

New ‘Cathedral Square’ Development divides the City



Sacred Heart Cathedral in Bendigo on Red Wednesday. Photo: Dane Van Der Werf

By Dane Van Der Werf

This week, the Catholic Diocese of Sandhurst will submit a planning application to develop the High Street site adjacent to Sacred Heart Cathedral, unlocking its potential to fund the Cathedral's long-term preservation.

In a briefing for Cathedral precinct residents on 18 March, Bishop Shane Mackinlay detailed plans for a three-story office block and answered questions, attempting to quell any scepticism from Bendigo locals.

The Very Reverend Father Brian Boyle, Administrator of the Cathedral, views the plans as a necessary change to modernise and accommodate the growing needs of the Diocese.

"It's a remarkable opportunity to maximise the architectural and religious significance of Sacred Heart Cathedral," Fr Brian pointed out.

Coined 'Cathedral Square', the four-story building will include commercial offices for diocesan Chancery staff and the Catholic Education Office, as well as a small Parish

Hall. It will also include retail outlets, a café and a chocolaterie opening out to a large terrace with views of the Cathedral.

The move comes as part of the Church's attempts to ensure financial sustainability in light of the consistently [declining number of Bendigo residents identifying as Catholic](#).

"Maintaining a 125-year-old Gothic revival Cathedral can be expensive," Fr Brian explained. "The income generated from the commercial facilities will contribute towards this ongoing cost."

The current site is one of Bendigo's most prominent landmarks, [attracting an estimated 100 thousand visitors each year](#).

The announcement likely won't come as a surprise to many residents, however. This is not the first time a proposal has been made to overhaul the site in the physical and symbolic heart of Bendigo.

In 2016, the Aspire Foundation proposed the 'Aspire Precinct', a development which included cafés, retail outlets, office facilities and most notably, a controversial multi-faith museum intended to be a tonic to the 2015 Bendigo Mosque protests.

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Despite dismissing the City of Greater Bendigo's requirement to provide an additional 40 car parks, the 'Aspire Precinct' successfully defended a VCAT appeal by Bendigo residents to stop the development.

Scheduled to begin in 2019 [at the cost of an estimated \\$15 million](#), the motion, however was abandoned after it failed to receive Federal Government funding.

In contrast, the 'Cathedral Square' development is expected to be funded entirely by the Sandhurst Diocese itself.

For Ruth Lawlor, a former diocesan Youth Ministry Coordinator and Cathedral parishioner, the new plans represent a missed opportunity and a regression from the Aspire Precinct's initial plans, which prioritised faith and social amenity.

"It's shifted away from Church as community to church as business," Ruth commented, "Whether the church funds are being best used is another matter."

According to Ruth, the 'Cathedral Square' proposal is sorely lacking in social amenity and is guilty of prioritising money over mission.

"Rather than a commercial establishment, I would have liked to have seen some form of social enterprise occupying that space," Ruth explained. "We need to walk the talk and be actively reaching out to our community, especially to those in need."

"The development will involve the demolition of all the existing Cathedral Hall and the 'old paint shop', which, thank God, is no great loss," quipped Fr Brian.

Responding to the lack of protest from residents, Ruth suggested, "When you neglect a building for twenty or so years, it may just be a case of people being grateful for any type of improvement."

As it stands, the parish hall and commercial building coexisting with the Cathedral are in a state of disrepair.

Ruth suggests the Diocese could have consulted with parishioners before developing the new plans for what she considers to be a commercial building. "They've kept it secret until now, presenting it as a done deal until they're ready to lodge to the City," she claims, noting that the Aspire Precinct proposal divided parishioners.

"I think it will be really interesting to see how the Bendigo people react to the announcement, when they realise what this *actually* means," Ruth states.

As the Diocese approaches its 150th anniversary, much of the local concern exhibited at Bishop Mackinlay's briefing revolved around maintaining the integrity of the Cathedral, not simply as a religious monument, but as a cultural hub for Bendigo and its residents.

Several residents also took aim at the scale of the four-story proposal, fearing it will overshadow the Cathedral's historic façade and ruin Bendigo's iconic skyline. "The architectural plans intend to enhance the site, rather than hide the Cathedral," Fr Brian reassured.

The towering Neo-Gothic Cathedral was born from a design by architect William Tappin, who won a diocesan competition in 1885. Funded by local Catholics, the grand structure took nearly a century to complete, with work grinding to a halt several times before finally wrapping up in 1977.

If approved by the City of Greater Bendigo, the 'Cathedral Square' development could be finished by late 2026.

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