most important historic buildings now left in Swindon. The factual account on the Locarno may not be the only reason why Swindon has lost so many historic buildings, but it may give an insight on what is always the common factor, Swindon BC and our elected Councillors.

The saying, "if you don't know where you are going, you will probably end up somewhere else" would be a fair assessment of our dealing with SBC Officers and Councillors. It would not be unreasonable to expect SBC to have a vision statement or a master plan for improving Old Town, but there is none and no joined up thinking exists. Clearly a better overall result is achieved if we all understand where

we are going and do so in the same direction. The SBC approach is a little more shall we say, “off the hip”, influenced by local elections and / or popularity!

In 2002 SBC Councillors approved a design guide for the Locarno which proposed two 12 storey towers. Councillor Mike Bawden reported in the Advertiser on 29 November 2002 saying.

*“He expected work to begin within the next 12 months”.*

When we got involved in late 2006 a new design guide had been approved supporting two 7 storey buildings and on submitting our planning application in accordance with this design guide, Councillor Mike Bawden says on 19 August 2007.

*“We have constantly tried to save some very important buildings in Old Town which are of importance in borough terms as well. “The three ward councillors are recommending this revised scheme following consultation.”*

Planning approval was granted in September 2008 but a start on site delayed by the banking crisis and economic recession.

On the 8 February 2011 our planning application was refused for a hotel based scheme. This proposal was of identical height and massing to the 2008 approved scheme. Councillor Mike Bawden had changed his mind again and instructed the planning officers to produce a 3<sup>rd</sup> and brand new design guide, this time restricting building heights to 3 storeys. On the 9 February 2011 Councillor Mike Bawden says.

*“The Locarno is going to sit there until we find a solution for it”.*

The problem Councillor Bawden is not about finding the solution, there is one, it has planning approval and can commence in 18 months. The only problem rests entirely with SBC and is about inconsistency, lack of leadership, no vision, poor management, no urgency, and indecision. So despite the many words said by Councillor Mike Bawden, who has championed the Locarno cause over the last 10 years, there is no real determination, commitment or professionalism to make things happen for the good of the people of Swindon.

SBC own the car parks whilst Gael Mackenzie (GM) owns the old buildings / ruins. The proposals require both land owners to work together if the regeneration of the Locarno is to happen. This is understood by SBC and underlined on 15 March 2002 when Councillor Mike Bawden said.

*“I'm delighted we've got as far as we have in terms of doing a deal with Mr Mackenzie for development of this area”*

Almost four years later on 27 December 2005 when saying.

*“I am hoping and praying that a deal can finally be struck between Swindon Council, Mr Mackenzie and Countryside Properties. But I can't rest easy until pen touches paper.”*

It is astonishing given the importance SBC placed on doing a deal with GM; they have never discussed their latest “U turn”, or the need for a new design guide with him. Instead they made a

unilateral decision for the benefit of whom.....is questionable? When asked about the dilapidations of the buildings on 11 February 2011 Councillor Mike Bawden says.

*“We could do to him (Gael Mackenzie) what we did to Mr Singh (owner of the Mechanics’ Institute)”*

Let’s set aside for now the £600,000 plus of Swindon tax payers’ money poured into the Mechanic fiasco, which will not be recovered by SBC. Instead let’s consider the facts about the Locarno.

1. GM planning application was refused in 2000 by SBC when the buildings were still in reasonable condition and functional.
2. GM was asked to join with SBC to regenerate the combined land holdings in 2001.
3. GM was supportive of the first design brief produced by SBC in 2002. This would have allowed two 12 storey towers.
4. GM was supportive of the second design brief produced by SBC in 2006. This followed public concern on the first design brief and reduced the building height to 7 storeys.
5. GM was supportive of the 7 storey scheme which was unanimously approved by the planning committee in September 2008.
6. GM has never been consulted but is certainly not supportive of developing a third design brief for 3 storey buildings, or indeed starting the process again.
7. GM considers developing the scheme which has planning approval which could start in 2013 is the best and quickest solution available now. Should a planning appeal prove successful on the hotel planning refusal, this scheme could commence earlier.

It is difficult to understand why GM would now be responsible for any future dilapidations of the buildings. After all it was not him who did a major U turn or walked away from the partnership.

GM and BHL remain in contract and have agreed to the following course of joint action.

1. Lodge an appeal against the refusal of the hotel scheme, which we are confident will secure planning approval.
2. Submit a renewal application on the scheme with planning permission which would otherwise lapse in September 2011. If this was refused it will be appealed with complete confidence.
3. If necessary discharge the prestart planning conditions of the approved scheme and make a material start on site which would preserve the approved planning permission in perpetuity.
4. Invite SBC to re-engage with the partnership they once thought essential.

Should SBC not re-engage with the established partnership and the building falls down. It will not be Gael Mackenzie to blame but a nightmare created one day in January 2011 by our Councillors. There is a time in life when people have to recognise they are no longer capable of what they once might have been and best to allow others the opportunity to lead. We consider this time has arrived for Councillor Mike Bawden and perhaps a few others if Swindon really is to be Forward Swindon.”

Steve Rosier  
Director  
Bach Homes (Locarno) Limited