Submission on ‘Transforming Downtown Auckland’ (formerly ‘Downtown West’)

30 October 2026

Submission to Auckland Council and Auckland Transport on the Transforming Downtown Auckland Programme

To whom it may concern,

Heart of the City (HOTC) represents businesses and property owners across Auckland's city centre. HOTC welcomes the opportunity to provide feedback on the *Transforming Downtown Auckland* programme. We support the long-term aspiration of creating a more connected, attractive and vibrant downtown that strengthens links between the city centre and waterfront, improves public transport performance, and enhances the experience for Aucklanders and visitors.

HOTC has consistently supported investment in the city centre and recognises the significant benefits delivered by projects such as Te Komititanga and the City Rail Link. However, support for transformational change must be accompanied by rigorous planning, transparent evidence, meaningful stakeholder engagement and practical mitigation measures that protect the economic vitality of the city centre throughout delivery.

Many of the issues raised by HOTC during its last formal consultation on this project in 2024 remain relevant today and have not been satisfactorily answered.

HOTC notes that the current engagement process is framed primarily around understanding how people currently experience downtown, including how they move through the area, what should be protected and what improvements they would like to see. While these are valuable questions, they do not provide business and property stakeholders with a meaningful opportunity to comment on many of the key elements that will ultimately determine the programme's impact, including transport network changes, corridor functionality, traffic circulation, flyover removal, servicing arrangements, construction staging, disruption mitigation measures, or the long-term role of Customs Street within the city centre transport network.

As such, HOTC considers this engagement exercise to be exploratory rather than consultation on a preferred project option. The absence of detailed plans, design drawings, traffic assessments, operational modelling and construction methodologies means stakeholders are currently being asked to provide feedback without sufficient information to fully understand the implications of the programme.

HOTC's feedback should be treated as strategic input identifying matters that require further investigation and resolution as the programme develops. The concerns and recommendations outlined in this submission should be actively considered and incorporated into the business case, concept design, detailed design, construction planning and mitigation framework for the programme.

General Position

HOTC supports the overall objective of improving transport connectivity, public space quality and downtown amenity. However, this support is contingent on:

- Maintaining accessibility by all transport modes.
- Protecting business viability throughout construction.
- Managing cumulative construction impacts across the city centre.
- Ensuring future transport and access arrangements are demonstrably functional before existing infrastructure is removed.
- Learning from previous city centre construction experiences, particularly Queen Street, CRL and Midtown.

The city centre continues to recover from years of disruption. Any future programme must avoid repeating mistakes that have damaged business confidence, significantly reduced economic activity and contributed to the loss of longstanding city centre businesses.

1. Lower Hobson Flyover Removal

HOTC remains concerned about the proposed removal of the Lower Hobson Street flyover. While Council's consultation material presents the flyover removal as a key enabler for improved pedestrian connections, public realm outcomes and urban development opportunities, there has not yet been sufficient publicly available evidence demonstrating that its removal will not compromise accessibility, vehicle circulation, network resilience or the efficient functioning of the wider transport system.

In response to HOTC's previous feedback, Auckland Transport advised that modelling indicated limited impact on network performance and that alternative routes could accommodate redistributed traffic. AT also stated that the flyover would not be removed until alternative network improvements and transport options were operational.

HOTC notes these commitments but considers further evidence is required before a decision is confirmed. Specifically:

- Detailed modelling assumptions and outcomes should be publicly released.
- Real-world operational scenarios should be tested and presented, including event days, freight movements, incidents and peak periods.
- The relationship between flyover removal and surrounding motorway access must be clearly demonstrated.
- The business community should have confidence that proposed replacement movements function effectively in practice, not simply in transport models.

2. Construction Disruption Must Be Planned and Resourced Up Front

The city centre's experience over the past decade demonstrates that disruption cannot be treated as a secondary consideration. Disruption mitigation must be embedded into project planning, design, procurement and funding from the outset, rather than developed reactively once construction is underway.

HOTC supports AT's previous commitment to a "network readiness" approach and coordinated delivery staging. However, experience suggests much greater discipline and accountability is required.

The programme should establish:

- Clear disruption management KPIs.
- Business impact monitoring throughout delivery.
- Requirements for contractors to minimise disruption duration.
- Access management plans for pedestrians, servicing and customers.
- Transparent reporting on disruption performance.

The success of the project should be measured not only by what is delivered, but by how effectively impacts are managed during delivery.

Particular attention must be given to preserving pedestrian permeability and maintaining strong connections between the city centre and waterfront throughout both the construction and operational phases of the programme.

Maintaining Connectivity Between the City Centre and Waterfront

Customs Street is one of downtown Auckland's most important connecting corridors. It sits at the seam between the city centre core, Commercial Bay, the waterfront, Viaduct Harbour and Wynyard Quarter. Its design and construction staging must ensure that it continues to function as a connector rather than becoming a barrier.

HOTC is concerned that, without careful planning, construction activity and eventual corridor design could create a "wall effect" along Customs Street that discourages pedestrian movement between the Queen Street Valley and waterfront precincts. Previous city centre projects have shown that even where pedestrian routes technically remain open, extensive construction zones, narrowed footpaths, wayfinding challenges and perceptions of inconvenience can create significant psychological barriers to movement.

The success of downtown depends on people moving easily and naturally between Queen Street and the Waterfront. Auckland Council should therefore make maintaining pedestrian connectivity a core project objective and establish clear measures for assessing and preserving pedestrian permeability throughout the delivery of the programme.

3. Avoid Hollowing Out - Learn from Midtown

A key lesson from Midtown and CRL construction is that physical transformation can come at an unacceptable economic cost if supporting measures are insufficient.

The programme must avoid a scenario where years of construction result in:

- Vacant premises.
- Reduced foot traffic.
- Declining investor confidence.
- Loss of destination businesses.
- Long-term reputational damage to the city centre.

- Safety issues and concentration of vagrancy emerging from the vacuum left by vacancies

Council should undertake a comprehensive review of CRL/Midtown outcomes to identify lessons relating to:

- Construction staging and disruption mitigation
- Communications.
- Access management.
- Business support effectiveness.
- Economic outcomes.

These lessons should directly inform the Downtown programme. The objective must be to maintain a functioning, attractive and economically active downtown throughout the construction period, not merely after completion.

4. Interaction with Wellesley Street Bus Improvements Stage 2 (WSBI2)

HOTC is particularly concerned about the interaction between the Downtown programme and Wellesley Street Bus Improvements Stage 2. Based on currently indicated timelines, there is a significant likelihood that elements of WSBI2 and Downtown delivery will overlap. The consultation material currently provides limited information regarding how cumulative impacts across multiple city centre projects will be managed. This raises important questions:

- How will traffic circulation function if both programmes affect east-west movement simultaneously?
- How will freight, servicing and customer access be maintained?
- How will bus priority measures interact across multiple corridors during construction?
- What contingency planning is being undertaken for network disruption?
- How will impacts on the wider city centre be assessed collectively rather than project-by-project?

HOTC requests that Council develop and publicly release a comprehensive cumulative impacts assessment covering:

- Downtown West/Customs Street
- WSBI2.
- Downtown Car Park redevelopment.
- Associated utility relocations and investigations.

The city centre experiences disruption cumulatively, not by individual project boundaries.
A coordinated programme-wide management framework is essential.

5. Meaningful Financial Support for Affected Businesses

HOTC has strongly advocated for targeted direct financial assistance for affected businesses throughout the construction period. This must be provided in this project budget, at an appropriate scale.

While Auckland Transport previously advised that delivery budgets may include disruption management measures and potentially 'micro-grants', experience demonstrates that such approaches have historically been insufficient relative to the scale and duration of impacts experienced.

The CRL and Midtown Experience

The business support programmes implemented during CRL construction were well intentioned but ultimately felt like a response to a much larger structural problem.

Key concerns include:

- Direct financial support did not match the scale or duration of disruption.
- Funding levels were materially insufficient relative to the business losses and closures.
- Businesses frequently perceived support measures as symbolic rather than meaningful.
- Significant stakeholder frustration emerged despite mitigation efforts.
- A number of longstanding businesses were lost permanently.

This outcome represents a cost to the city that should not be repeated.

A More Effective Model

The Downtown programme budget should contain a dedicated and meaningful allocation for business support, proportionate to the level of disruption businesses experience.

The programme should include a financial relief package that takes into account business needs. Support mechanisms should include:

- Direct grants scaled according to demonstrated disruption impacts.
- Occupancy support mechanisms
- Business continuity assistance.
- Marketing and customer attraction programmes.
- Support for relocation where necessary.
- Targeted support for hospitality, retail and service businesses most affected by reduced access and foot traffic.

Importantly, disruption mitigation and economic support should be treated as core project components rather than discretionary add-ons.

Social Licence for Delivery

The level and quality of business support directly influences community confidence in the project. Underscaled support programmes risks business failure, reduced stakeholder trust, increased opposition to project delivery and long-term economic damage.

Conversely, meaningful support helps maintain economic activity, preserve jobs and strengthen the project's social licence.

6. Access, Servicing and City Centre Function

HOTC reiterates the importance of maintaining balanced access for all modes.

While improvements to public transport are important, downtown must continue to function effectively for:

- Customers arriving by vehicle.
- Freight and servicing activities.
- Ride-share, taxi and pick-up/drop-off activity.
- Mobility parking users.
- Emergency services.
- Tourism and visitor transport.

We note Auckland Transport's previous commitment to integrated kerbside planning, servicing access and city centre parking management initiatives. These considerations remain critical and must be reflected in design.
The project has implications well beyond the immediate corridor, including its potential impact on perceptions of city centre accessibility. The removal of the Downtown Car Park in particular represents a significant shift and the impact of that cannot be underestimated. These cumulative changes make it essential that servicing, loading, pick-up and drop-off activity, mobility access and short-stay parking are carefully planned for and protected throughout both the construction phase and the long-term operation of the area.

7. Downtown Development and Sequencing

HOTC acknowledges Council's intention to deliver the programme in stages between 2026 and 2031 and to coordinate public realm improvements alongside the Downtown Car Park redevelopment. However, sequencing decisions must prioritise:

- Network resilience.
- Business continuity.
- Construction efficiency.
- Minimisation of repeat disruption.

Works should be bundled and coordinated wherever possible to avoid multiple waves of disruption affecting the same locations over successive years.

8. Transparent Strategic Alignment

HOTC believes it is important that Auckland Council and Auckland Transport are transparent about the strategic framework that is ultimately intended to guide the future development of downtown Auckland.

The consultation material references a number of existing plans and programmes, including the City Centre Bus Plan, while sitting alongside broader frameworks such as Access for Everyone (A4E) and the City Centre Master Plan (CCMP). However, it is currently unclear which aspects of these

frameworks remain the intended direction of travel, which aspects may be evolving, and how the Downtown programme fits within that wider strategic context.
This creates uncertainty for stakeholders attempting to understand both the immediate project and its longer-term implications.

In particular, the consultation material does not clearly articulate the intended future role of Customs Street within the city centre transport network. This is significant because the long-term function of Customs Street has implications for accessibility, servicing, freight movement, business operations, visitor access and the overall functioning of downtown.

In terms of overall city centre planning, there needs to be clarity as to what strategic direction is being adopted, how decisions are being made, and what evidence is informing those decisions.

HOTC requests a review of the City Centre Master Plan and welcomes the opportunity to contribute to that process. We believe it is important that businesses, property owners and city centre stakeholders have an opportunity to help shape the future direction of the city centre and provide feedback on how strategic objectives are balanced with economic vitality, accessibility, servicing requirements and the practical operation of a successful city centre.

As more detailed Downtown proposals are developed, HOTC requests that Auckland Council and Auckland Transport clearly set out:

- The long-term intended function of key downtown corridors, including Customs Street.
- The evidence base supporting those decisions.
- The implications for business access, servicing, freight movement, customer accessibility and city centre operations.

Providing this clarity early will help avoid uncertainty, improve stakeholder confidence and enable more meaningful engagement as both the Downtown programme and the future City Centre Master Plan evolve.

Conclusion

HOTC supports investment in the future of downtown Auckland and shares the aspiration of creating a more connected, prosperous and people-focused city centre.

HOTC notes that the current consultation is being undertaken at a high level, with Auckland Council indicating that more detailed street designs and proposals will not be released until early 2027. As a result, there is currently insufficient information available to fully assess many of the programme's likely impacts and outcomes.

HOTC therefore views this submission as identifying key issues that must be addressed as the project develops. Our ability to support specific proposals will ultimately depend on understanding the detailed plans, operational arrangements, access changes and construction impacts when they are released for consultation in 2027.

Regardless, support for whatever final programme is proposed, will depend on confidence that:

- The overall plan governing city centre access is viable

- Removal of the Lower Hobson flyover will not compromise city centre accessibility or network performance.
- Construction impacts will be proactively managed and minimised.
- Lessons from CRL and Midtown have been genuinely incorporated.
- Cumulative effects from overlapping city centre projects will be properly addressed.
- Meaningful financial support for impacted businesses is embedded within project funding from the outset.
- Downtown and the wider city centre remains economically vibrant throughout delivery and is not hollowed out by prolonged disruption.

The city centre feels on a positive trajectory, but recovery remains fragile and this project must be designed and executed with care in order to not derail that recovery.

The success of 'Transforming Downtown Auckland' should be measured not only by the quality of the completed infrastructure, but also by its ability to sustain the businesses, workers, visitors and communities that give downtown its life during the years required to deliver it.

ENDS

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