

THE PARLIAMENTARY STANDING COMMITTEE ON PUBLIC WORKS

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R E P O R T

relating to the proposed construction of

COMMONWEALTH OFFICES

at

TOOWOOMBA, QUEENSLAND

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COMMONWEALTH OFFICES - TOOWOOMBA, QUEENSLAND

R E P O R T

By resolution on 23rd November, 1960, the House of Representatives referred to the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Public Works for investigation and report, the proposal to construct new Commonwealth Offices at Toowoomba, Queensland. The Committee have the honour to report as follows:-

S E C T I O N 1 - INTRODUCTION

Historical

1. The Commonwealth has owned land in Ruthven Street, Toowoomba, for many years, being acquired for public health purposes, partly as a gift and partly at a small cost, from the Toowoomba City Council in 1922 and in 1928 respectively.
2. A small building on the Ruthven Street frontage was occupied by the Department of Health as a pathological laboratory and branch office until it moved to new laboratories at the Toowoomba Hospital in 1957. The Department of Health having no further use for the land, and the Toowoomba City Council having agreed to forego any right to it, consideration was given to establishing Commonwealth offices on the site.
3. The proposal now before the Committee arises therefrom. In the meantime however, a branch post office has been established in the building vacated by the Department of Health, and also, office space has been provided for the Federal Member for Darling Downs.

S E C T I O N   I I   -   T H E   C O M M I T T E E ' S   I N Q U I R I E SGeneral

4.           The Committee heard evidence in Toowoomba and Canberra from representatives of the Public Service Board, the Department of the Interior, the Postmaster-General's Department, the Department of Works, the Toowoomba City Council, Chamber of Commerce and Secondary Industries Committee and the Federal Member for Darling Downs.

Existing accommodation

5.           Rented accommodation occupied by Commonwealth Departments, which includes a weatherboard cottage, a public hall and a converted warehouse, is generally unsatisfactory.

6.           Divisional Engineer - P.M.G.'s Department.     This office, which has a staff of 24, occupies 3,100 square feet of space in a house which is 65 to 70 years old, the rental being £338 per annum. The owners require the premises for their own use.

7.           District Telephone Office - P.M.G.'s Department.   The staff of 14 occupies 2,733 square feet of space in a public hall at a rental of £559-9-0 per annum. The amount of space rented is more than would normally be needed for the number of staff, but this is brought about by the existence of permanent partitions and the resulting uneconomical subdivision of the area.

8.           Department of Labour and National Service.   A rental of £298-11-0 per annum is paid for 1,500 square feet of space in the same building as the one occupied by the District Telephone Office. There are eight people on the staff.

9.           Divisional Returning Officer - Commonwealth Electoral Office.  
The Staff of two occupies 514 square feet of space at a rental of £167-1-0 per annum. The owners want the Commonwealth to vacate, have refused to carry out painting and lighting maintenance and are not agreeable to the Commonwealth improving the premises.

10. Department of Social Services. This office occupies 1,800 square feet of space, at a rental of £832 per annum, in a warehouse type building with a galvanised iron roof and no ceiling. There are fourteen people on the staff. The owners have now requested a rental of £1,300 per annum.

The need for Commonwealth Offices

11. It is evident that a better standard of office accommodation should be provided to replace the space occupied in leased premises.

12. Centralization. In providing a service to the public, it is desirable, in cities the size of Toowoomba, for the Commonwealth, where possible, to concentrate its activities in one place. Apart from service to the public, the opportunity is provided for mutual assistance between departments, and if partitioning of the whole area can be undertaken to the best advantage, more economical use of space and better supervision can be achieved.

13. The Committee believe the best way to provide improved accommodation and to achieve all the desirable features of centralization of Commonwealth activities in Toowoomba, is to erect a Commonwealth office building, and we recommend accordingly.

The proposed Building.

14. The proposal submitted for consideration by the Committee is for a building with 9070 square feet of nett office space in the first stage. It has been submitted that this space will be sufficient to accommodate the activities at present in leased accommodation.

15. The site. The site for the proposed Commonwealth Offices is on Commonwealth owned land, having a frontage of 56 feet to the west side of Ruthven Street, which is a principal thoroughfare, and a depth of 196 feet 9 inches to a 20 foot wide lane known as Graham Street.

16. The evidence before the Committee supported the proposed location of the Commonwealth Offices, situated, as they would be, handy to retail and commercial areas, adjacent to a proposed civic centre housing municipal activities and alongside a bus stop, used by 80 per

cent of the city's bus services.

17. The Committee agree that the location of the site is most suitable.

18. However, the nature of the site presents some difficulties in planning a building of good appearance.

19. It is bounded on the north by the town hall, which is partly of two storeys and on the south by a Soldiers' Memorial Hall, wholly of two storeys, both structures being built right to their boundary limits.

20. Already on the site are two buildings. One is the former Department of Health building, which is built on the Rathven Street frontage and now occupied by a branch post office; the other, which is behind the post office, was previously used as an animal house in connexion with the Health Laboratory.

21. The proposal before the Committee envisages demolition of the former animal house, but retention of the building occupied by the post office.

22. The design. A building of three floors and containing 9,070 square feet of nett office space has been planned to be erected behind the branch post office. As planned, the rear of the building would be on the Graham Street alignment. The existence of two storey structures on the northern and southern boundaries, one with windows in the dividing boundary wall, has influenced the planners to leave space on both sides of the building. This will provide light and vehicular access.

23. The building would provide 3,680 square feet of nett floor space on the ground floor for the Departments of Labour and National Service and Social Services, 3,050 square feet on the first floor for the Postmaster-General's Department and the Electoral Office and 2,340 square feet on the second floor for the Postmaster-General's Department, this latter floor covering only part of the building area.

24. In addition to the office space, the first floor would also contain a combined lunch room and tea preparation area, switch room, cleaners' room and toilets. A plant room would be located in a centrally placed basement.

25. Evidence was given that provision would be made, either in the area occupied by the Postmaster-General's Department or by the Electoral Office for visiting officers, particularly from the Taxation Branch.

26. In this scheme no provision has been made for the local Federal Member because he is already adequately accommodated in the building occupied by the branch post office.

27. The only other Commonwealth activity occupying rented space in the area is the Australian Broadcasting Commission. Present accommodation is unsatisfactory and negotiations have been completed for the Commission to occupy space in the new State Government Insurance Office.

28. Access to the building would be from Ruthven Street by a 7 foot wide walkway between the branch post office and the town hall, opening onto a 15 foot wide covered area providing circulation space and access to, and additional waiting space for the Departments of Labour and National Service and Social Services. Both these Departments would also have ample enclosed public space within their areas.

29. A stairway from the covered area would provide access to the first and second floors.

30. Allocation of space. The Committee's inquiries revealed that the space proposed for the occupying Departments would be sufficient for present needs and would allow for expansion over the next ten years and possibly longer.

31. Building materials and finishes. It is proposed to construct the building of reinforced concrete frame and floor slabs with infill brick cavity walls faced externally below window sills with precast exposed aggregate panels. Roof framing would be of steel covered externally with ribbed steel decking and ceilings would be insulated. Windows and external door frames would be of aluminium and aluminium hoods would provide sun protection to windows on the northern face of the building.

32. Internal partitions would be of brick and toilets would have terazzo floors and tiled walls. Fluorescent lighting would be provided and a thermal fire alarm system installed.
33. Future expansion. The design of the building would be such that, when necessary, it could be extended in an easterly direction. This would involve demolition of the building accommodating the branch post office.
34. Construction time. It is expected that documentation would take approximately nine months and, allowing two months for the receipt and consideration of tenders and a construction period of sixteen months, the time, from commencement of documentation to completion of the building, would be twentyseven months.
35. Estimates of cost. The estimated cost of the building, as proposed, is £91,000, including £7,000 for hot water heating.
36. As an indication, based on present day prices, the estimated cost of completing the second stage of the building, by extending it eastwards to Ruthven Street is an additional £40,000.
37. Thus, on present day prices, the estimated cost of the building now proposed, together with later additions which would bring the building forward to the main street alignment is £131,000.
38. Disabilities of the proposal. From the foregoing it will be seen that the proposed building would be obscured by the existing branch post office and that access to it would be from a seven foot wide walkway between the post office and town hall.
39. The Committee were unimpressed by the proposal in so far as the existence of a small building on the main street alignment prevents architectural treatment in keeping with the concept of Commonwealth Offices. We felt that a building costing £91,000 should not be erected on a site where it will not be seen to advantage.
40. Despite the fact that it would be a quite substantial structure, the building, as proposed, would more than likely be criticised as being makeshift, for if it were proceeded with, some fifteen years would elapse before expansion of Commonwealth activities



would be sufficient to justify extension of the building to the Ruthven Street frontage.

41. For many years therefore, such a building would be obscured by the single storey post office in front.

42. Evidence was sought whether a more attractive result would be obtained by having the building face Graham Street. However, Graham Street is not a through street, the orientation of the building would not be good and a building on this frontage on a narrow street would be obscured by the side of municipal offices to be erected only six feet from the street alignment opposite.

43. For these reasons it was concluded that there would be no advantage in facing the building on to Graham Street.

44. To guide our thinking we sought information about alternative sites but concluded that the cost of acquisition would be prohibitive.

Alternative proposal

45. Arising from the trend of the Committee's inquiries, the Department of Works submitted an alternative proposal to the Committee.

46. Demolition of existing building. This alternative envisages the demolition of the building housing the branch post office and the erection of a two storey building on the Ruthven Street frontage, leaving some space at the rear of the site for the parking of official vehicles. We were told that the post office building could be demolished for approximately £800.

47. The design. The two storey alternative proposed provides for a branch post office on the Ruthven Street frontage with an access arcade on the northern side leading to offices of the Departments of Labour and National Service and Social Services.

48. Stairs from the arcade would lead to the first floor which would be occupied by the Postmaster General's Department, Electoral Office and the Federal Member for Darling Downs. Lunch room, switch room, cleaners room and toilets would also be located on this floor.

49. Space to be provided. The alternative scheme would provide an additional 250 square feet of office space, but, with the inclusion of a branch post office and accommodation for the Federal Member for Darling Downs, would leave less space than in the original proposal for other occupants of the building.

50. Mainly affected would be the Postmaster-General's Department, but evidence before the Committee was that, because a more economical layout would be possible with all the space on the one level, the accommodation would be fairly close to the requirements of that Department.

51. Future expansion. To enable a third floor to be added over the whole or part of the building when necessary, a concrete slab would be provided at roof level, the slab to be covered by a metal roof.

52. Estimates of cost. The estimated cost of the alternative proposal was given as £98,000, including the cost of demolishing the existing post office building. The estimated cost of completing a second stage later, based on present day prices is £30,000.

53. Thus the estimated cost of both stages of the building is £128,000, compared with £131,000 for the original proposal.

54. The merits of the alternative proposal. The Committee believe that the alternative proposal would result in a prestige type building which would make a creditable contribution to the development of Toowoomba.

55. This proposal, although involving an estimated additional £8,000 in the first stage, would result in an estimated saving of £3,000 when the site is fully developed.

56. The Committee find the proposal, as originally referred, unacceptable but strongly recommend the alternative suggested by the Department of Works.

57. In arriving at this conclusion we have not treated lightly the need to demolish a substantially constructed building, the life of which was stated to be at least fifteen years and which, from appearance, would probably be much more.

58. Nevertheless, we think that this action would be justified in order to develop a building of good appearance, rather than one which would despite good design, be almost unseen from the street.

59. In accordance with usual practice when proposals are to be referred to the Committee, no detailed planning has been undertaken. As a consequence it is presumed that there would be no significant difference in the time required to construct either of the proposed buildings.

60. During the course of the inquiries in Toowoomba, his Worship, the Mayor, indicated his support for a suggestion that a corrugated iron fence between the post office and town hall might be removed in order that an attractive and open courtyard area, common to both properties could be developed.

61. The Committee therefore recommend that this matter be taken up with the Toowoomba City Council with a view to the development of a mutually acceptable common courtyard area.

### S E C T I O N III - THE COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS

#### Summary of recommendations and conclusions.

62. The Committee's recommendations and conclusions, arrived at after studying all the evidence and material submitted, are set out below. The paragraph quoted alongside each conclusion or recommendation refers to the relevant portion of the report.

Paragraph  
in report.

- (1) Accommodation rented by the Commonwealth  
in Toowoomba is generally unsatisfactory  
and a better standard should be provided. 5, 11.
- (2) Centralization of Commonwealth activities  
in cities the size of Toowoomba is  
desirable. 12
- (3) The erection of a Commonwealth Office  
building in Toowoomba is recommended. 13

- (4) The location of the site is most suitable. 17
- (5) The nature of the site presents difficulties in planning a building of good appearance. 18
- (6) The space proposed for occupying departments would be sufficient for present needs and for expansion over at least ten years. 30
- (7) The estimated cost of the proposal as referred to the Committee is £91,000. A second stage to complete development of the site would cost, on present day prices, an additional £40,000. 35, 36, 37
- (8) The Committee were unimpressed with the proposal which involved the erection of a £91,000 building in a position where it would not be seen to advantage. 38, 39
- (9) There would be no advantage in facing the building to the street at the rear of the site. 42, 43
- (10) The cost of acquiring an alternative site would be prohibitive. 44
- (11) The estimated cost of an alternative proposal submitted for consideration by the Committee is £98,000. A second stage to complete development of the site would cost, on present day prices, £30,000. 52
- (12) The estimated cost of the two stages of the alternative proposal is £3,000 less than estimated cost of the two stages of the original proposal. 53, 55
- (13) The alternative proposal would result in a prestige type building. 54
- (14) The original proposal referred to the Committee is unacceptable but the alternative scheme is strongly recommended. 56

- (15) Negotiations should be entered into with the Toowoomba City Council for the removal of an iron fence between the post office and town hall to allow for the development of a common courtyard area.

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S E C T I O N IV - COMMONWEALTH OFFICES IN REGIONAL CENTRES

The Reference.

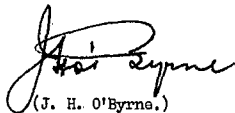
63. The reference of this proposal to the Committee arose from a suggestion made to the Minister for the Interior and Works that examination of it might assist in establishing principles to be adopted in planning similar buildings elsewhere.

64. Suggested principles. Arising from the study of the proposal at Toowoomba, the Committee offer the following suggestions for consideration when similar buildings are being planned in cities of comparable size to Toowoomba:-

- (a) Commonwealth Offices in large regional centres should be erected on unobstructed sites which would permit buildings of good appearance to be designed.
- (b) Sites should be in an accessible location, convenient for people who have business with the occupying departments.
- (c) Where possible, the site should be such that the Commonwealth Offices would be in close association with buildings occupied by municipal and local government activities.
- (d) Accommodation should be suitable for the proper housing of staff and the handling of members of the public expected to use the offices.
- (e) In the initial stages of planning, those responsible for all Commonwealth Government activities in the area,

including non trading statutory authorities, should be encouraged to participate in the centralization of such activities in one building.

- (f) When new post offices are being planned in smaller centres, the opportunity should be taken to establish whether other Commonwealth activities could be conveniently centralized by providing additional space in the proposed building.



(J. H. O'Byrne.)

Vice Chairman.

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