

Town & Around



An architectural render of the proposed retirement complex, facing on to Maunsell Rd, Parnell

BLIND PRECINCT COMES FULL CIRCLE

The Blind Foundation's land in Parnell is set for a return to accommodation use after a 30-year gap since hostels for older blind people closed. This time, however, the new wave of residents coming to the address will not necessarily have sight problems and they will have bought premium apartments in a retirement village.

The foundation, which has recently renamed its operational side to Blind & Low Vision NZ, has a property arm which has joined with retirement village operator Generus Living to seek resource consent for up to 116 apartments in two new five-storey buildings. The ground floor of one building will become the foundation's head office.

With a footprint of 6449m², the new buildings will fit in the block between the heritage Jubilee Building on Parnell Rd to the south, Maunsell Rd to the north and the Birthcare building on Titoki St to the west.

The new buildings will occupy a quarter of the land known as the 'Foundation Precinct' and in doing so will take the sites of three other structures: Awhina House, which was built in 1996 for the foundation's offices; a former boys' hostel converted to offices, and a 1915 private house which the foundation bought in 2017, on the corner of Maunsell and Parnell roads.

The Maunsell Rd sites have been used previously for residential purposes. Awhina House was built on the site of the 1933 Bledisloe House for elderly blind men, and Birthcare is on the site of Hutchinson House, which housed older women until 1991.

Royal New Zealand Foundation Of The Blind (RNZFB) chair Rick Hoskin told *The Hobson* with the government providing only one-sixth of its income, it has to look to investment properties in order to help fund essential services. The retirement living partnership with Generus, which operates four villages including Ranfurly, in

Three Kings, is making best use of the Parnell land asset without losing ownership of it. The foundation owns all buildings in the precinct, most of them on farmland acquired 130 years ago.

About 15 per cent of its annual income is from Parnell rents, and Hoskin says the proposal allows this to grow without affecting the integrity or curtilage of three Heritage Category 1 buildings in the precinct. "The retirement village scenario, once fully established, will create a rolling income for a protracted period for the Royal New Zealand Foundation for the Blind," says Hoskin.

If consent is granted, a first stage of 46 apartments on the corner of Maunsell and Parnell roads could be ready in two years and all planned building finished in five years. "This is one of the better retirement village sites with Newmarket, Parnell, the Domain and Auckland Hospital so close. The intention is that these apartments will be 6-star quality."

Although the apartments are for anyone of the right age to buy, Hoskin says Blind & Low Vision NZ insists that buildings are fully accessible for blind people, in and outside. The tradition of delivering services to clients from the precinct will continue from the ground floor office. While once the Parnell site and Homai, in Manurewa, served one third of visually-impaired clients, there is a move towards satellite centres in other parts of Auckland to reduce travel. The first small branch was set up in Albany two years ago and others will pop up where services are needed, in the west and south-east.

"With the increasingly ageing population, the number of people with eye conditions is increasing so we are here for the long term and we need to ensure we have the ability to financially sustain the services required," says Rick Hoskin.

In a report to Auckland Council on the effects of the proposed

development, the promoters emphasise that the new building won't come closer than 7m from the Category 1 heritage Jubilee Building and no part of its 1909 red brick Gothic Revival structure will be demolished.

Once the foundation's main building but not used by it since 1992, the Jubilee Building is leased to Auckland Council, which uses it for the Parnell Library and for the headquarters of the Parnell Trust, which runs community programmes and manages venue hire of the rooms and the attached heritage Jubilee Hall. The Parnell Trust also runs the weekly Parnell Farmers' Market, held in the precinct's central carpark.

Asked for comment, both Heritage New Zealand and the Parnell Trust raised concerns about noise from current activities upsetting new residents and prompting restrictions. Parnell Trust chief executive Lyn Fox says the Jubilee Hall must be able to hold night and weekend functions such as weddings, and she hopes the new neighbours will enjoy the community centre on their doorstep, and join activities such as bridge, mahjong and language classes. (Generus Living says the apartments will meet acoustic code and be double-glazed, as the building code requires).

Parnell Community Committee chair Luke Niue says trees in the way of construction access on the Maunsell Rd frontage of the development will be removed. They include big pūriri and, on the street berm, four mature flowering cherry trees. "It would be great if the developer could plant large specimen berm trees to strengthen the unique avenue of trees in this part of Parnell," says Niue. (The developer says five cherry trees will be planted.)

Although the new building is bigger and taller than the Jubilee, promoters say the design of the new buildings is sympathetic to it. The building also must fit in with both the Jubilee Building and the foundation's other nearby Heritage Category 1 building, the Gummer and Ford designed Pearson House, built in 1926 as a hostel for blind working men. It is now part of the ACG Parnell school complex, which fronts Titoki St.

In the report to council, Salmond Reed Architects report "less than minor" effects are expected from infringement to the area of land attached to the Jubilee Building. The new building will have a semi-public ground floor colonnade facing Jubilee's glazed two-storey loggia and will maintain walkways and courtyard spaces. The Jubilee Building will remain clearly visible from the north along Parnell Rd and the bulk of the new building will be softened by setbacks above level three.

The new buildings have references to Jubilee through the use of protruding bays, double height windows, horizontal stone reveals and upper balcony setbacks. The top two levels are lightened by a series of frames to windows and balconies. The long road frontage of the building will be broken up by the listed notable pōhutukawa tree on Parnell Rd, albeit its spreading branches trimmed to stay 2m clear of the building.

The appearance of a five-storey building on the corner will bring a marked change to the low-rise residential character of Maunsell Rd. But the promoters say the more intensive use of the site is in line with the intent of the Auckland Unitary Plan's Business-Mixed Use Zone. It is also in line with its fringe Newmarket location. Boffa Miskell consultants say the introduction of taller and larger-scaled buildings with bigger footprints is to be expected, but the trick is to make the buildings appropriate to their context and to avoid adverse effects. They say the proposal avoids "visual dominance" of the residential street by complying with the height to boundary standards along Maunsell Rd and setting back the upper two levels. One building has a central courtyard and a rooftop garden. Both buildings have basement car parking to give a total of 147 new spaces.

Council could not say whether the consent application would be publicly notified as it is still being reviewed. – *Wayne Thompson* ■

CYCLEWAY OFF ROUTE

Auckland Transport has announced that they have canned the proposed, locally controversial, cycleway along St Stephens Ave and Gladstone Rd, Parnell. The Parnell business and residential community believed the cycleway design was unworkable and too expensive, and after four years of to and fro, AT has ruled it out for the next three years at least, based on cost. Budget blowouts, including undergrounding power lines and new kerbing, saw the estimated cost rocket to \$17 million, far beyond its initial budget of \$4m.

The cycleway was to be a part of a comprehensive network of routes across Auckland that would focus on improving access by bike from suburbs to the city centre. The route was to run from the intersection of St Stephens Ave and Parnell Rd to the intersection of The Strand and Quay St, and would have connected with the Quay St and Tamaki Dr cycleways. It was also the first section of a planned cycle route leading up through to Newmarket and beyond.

The design included a 1.5 metre wide cycle lane on both sides of St Stephens and Gladstone roads, with a 30 centimetre concrete buffer between the cycle and traffic lanes. Existing traffic lanes were to remain the same, while some footpaths were to be widened. Some on-street parking was to be removed, or changed from angle to parallel parking. As part of the overall plan, changes were also to be made to create shorter crossing distances on foot and encourage slower vehicle speeds, including a raised speed table across the intersection of Brighton Rd and St Stephens, and at the intersection of St Stephens, Gladstone and Takutai streets.

While the removal of parking at the Gladstone Rd shops, at Parnell District School and around the cathedral annoyed locals – the then-Dean pointed out that few people arrive for funerals or weddings by bike – some cyclists were also baffled by AT's grand plans.

"If it is not broken, don't bother fixing it," says James Matthews of Remuera, who's been cycling the area for 12 years. "Gladstone Rd is super-wide and already perfect for cyclists to ride safely up and down. Putting in the lanes is completely pointless on that road."

"I think AT when they are designing these cycleways, they need to think about who the cycleways are actually for – commuters or recreational riders? What exactly are they trying to achieve by putting in these lanes, and at high cost?"

Similarly, the business community was also not in favour. Parnell Business Association general manager Cheryl Adamson saying that while the association is supportive of cycleways when "they add value, enhance amenity and do not materially detract from local businesses' ability to operate or restrict patrons", what was planned for Parnell did not tick those boxes.

"We were opposed to what was initially proposed due to the dramatic loss of parking and subsequent impact this would have on affected parties including the hotels, Holy Trinity Cathedral, Parnell District School and the neighbourhood shops and cafes, and the fact that safety risks inherent at two important intersections were not addressed," says Adamson.

"Also, there was absolutely no contribution to enhancing a sense of place, nor increased visual amenities to this heritage precinct."

The business association sees the 'on hold' status as positive, and is happy that AT listened to community concerns. Cycling is not totally off the agenda for Parnell – local groups are keen to see the development of the Waipapa Greenways cycle route, which would use the disused rail tunnel to link Newmarket to Stanley St.

Meanwhile, stage two of the Glen Innes to Tamaki Dr cycleway through Pourewa Valley – a joint project between AT and the NZ Transport Agency – has been put on hold until next year, along with stage four from Ōrakei Basin to Tamaki Dr, while funding is allocated. – *Mary Fitzgerald* ■