

**PUBLIC AND BUSINESSES URGED
TO GET INVOLVED IN CAMPAIGN**

New bid to transform Inverness city centre

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(front page)

BY CHERYL LIVINGSTONE

An ambitious new campaign to transform Inverness city centre into a magnet for retailers, business and tourists was launched yesterday.

The aim is to maximise the Highland capital's natural assets including the River Ness and pave the way for new developments and cement its role in the north economy.

The sheriff and district courts could be moved from Inverness Castle to open it up as a visitor attraction.

The "carbuncle" former Crofters Commission HQ on Upper Bridge Street could be demolished and the vacant BT building in Friars Lane could be redeveloped.

And one of the project's major goals is to increase the

number of shoppers using the city-centre and help the "old town" compete with out-of-town retail parks.

Highland Council, in partnership with Inverness Business Improvement District (Bid), want the public, developers and businesses to help create a masterplan by setting out their views.

Inverness Bid manager Mike Smith said it is vital the city makes the most of its riverfront and could take a lead from Dundee - which regenerated itself around Captain Scott's Discovery.

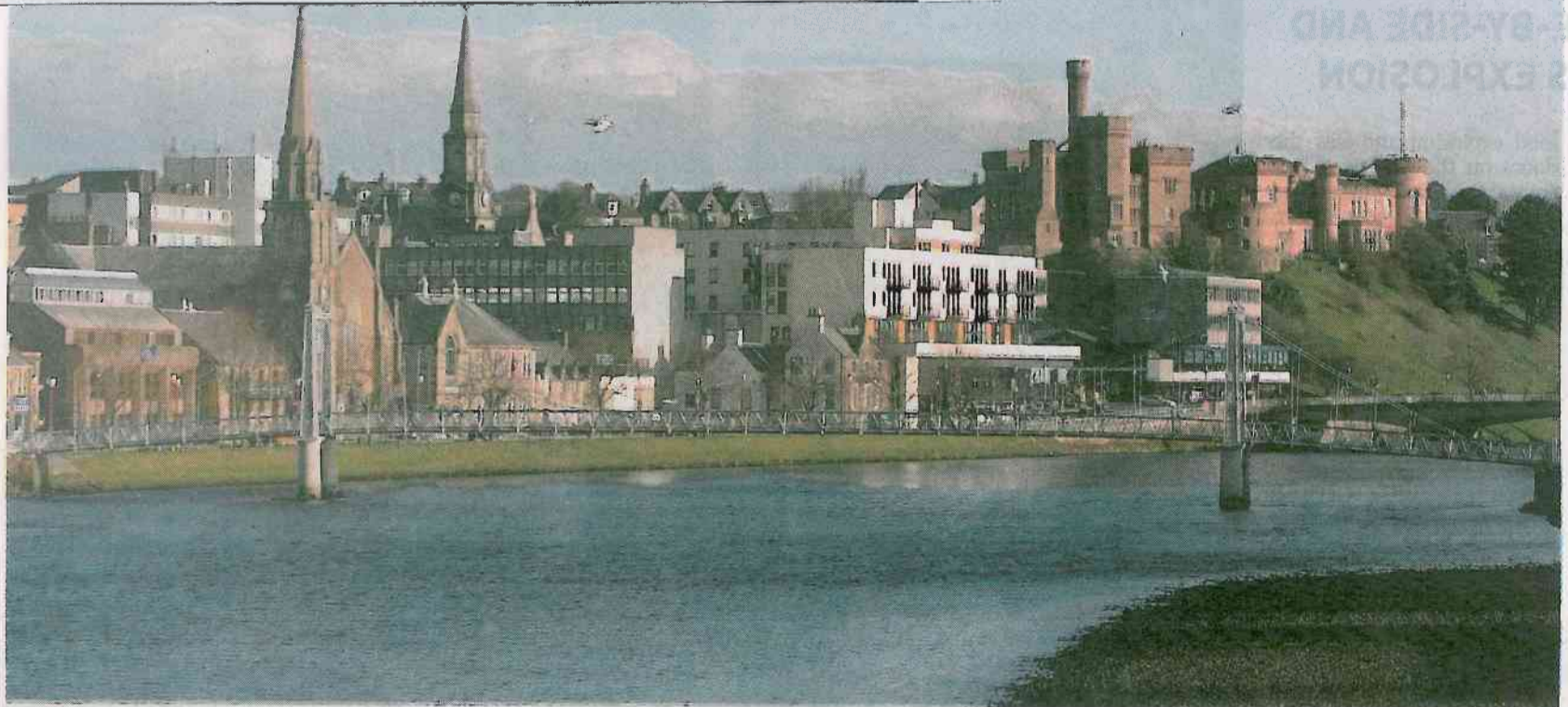
He said: "We need to exploit our unique selling point which is our riverfront. We need to find these opportunities in our city-centre and put them into practice."

Part of the brief will include looking at developments in other Scottish cities and finding out why investors are not coming to Inverness.

Mr Smith added: "Apart from the Strothers Lane flats and the conversion of the former Safeway into four retail units in Rose Street, there hasn't really been any major investment in the city centre. I think it's because developers cannot see the financial return they need to get to develop here. We need to look at that and address it."

Highland Council's development plans manager Malcolm Macleod said a vital part

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ON THE WATERFRONT: The riverside area of Inverness, hailed as the city's greatest asset, basked in winter sunshine yesterday. Photograph: Sandy McCook

Ambitious campaign launched to transform Inverness city centre

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of the project would be assessing sites and working with potential developers.

He said: "The former BT building is a very big and dominant building and there are opportunities coming up on that."

"There is also Inverness Castle where people constantly point out that it has more potential than it is currently being used for, and so we are looking at possibly

relocating the court service and trying to make more of its tourist opportunities."

Other areas which will be considered include the Upper Bridge Street site, owned by Tulloch boss David Sutherland, and the site of the former Inverness Swimming Baths in Glebe Street.

Further expansion of the recently-completed £6million streetscape project, environmental improvements, transport enhancements and

links to the green spaces and waterfront from the Ness Islands to the harbour will also be part of the development brief.

Mr Macleod added: "The recent Streetscape improvements outside Riva and McNabs in Ness Walk shows what the riverside can be like. We need to be in a position where we have a strategy in place so that if opportunities do come up, we are able to deal with them."

Inverness Provost Jimmy Gray, a member of the Bid board, urged the public to contribute to the debate about what they want to see happen in the city-centre.

He said: "By planning ahead and putting in place a framework for development, we will be in a stronger position to attract investment to the city centre."

"A strong Inverness city centre will mean a strong Inverness, and contribute to

strengthening the Highlands as a whole."

Bid chairman Craig Duncan said: "We believe the development brief is essential to future prosperity and growth in the city centre. We see this initiative as bringing new opportunities within the retail, office, leisure and property sectors, which will further enhance the area and in turn bring a greater numbers of shoppers and pedestrians into the heart of Inverness."