



World Tourist Attractions Ltd

1<sup>st</sup> May 2009

Dear Mr McNaney

Wheel of Belfast

I am writing to you to ask Belfast City Council to agree to an extension of the Belfast Wheel until the end of 2012. We would intend, if the Council approved the use of its land, to request an extension to the Belfast Wheel planning consent in conjunction with the Department of Social Development. But before we can do this we would require Belfast City Council's authorisation as landlord of the wheel site before we submit the application to the Northern Ireland Planning Service.

I have laid out compelling reasons as voiced by many passionate supporters and city centre stake-holders for the wheel to remain in its current temporary location, in the grounds of Belfast City Hall, for another 24 months and in particular during the current economic crisis.

Furthermore, in 'sequential planning' terms, we have examined a number of other sites in the city over a period of time as potential alternative locations for the Wheel of Belfast. Unfortunately none of them meet our stringent criteria for an attraction of this type which as I'm sure you will be aware represents a substantial financial risk on the part of WTA – we cannot construct a wheel in a site where we believe there is insufficient footfall to justify our initial investment.

In addition, we have been advised by local interested parties of overwhelming cultural, commercial and economic reasons for keeping the wheel in its current position at City Hall, even after its scheduled reopening in September. Indeed, it could be argued that from the point of view of City economic vitality and footfall, the city centre can ill-afford to lose an attraction of this kind.

These concerns are shared by Neil Gordon, the Chair of the Economic Activity Action Group of Belfast City Centre Management and represent the views of key retailers;

*"As a group of retailers who have made a significant investment in Belfast city centre and appreciating the large public sector investment, I am extremely concerned that footfall levels are maintained in the current declining economic climate. As a major tourist attraction, the Belfast Wheel in its current location is a significant asset to the local business economy. To move this attraction away from its current position in the retail core is a huge mistake and would only increase the hardship being felt by the business community.....I think we would all agree these are unprecedented times and therefore we must do all we can to protect our city centre economy."*

This view is shared by Sammy Wilson MP MLA, who is "appalled that the Northern Ireland Environment Agency is suggesting that it [the wheel] has to be removed....It is important that there should be a huge lobby on this issue to ensure that the Planners come to the right decision."

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Quite apart from the economic benefits of the wheel at Belfast City Hall, we believe that we are able to make a robust argument to the planners particularly countering NIEA's objections. In terms of the heritage impact, our other wheel sites have ranged from the Grounds of a Grade 1 listed Royal Palace – Windsor Castle – to a World Heritage Site at the Royal Naval College in Greenwich as well as Trentham Gardens on the listed Trentham Estate in Staffordshire.

We believe that the graceful and elegant design of our wheels can fit in harmoniously with exciting public spaces and distinguished architecture, such as the restored Belfast City Hall. Our wheels also give ordinary members of the public the chance to see local and familiar architecture from a completely different angle; something that we would expect that many people will want to do, once the City Hall reopens to the public, and if granted planning consent to remain, we will be happy to encourage and promote the freshly restored City Hall.

We will also be countering NIEA's contention that the wheel is a 'permanent structure' and therefore contrary to planning regulations. As has been demonstrated on numerous occasions the unique transportable design of the R60 wheel means that it can be dismantled in around 7 days and relocated on a new site in less than 10.

From a cultural perspective the arguments for keeping the wheel where it is are much less contentious. One of Belfast's leading architects and City Planners, Arthur Acheson, is in no doubt about the importance of the wheel as both a symbol and economic magnet;

*"There is no doubt that the Wheel has become a significant part of our skyline; it has a strongly recognisable public presence and I firmly believe that we must allow our heritage to rub shoulders with the modern city (including embracing heritage buildings). To move this attraction away from its current position in the heart of the city could be seen as a huge mistake for our evolving city image....this is one example where heritage, tourism, environment and economy come together for the good of the City".*

It is widely recognised that the wheel has become a symbol of Belfast's resurgence to the World at large as is often featured in documentaries, news articles, TV clips and in major advertising campaigns for brands such as Guinness, BMI Baby airlines and the Tourism Industry.

The extent to which the wheel has become a symbol for hope on the Belfast skyline was reflected recently when an award-winning BBC drama about reconciliation in the province in the wake of the troubles, starring Liam Neeson and James Nesbitt, featured the wheel in one of its climactic sequences.

The public love it too – The Wheel of Belfast was voted Visitor Attraction of the Year in 2008 in the 7UP/Go Belfast magazine and annual awards ceremony. On its commercial impact and benefit to

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Northern Irish and Belfast tourism the feeling is equally unanimous – Nigel Dodds, Economy Minister for Northern Ireland said:

“We talk about innovation, we talk about imagination, and I think it’s a good example in terms of tourism. It shows what a little bit of innovation and imagination can bring.”

Our wheels have a proven track-record of benefiting local retailers and businesses in addition to creating new jobs. The president of the Belfast Chamber of Commerce has recognised this and has given the wheel in its current position at City Hall his full support, a view for which he has overwhelming backing from his members.

Additionally, independent research conducted by VisitYork demonstrated that our Yorkshire Wheel at the National Railway Museum became a specific justification for day-trippers to visit York instead of Leeds. Once in York, the day-trippers would typically then combine the visit with a shopping trip. We believe that the Wheel of Belfast has similar pulling power.

In addition, over the full year the wheel employs up to 30 individuals, some in management positions. We also work with local suppliers, charities, retailers and tourism-related enterprises, implementing joint promotions and cross-marketing with many businesses with a view to raising the profile and driving visitor traffic to all involved including Stenaline, Iceland foods and BT.

In conclusion, we urge Belfast City Council to support our planning application for an extension of the wheel in its current location at Belfast City Hall on the grounds that we are confident that it can continue to deliver the following benefits for the city;

- An additional attraction and enhancement for the grounds of the newly-restored City Hall
- Boosted tourism numbers for the city centre
- New jobs and benefits to the local economy
- Significant PR, media interest and footfall of significant benefit to local businesses and Belfast’s public profile.

If you require any further clarification on any of the above points, please don’t hesitate to contact me directly.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "E L Hall", written over a light blue horizontal line.

Elliot Hall  
Chairman and Chief Executive  
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