

Great ideas require solid investment

STUDENT residences, an arts and crafts complex and a House of Bruar-type tourist attraction are amongst the ideas suggested for Inverness city centre today by Mike Smith, manager of the city's Business Improvement District.

Writing in this newspaper, he argues that more must be done to meet the needs of tourists and believes the forthcoming development brief being drawn up jointly by BID and Highland Council should boldly point the way forward.

Key to the success of the initiative are talks planned with developers to find out what is blocking private investment in the city centre. A lack of available sites is one obstruction, but Mr Smith thinks that more public backing might also be required to kick start the major projects envisaged. He points to Glasgow where, despite the massive infrastructure investment in preparation for the Commonwealth Games, public agencies are still having to incentivise developers.

So where would this financial support come from? Certainly Highlands and Islands Enterprise ought to become involved. Having chosen to invest heavily in the out-of-town education campus at Beechwood, it must acknowledge the effect this will have on the centre and begin to redress the balance.

More controversially, Mr Smith wants the Inverness Common Good Fund to release cash to help attract private investment. This is less straightforward, with a danger of the fund replacing national and local government investment rather than adding to it.

Already the pot of gold handed down by previous town fathers is coming under increasing pressure to support schemes and events previously backed by the local authority. For example, some are asking why it cannot be used to keep Inverness Museum and Art Gallery open during the winter when it has recently made a substantial donation to the Highlanders' Fort George Museum appeal. The answer is that the city museum is a council-funded facility and it is not up to the Common Good Fund to bail it out.

If the trustees declare at the outset their readiness to back city centre developments there may be less chance of securing grants from the government and agencies such as HIE. Instead the fund should remain in the background, ready to support individual projects as a backer of last resort. A white knight, not a milch cow

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