

STATES OF JERSEY



PIQUET HOUSE: CANCELLATION OF SALE AND FUTURE USE

Lodged au Greffe on 11th February 2014
by Deputy J.H. Young of St. Brelade

STATES GREFFE

PROPOSITION

THE STATES are asked to decide whether they are of opinion –

to request the Minister for Treasury and Resources –

- (a) not to proceed with the sale of Piquet House, Royal Square, St. Helier as proposed in the Report presented to the States by the Minister in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order 168 on 29th January 2014;
- (b) to investigate and implement suitable alternative uses of the premises for public or community purposes which are compatible with the strategic location of the premises in the Royal Square, including their leasing to community organisations; provided that, if no suitable alternative public or community use can be identified within 12 months, the Minister should offer a lease of the building for commercial purposes, subject to restrictive conditions to ensure the building is conserved and that its future use is compatible with its historic location in the Royal Square.

DEPUTY J.H. YOUNG OF ST. BRELADE

REPORT

1. Introduction

The vast majority of transactions involving States-owned property which are approved by the Minister for Treasury and Resources under the delegated power of Standing Order 168 are routine and non-contentious. However, it was accepted in 2009 by the Minister **that certain transactions would be called in by members to be debated by the States.**

Hansard records Senator Ozouf saying, on **10th March 2009**: “... *property is a very emotive matter for Members ... I will give an undertaking on behalf of myself and the Assistant Minister, who largely makes decisions in this area, that we would not carry through a transaction if a Member were to draw my or my Assistant Minister’s attention to the fact that there is an issue... I think there must be the ability for Members under Standing Order 168(3) to effectively have a debate on it and have a discussion on that ...*”

The proposed sale of Piquet House in the Royal Square for commercial use, without any restrictive covenants being imposed to prevent unsuitable uses in the future, is such a case which requires a States debate. My proposition is intended to enable that debate.

2. Rationale for the Proposition

2.1 Sale of part of Jersey’s Heritage

A decision to sell a unique part of Jersey’s heritage, on land which has for centuries been publicly owned, should not be rubber-stamped by an Assistant Minister but be openly declared and decided by the States Assembly.

This property, which is listed by the Minister for Planning and Environment as a Grade 2 Site of Special Interest, has survived unaltered and is a rare survival of a Georgian military picket house. It was one of 2 picket (*piquet*) houses built in town at that time; the other being at West Park, associated with the garrison at Elizabeth Castle, and now demolished.

Piquet House in the Royal Square was built on public land adjacent to the old meat market in 1803 and according to Jersey Archive, its ownership and use has always been a source of argument and controversy.

Correspondence between the Lieutenant Governor, the Bailiff, the Solicitor General and the Greffier in 1887 reveals that the land was never transferred out of public ownership and, in 1934 the War Office even sought to prevent the States leasing the building to the National Provincial Bank, proposing that their building should remain in public use or requiring recovery of the cost of its building. For a period in the 1880s the building was used as a residence for a married soldier and his family, but again due to objections by the States, the soldier was evicted and this use ceased. There were also arguments over the suitability of the building as an office for the Receiver-General at that time.

Piquet House was originally built by the military in 1803 as a result of an Act of the States of the previous year, which proposed that a detachment of soldiers from the garrison at Fort Regent should be on hand to help the Honorary Police in times of trouble. This would have been during the Napoleonic Wars, when Jersey privateering against French shipping was rife, and St. Helier was populated with a large military and naval presence.

After the defeat of Napoleon, the building continued as a picket house until 1834, when it became a lock-up for a time until the Army Paymaster used it to pay out pensions to retired soldiers. It then became the office for the Registrar of Births, Marriages and Deaths until 1872. From 1887, the Army used it as a picket house once more until 1926.



In Victorian times, Mr. Eli Le Gros, school-master and map-maker, erected a sundial on the southern facade with a rather jingoistic exhortation to the local people to set their timepieces by the Jersey sundial rather than by Greenwich Mean Time (GMT), which was 8 minutes different. Jersey signed up to GMT in 1898. Telling the time accurately only became important with the advent of trains. The speed of trains meant that accurate timetables needed to be drawn up. Standard railway time (GMT) was devised, which standardised time throughout Britain.



In 1934 the Crown relinquished the use of Piquet House; in 1947 the States leased it for 99 years to the National Provincial Bank to allow them to link it to their own adjacent building, 11 Royal Square, which also dates from Georgian times, which they occupied until 1995 when the States acquired this building from the National Westminster Bank.

There are many individual stories to be told about Piquet House, and questions arise by its presence alone. What does it say about life in St. Helier in Georgian and Victorian days? What was it used for during the Occupation years?

I believe it is important for the States to be a reliable custodian of our heritage and that we should not sell pieces of it off to the highest bidder. If we do, where do we draw the line? If we ever have a modern elected Assembly, shall we sell the States building because it is old-fashioned, expensive to run and does not meet modern needs well? If the States are seen to be a bad risk by those making bequests of their property wishing it be conserved for the future, such people will be greatly discouraged by the example of the sale of Piquet House. We have public duty to be a reliable custodian of our heritage.

2.2 Strategic location

The Royal Square is the very heart of Jersey, our civic centre, where we hold our national celebrations, receive royalty, where we transact our property, face the rigours of the courts, and national decisions are debated and major events are held. Rarely does property which fronts on the Royal Square come onto the market. In 1995 the States recognised the strategic importance of this location and purchased 11 Royal Square to add to the complement of public offices, and facilitated the future use of Piquet House to establish a Town Centre Police Station on a permanent basis.

This strategic location was recognised in Victorian times. By 1886, the public buildings surrounding the Royal Square were: the Assembly rooms of the States, the Public Library, the Royal Court, the Police Court and the Greffe Office.

More recently since its acquisition by the States, 11 Royal Square and Piquet House have been used by Parish of St. Helier Registrars and the States of Jersey Police Town Centre Police Station on the ground floor. The upper floors were formerly in use as offices of the Home Affairs Department, until December 2013.

This sale is part of Property Holdings' property plan, to rationalise the existing use of States offices. I support this approach generally, but with major reservations in respect of historic buildings, and I have concerns over short-term thinking. The plan is clearly driven by financial considerations at the expense of longer-term thinking of the public needs for public office space in this central location now and in the future. There are public needs which are currently unfulfilled, and we should also consider opening up the space to community organisations that provide valuable services to the public.

I requested information from the Assistant Minister and Head of Property Holdings of the terms of the proposed sale. I was given the identity of the purchaser in confidence, so I can say publicly only that the buyer is a private company and the intention is for commercial use.

I have been refused information on the price which has been agreed. This is a principle which I consider entirely unacceptable – the public have a right to know. Following

my meeting with the Assistant Minister, I have made enquiries and, within a few hours, was given information on the price believed to have been offered. This information came from a community group who were interested in acquiring the building and discouraged by what they had been told.

Looking at value, 11 Royal Square was acquired by the States in 1995 from the National Westminster Bank for £450,000, plus cancellation of the remaining term of the States' lease of Piquet House for £35,000, for the purpose of establishing a permanent Town Police Station (P.97/1995: 26th July 1995).

As a combined building now offered for sale its basic statistics, i.e. 3,019 square feet of secondary offices over 3 floors, plus 377 square feet, do not suggest a high price without taking the location into account. My figures are entirely speculative, but assuming rental of up to £15 per square foot on secondary offices, plus rental of up to £10 per square foot for storage, would produce a very modest capitalised rental value.

The value arises from the unique location which it is proposed to sell. I have been told the price is £850,000. This price is unconfirmed. If this is true, this suggests the purchase is speculative, as part of a development or change of use. In this case it is selling our heritage for a price.

I believe the Royal Square location at the very heart of the Island's capital has strategic importance, and therefore its value lies not in its open market value which the assistant Minister proposes to realise, but in the potential this building has for public and community uses, all of which make a huge contribution to the quality of life of our community.

2.3 Alternative community uses

As an elected member for the last 2 years, I am very aware of the complete inadequacy of States members' facilities. There is competition for meeting-rooms for political meetings, and security of the States buildings is often off-putting for many citizens who meet privately with members to discuss their confidential problems.

We have a very unequal and fragmented government: Ministers are all provided with offices in different parts of the Island and served by their secretarial and administrative resources, and Assistant Ministers also enjoy similar facilities. Connétables have their own offices, secretarial and administrative support in the parish halls. Scrutiny Chairmen and members have to make do as best they can from their own resources; most non-executive members work from home, or carry their office around with them and have no access to support. This contributes greatly to the dysfunctionality of government and the divisions between members which exist. In the longer term, with the introduction of changes to machinery of government, the need for adequate States members' working facilities has to be addressed.

I also sought external opinions from organisations serving the community. One informed me –

“The ... were surprised that the States was minded to sell office space immediately adjacent to the “heart of Government” as such space might be required in the longer term to help facilitate the workings of the States Assembly.”

Another organisation who was interested in purchasing the building for a local branch for administrative support and to provide facilities for their members, informed me they would have favoured a shared use of the building with the parish of St. Helier and would have discussed their proposal with the Connétable and his Centeniers. They very much liked the idea of Parish Centeniers resuming the traditional function of the Picket House alongside their community use.

Another comment I received was –

“It was felt that Piquet House could be a useful tourist information point as opposed to the current location adjacent to the bus station.”

This could assist tickets sales for major events in Jersey and be a base for town heritage walks.

A government public information or service point might also be considered, including a base for transport (coach, bus enquiries and taxi bookings).

3. Conclusions

The objection to the proposed sale of this building which I have outlined in this report, i.e. the principle of selling a unique part of Jersey’s Heritage in this strategic location, will either be disagreed or agreed by members. My purpose is to have a proper democratic vote on this principle.

In making their decision, I hope members will also consider the arguments I have made for alternative public uses of the building. I accept they may not be universally accepted, and my arguments for the potential for community use of the building are speculative and remain to be proven. However, I believe it important to give this matter enough time to identify and implement a viable alternative. I have therefore proposed a 12 month period for the Minister for Treasury and Resources to either identify an alternative public use or viable community use by lease or licence.

In order not to permanently prevent viable use of this building, I have also proposed that, if such alternative use cannot be identified after 12 months, the Minister for Treasury and Resources should be authorised to offer the building for commercial use, not by sale but by lease, with covenants imposed to ensure the building is conserved and that its use remains appropriate to the historic location of the Royal Square.



Financial and manpower implications

Approval of the proposition will result in the anticipated capital receipt for the sale of the property being foregone. The Assistant Minister for Treasury and Resources and Chief Officer of Property Holdings have refused to disclose the anticipated sale price, so the amount cannot be confirmed. However, the States will continue to own this asset, so there is no financial loss.

Retaining ownership of the property will mean continued liability for property maintenance and outgoings. This expenditure can be offset by rental income which the property is capable of attracting. I would estimate this to be £49,000 per annum if the building is let commercially, with a rental reduction to community organisations; say to £20,000 – £25,000 per annum. If the building is used for public facilities, a budget would be required to fund the rental, which should be met by transfer of the existing budget for rental from the Home Affairs Department. The direct effect is therefore largely financially neutral.

There are no manpower implications.