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CONTROVERSIAL plans for a 16-storey hotel in a revamped Haymarket have received a major boost after being backed by the Government's heritage watchdog.

Historic Scotland said it had no "significant adverse comments" about the GBP 200 million redevelopment, which includes proposals for one other hotel, as well as offices, restaurants and bars on the site of the former Morrison Street goods yard.

The backing will be welcome news to developers, coming just weeks after another government watchdog - Architecture and Design Scotland - criticised the five-star leaf-shaped hotel at the centre of the Haymarket plans.

The Evening News revealed the first images of the proposed glass and stone structure in September, and concerns were immediately raised by community groups about the "ghastly" scheme, amid warnings the main hotel would "dwarf" the surrounding area. The building would be visible from miles around. Previous plans for the site were drawn up by EDI, the council's development company, which included a massive shopping arcade, offices, cafés, bars and restaurants.

Planning consent was granted, but EDI was then forced to put the site on the market because of the council's decision to use the firm's assets to help finance a massive equal pay settlement.

Irish developer Tiger later bought the site for a sum believed to be around GBP 41.5m.

In a letter sent to the city council, obtained by the Evening News, **Historic Scotland's** head of development assessment - Lily Linge - said: "We have no significant adverse comments to offer on the application, which in our opinion represents a marked improvement on the previously consented scheme for this site. We are content with the conclusions reached about impacts on nationally important elements of the historic environment.

"The applicants have correctly identified the sensitivity of the site, and the adjoining neighbourhood."

Earlier this month, Architecture and Design Scotland questioned whether the hotel development was of high enough quality for such a high-profile site.

The Cockburn Association, Edinburgh's Civic Trust, has also objected to the design of the 16-storey building.

If the scheme gets the go-ahead, luxury chain InterContinental - which has only one hotel in the UK - will run the 180-room complex, complete with a swimming pool and gym near the top floor where users will have views of Edinburgh Castle.

A 246-bed Travelodge is planned next to the building, alongside three office complexes.

A street would run through the centre of the site, extending from Morrison Street to Dalry Road, creating a pedestrian link to the railway station and the opportunity for cafes and bars.

John Nesbitt, managing director of Tiger Developments, said: "With planning permission in place for the earlier scheme, we could start work tomorrow, but we believe our own revised proposals are a vast improvement and represent the right solution for this strategic site.

"We look forward to the city council planning committee hearing the detailed planning application."

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