

SILVERLIGHT STUDIOS LIMITED

**APPLICATION FOR REFERRAL PURSUANT TO THE COVID-19 RECOVERY
(FAST-TRACK CONSENTING) ACT**

REPORT ON LANDSCAPE AND VISUAL EFFECTS

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1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Silverlight Studios Limited (**the applicant**) proposes to construct and operate a film studio facility on a 322ha landholding (**the site**) adjoining State Highway 6 (**SH6**) near Wanaka Airport. This report accompanies an application for referral pursuant to the Covid-19 Recovery (Fast-Track Consenting) Act 2020 (**the application**) and discusses the potential effects of the proposal in relation to landscape character and visual amenity.
- 1.2 The design, layout and details of the proposal are set out in material that forms part of the application including plans, views of a three dimensional digital model, and design parameters in relation to buildings. I do not repeat that material in this report but I have examined and considered it. Reference to the plans and information of the application will be useful when reading this report.
- 1.3 I have visited and walked over the site numerous times and have also viewed the site from many surrounding locations. I am very familiar with the landscapes of the Upper Clutha area and the Queenstown Lakes District as a whole, having been involved in landscape planning and assessment work here for twenty years.
- 1.4 This report gives high-level assessment conclusions in relation to landscape character and visual amenity and the associated potential effects of the proposal. I understand that a more detailed assessment that comments more specifically on details of the proposal would accompany a resource consent application if the proposal becomes a referred project.

2. GUIDANCE FROM THE DISTRICT PLAN

- 2.1 Pursuant to the Queenstown Lakes Operative District Plan (**ODP**), the site is zoned Rural General Zone (**RGZ**) and is not within an identified Outstanding Natural Landscape (**ONL**). Pursuant to the notified Proposed District Plan (**PDP**), the site is zoned Rural Zone (**RZ**). The northernmost part of the site is a steep escarpment that leads down to the banks of the Clutha River. This part of the site is categorised by the PDP as being part of the ONL that consists of

the river corridor itself. The remainder of the site is outside of the PDP's identified ONL¹. The PDP categorises landscapes that are not ONLs as Rural Character Landscapes (**RCLs**). All of the application's proposed activities are within the RCL part of the site and are well separated from the ONL.

2.2 The PDP is being heard and decided upon in stages by the Queenstown Lakes District Council. Chapters 3 to 6 of the PDP form the Strategy Section and these have been decided upon at a Council level and have also been subject to interim decisions of the Environment Court in relation to appeals². The same is true of the PDP maps that identify the district's ONLs. I understand that the issue of the proposed activities being outside of any ONL is final and not subject to any appeal. Therefore, while Sections 7(c) and 7(f) of Part 2 of the Resource Management Act (**RMA**) are relevant, Section 6(b) is not.

2.3 Chapters 3 and 6 of the PDP make it clear that the ONLs are the most highly valued landscapes of the district, while the non-ONL rural landscapes (i.e. the RCLs), are less valued (although still have some important character and amenity associated with them). I consider that this is logical from a landscape planning perspective and it reflects the relevant parts of the RMA.

2.4 The most relevant landscape-related Objective from the Strategy Section of the PDP (as amended by the abovementioned interim decisions of the Environment Court) is:

3.2.5.2 *Within Rural Character Landscapes, adverse effects on landscape character and visual amenity values from subdivision or development are anticipated and effectively managed, through policies and rules, so that:*

- a. *landscape character is maintained; and*
- b. *visual amenity values are maintained or enhanced.*

2.5 Another relevant Objective (less squarely related to landscape) is:

3.2.1.8 *Diversification of land use in rural areas beyond traditional activities, including farming is enabled provided that:*

...

¹ The PDP's landscape categorisation line is shown on plans that form part of the application.

² Environment Court Decisions [2019] NVEnc 160, 205 and 206.

- b. *the landscape character of Rural Character Landscapes is maintained and their visual amenity values are maintained or enhanced;*

- 2.6** While the notified PDP zones the site as RZ, a submission (Submission 31021) seeks that the site is zoned Rural Visitor Zone and subject to a specific Structure Plan that would enable a golf course with a hotel and other visitor accommodation development as well as areas of residential development. This submission has been heard by the Queenstown Lakes District Council's PDP hearings panel but no decision has yet been issued.
- 2.7** It is also relevant that existing resource consent RM120572 provides for subdivision of the site to create a 35-lot rural living development. The RM120572 development concentrates rural living activity around the more hidden, central part of the site and also on the top of the north-facing escarpment at the northern end of the site (i.e. immediately outside of the PDP's identified ONL). Considerable native planting and ecological management form part of the consented development. Resource consent is also held for a function venue within the site (RM150918) allowing up to 65 events per year of varying lengths and time of day. It is my understanding that if the current proposal gains resource consent, these existing resource consents would be surrendered.
- 2.8** In summary, both the ODP and PDP set out that the location of the proposed activities is outside of any ONL. A rural living development is currently consented on the site and a live submission seeks zoning that would provide for a golf course and considerable associated development. The most relevant landscape-related Objective of the PDP seeks that landscape character is maintained and that visual amenity values are maintained or enhanced.

3. LANDSCAPE CHARACTER

- 3.1** With reference to the plans that form part of the application, the site extends between SH6 at its southern end to the corridor of the Clutha River at its northern end. It sits on undulating, rolling terrace land between Wanaka Airport (close to the site to the southeast) and Albert Town / Wanaka (approximately 3km to the northwest). The part of SH6 that adjoins the site provides the primary vehicle link between Wanaka and the airport, and also onwards to Luggate and Cromwell.

- 3.2** Currently, low density rural living or lifestyle-block activity coupled with farmed pasture extends between Wanaka Airport and Albert Town / Wanaka. The site sits somewhat centrally in this area of the Upper Clutha Basin and immediately to the north of fourteen 40ha blocks that are centred around the Ballantyne Rd / SH6 intersection.
- 3.3** In relation to landscape character, the site itself is comprised of rolling landform, generally rising in elevation from SH6 towards the north, before dropping precipitously to the Clutha River. There is a significant area of lower elevation in the centre of the site that currently accommodates a pond. A number of tall mature shelterbelts break up the site and a network of farm tracks and fences cross it. While the land use is dominated by cultivated improved pasture, there are some areas of remnant native vegetation. A collection of farm / utilitarian buildings (including a dwelling) are located close to SH6 in the southern part of the property. Overall, the site has a verdant, improved rural character associated with open space and agricultural management. The rolling and variable topography of the site means that large parts of the site itself are visually hidden.
- 3.4** The proposal would create six nodes of significant built form, being a sound stage and workshop area and five village/city areas that would double as film sets and production offices or film school buildings. I understand that sound stage buildings may be up to a maximum height of 16 metres and the other built areas may be up to a maximum height of 12 to 14 metres. I understand that the external appearance of the buildings will be particularly varied in terms of colours and materials so as to be of use as film sets and that that a requirement of the applicant is that the proposed activities are not readily visible from public places.
- 3.5** In addition to built development, the proposal includes the retention and bolstering of existing belts of shelter trees and also very considerable areas of tree planting in the part of the site that is close to SH6. Considerable earthworks are proposed to create the building areas and excavated material will be deposited so as to naturalistically enhance existing areas of rolling proud topography in the southern parts of the site, prior to tree planting being undertaken.
- 3.6** As discussed above, the existing environment includes the current rural use of the site and also the consented rural living development provided for by RM120572. The Rural Visitor Zoning that is sought by way of submission to the PDP is unresolved and cannot be considered to be part of the existing environment.

- 3.7 In terms of landscape character, the proposal would bring a new use to the site that is quite different from anything in the vicinity or in the broader landscape. The use of the site would be commercial in nature, would involve considerable built form and busy activity. Notwithstanding this, the proposal would concentrate activity and buildings within the topographically low central part of the site while retaining much of the site as open space that could continue to be used productively (by grazing or cropping) and/or could be enhanced in terms of its natural character. The use of topography and large areas of tree planting will mean that the new land use is considerably contained and separated from the broader surrounding rural landscape.
- 3.8 The film studio facility and its associated activity will be elements that are unusual in this rural landscape. However, I consider that their location and containment will mean that their impact on landscape character is particularly localised. While they will be anomalous elements in relation to existing landscape patterns, the majority of the site's area, and also the surrounding vicinity, will remain in a rural state with the film studio activities being discrete, inconspicuous and limited in influence.
- 3.9 I consider that the landscape character of the area between Wanaka Airport and Albert Town / Wanaka itself will remain very much dominated by rural character, albeit that a node of film studio activity would sit within it. I consider that, subject to consideration of visual effects, the proposal will not significantly endanger rural character in a setting of this sort. In this regard (and with reference to the Objective cited in paragraph 2.5 above), I consider that the proposal represents a diversification of land use in a way that maintains the current rural character of the landscape within which it sits.
- 3.10 As well as the spatially contained layout of the proposed activities, the attributes of the site itself mean that this particular location is more able to absorb an activity of the proposed sort than most settings within the rural landscapes of the district, in my opinion. This is primarily because:
- The part of the site that will accommodate the propose activities is not within an ONL; it is in a less sensitive location in relation to the district's rural landscapes, in a vicinity that currently accommodates a reasonable degree of human modification and occupation;
 - The site is adjacent to a State Highway and between Wanaka Airport and Albert Town / Wanaka. In terms of the patterns of activities that make up landscape character, there

is considerable logic and expectation of some non-rural / semi-rural activities in a location of this sort.

- The site itself is large enough and topographically varied enough so that development can occur in a way that visual prominence is avoided and an outwardly open, green, rural character is perceived.

3.11 Overall, I consider that in relation to managing the landscape character of the district into the future, there is considerable logic in placing an activity of the proposed sort in this location and that while the character of the site itself will change, the character of the landscape within which the site sits will very largely be maintained.

4. VIEWS AND VISUAL AMENITY

4.1 In relation to views and visual amenity, much of the site is considerably hidden from outside views due to topography. Views into the main central part of the site are particularly difficult to gain. The outer parts of the site (particularly a sweep of land adjacent to SH6 and a steep escarpment that faces the Clutha River) currently provide visually displayed open space.

4.2 The rolling and undulating topography of the site means that much of it is well contained in a visual sense. The various mature shelterbelts also assist with visual screening of much of the site. The intention of the proposal is to maintain and bolster these shelterbelts into the future. Additionally, it is proposed that part of the site to the south of the proposed built form becomes considerably treed while maintaining a sweep of open pastoral space closest to the highway.

4.3 SH6 passes the southern end of the site and views are available over the southern part of the site that sits at approximately the same elevation as the highway. Much of this part of the site will remain as open space maintaining a rural form of visual amenity for highway users. The extensive tree planting that forms the "Central Park" precinct and that surrounds the proposed visitor carpark will incrementally mature to become a dense sweeping stand of trees set back approximately 80 metres from the highway. These treed areas and also the site's topography visually separate the proposed areas of built development from the highway corridor. This

separation will also be bolstered by the proposed enhancement of naturally mounded landform in this southern part of the site.

- 4.4** As mentioned, the applicant requires their activities within the site to be considerably hidden for their own purposes. Additionally, they envisage the site as a whole displaying particularly high standards of visual amenity and landscape pleasantness.
- 4.5** Despite the proposed earth mounding and extensive tree planting, it is likely that in the short to medium term, some parts of built form will be visually evident from the adjacent stretch of SH6. I would expect and recommend that a future resource consent application sets out details of this visibility and includes proposed measures to mitigate potential adverse effects on amenity that may stem from it. Such measures would be likely to include details of the exterior colours and finishes of the particular pieces of built form that may be visible, details of earth mounding and of tree planting in specific locations that may assist in mitigation, which may include using larger specimen trees in some locations.
- 4.6** In relation to the northern part of the site, the proposal retains this area as open rural space. To the north of the site, across the Clutha River, is the large dairy farm of Devon Dairies Ltd, which is a working property with no public access. However, following the northern bank of the Clutha is the public Newcastle Track. This track is at a considerably lower elevation than the top of the northern escarpment within the site, such that views of the escarpment itself and also its upper lip are available from the track, but no visibility of the flatter terrace land of the subject site are available. The existing resource consent RM120572 locates a number of rural living properties along the northern crest of the site that is exposed to the north. No development associated with the current proposal would be visible from the north.
- 4.7** The eastern and western edges of the site are considerably lined by mature shelterbelts that restrict views from neighbouring land into the site. Topography also very considerably restricts views. The proposal locates built development and activity towards the centre of the site such that views from the neighbouring properties to the east and west are maintained in their current state.
- 4.8** In practical terms, the ability to visually experience the parts of the site on which development and activity is proposed is limited to views of the southern part of the site from SH6. As discussed,

from SH6 an open, rural and (in part) ultimately considerably treed rural aesthetic will be maintained. An observer on this stretch of highway will certainly have awareness of some development within the site, there will after all be a road entry, but built form will be only visible in a manner that is relatively distant and separated from the observer. This visibility of built form will not be dominant or even prominent in relation to the pleasant rural form of visual amenity that is otherwise experienced. It will be a relatively peripheral part of the overall visual experience. As discussed in relation to landscape character, this particular location within the Upper Clutha Basin (being adjacent to SH6 between Wanaka Airport and Albert Town / Wanaka) is one in which some visibility of built form or associated activity is not particularly unexpected or offensive in relation to visual amenity, provided that an overall pleasant rural aesthetic is maintained.

- 4.9 Overall, in relation to views and visual amenity, I again find that the site has good capacity to absorb the proposed activities without inappropriately degrading the visual experience of the landscape that is currently had by observers. I consider that appropriate visual amenity can be maintained.

5. CONCLUSIONS

- 5.1 The site of the proposed activities is not within an ONL. It is in rural farmland between Wanaka Airport and Wanaka / Albert Town. By definition, non-ONL landscapes are less sensitive than ONL landscapes. Additionally, while retaining a pleasant rural character, the site is part of a vicinity that includes considerable human modification and occupation. An existing resource consent provides for a 35-lot rural living development within the site.

- 5.2 The proposal includes nodes of considerable built form and busy activity. The proposal has been spatially designed such that development and activity is concentrated in the central, topographically hidden part of the site and that the more exposed and sensitive parts of the site are kept in an unbuilt rural state.

- 5.3 In relation to landscape character, I consider that, while the proposal will change a part of the subject site considerably, it will not significantly endanger the rural character of the broader landscape within which the site sits. The subject site itself is more able to absorb development of the proposed sort than most settings within the rural landscapes of the district because:

- it includes a large area that is well separated from any ONL;
- it is large and topographically varied enough such that such that an outwardly open, green, rural character can be maintained;
- it is in a location (adjacent to a State Highway, airport and area of rural living land use) such that some non-rural / semi-rural activity will be less incongruous than in most rural locations.

5.4 In relation to visual effects, the ability to visually experience the site to any significant degree is limited to views of the southern part of the site from SH6. The proposal has been formulated such that the most visually exposed parts of the site will be free of built development and associated activity. Considerable visual screening is included in the proposal in the form of earth shaping and tree planting. Some visibility of built form is likely to be available to users of the adjacent stretch of SH6 in the short to medium term, however, this will be relatively peripheral and not significantly degrading in relation to the visual amenity that would otherwise be experienced. Overall, I consider that effects on views and visual amenity can be well mitigated.

5.5 The above findings are at a high level. I consider that at the time of a resource consent application, a comprehensive assessment of a more detailed proposal is appropriate

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