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*The Mayfair Voice*

*The heart of Mayfair*

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Some Thoughts from The Chairman

The last twelve months do not seem to have produced any lessening in the longer term environmental dangers to our neighbourhood. Indeed, with the increased pressure to pedestrianise Oxford Street, these dangers would appear to be increasing.

The sources of these dangers are of course “The usual suspects” – landowners (such as Grosvenor Estate), Transport for London, The New West End Company, The Mayor of London and Westminster Council.

As far as I can tell, all these bodies share one common belief about the future for Mayfair and the West End as a whole. This is that their primary and overriding objective is to create and sustain a vibrant economy for the area primarily based upon an expansion of mass-shopping.

Whilst no one could possibly argue with the desire to create a vibrant West End Economy, I would like to suggest that the belief that this could be achieved primarily through mass-shopping is fatally flawed, and must inevitably fail.

My reasoning behind this point of view is twofold.

First, from what I have seen so far, the mass-shopping protagonists appear to have under- estimated the real and growing impact of on-line shopping.

But secondly, perhaps the more strategic flaw in this mass-shopping reasoning is that, by definition, it devalues and may well ultimately destroy the brand values of West End areas such as Mayfair, Soho and Marylebone.

These areas symbolize the heterogeneity of London’s’ West End which is why people are attracted to visit, work and indeed live here. The West End is indeed a special place, unique perhaps amongst the great cities of the world. This specialness is one of the key reasons as to why businesses and wealthy individuals continue to pay premium rents to be located here.

All brand values are ultimately based upon products. In the case of these West End areas, the product consist not just of the bricks and mortar of the local buildings, but ultimately in the particular character of the residential and business communities located in each area.

The Oxford Street pedestrianisation proposals have the potential to ultimately destroy all of this. One glimpse of what could well happen can be seen in Brook Street where the widening of pavements to cope with an envisaged greater post-Crosssrail and post-pedestrianisation pedestrian footfall, plus the introduction of two way traffic, has led to this quiet elegant street being transformed into a mini-Oxford Street, with traffic congestion, commercial vehicles parked on the pavements, and no apparent commercial gain to the neighbourhood.

It is therefore my belief that the Oxford Street proposals have to be rejected as they stand if there is to be any chance of retaining the special nature of the West End brand and to avoid our whole area being homogenised into a kind of suburban shopping mall.

In such a gloomy scenario, the question to be asked is why would people want come into such a suburban West End, devoid of most of its historic personality and charm, unless they really had to?

I don’t think that they would..

After several decades of working in Advertising, Marketing , and New Product Development, I have never seen an example of commercial success emanating from a devaluation of a brand’s status – and that is exactly what is being proposed in this Pedestrianisation/Mass Shopping model for the West End. Time and time again what I have seen is commercial failure from such a strategy– and that is what will happen on this occasion.

I would ask the proponents of this model to call a halt and have a rethink. We can all agree that what we would like is a sustainable and vibrant economy for our areas. But it doesn’t have to be based on a single model does it?

If, for example, diversity and community sustainment, were to be included in the agenda for the future for our areas (which they appear not to have been so far) then I believe a completely different and much more productive debate would result –particularly with regard to small businesses which have suffered badly in our areas in recent year.

On behalf of the MRG I would like to ask the principal advocates of the Pedestrianisation of Oxford Street, and its associated mass shopping consequences, to put a hold on the current drive for immediate short term action and instead enter into more open and informed discussions with local West End communities.

Specifically, real statistical evidence has to be provided

* How many extra shoppers are expected as a result of any pedestrianisation, and why this might occur
* What scale of extra retail turnover in Oxford Street might be expected from any pedestrianisation
* How many extra shoppers are expected in the West End as a result of the new Crossrail link at Bond Street?
* What scale of extra retail turnover is expected in the area because of this new Crossrail link?

It is only on the basis of having this ‘hard’ information that a sensible dialogue can be held about how best to achieve the shared aim of a sustainable and vibrant economy for our West End areas.

Let’s hope that such a dialogue can be created in the early part of 2018.

Ron Whelan

Chairman