

## Great Horkesley: Planning officer takes “favourable” view of controversial heritage centre plans

✉ By Amie Keeley

Monday, December 24, 2012

6:00 AM



Will Pavry during a protest at plans to build at Horkesley Park.

CONTENTIOUS plans for a £25million heritage centre in the heart of the Essex countryside are set to be recommended for approval.

A senior planning officer at Colchester Borough Council (CBC) announced the Planning Service's recommendation "would be favourable" towards the application for Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre.

The controversial project was refused planning permission last May. The Stour Valley Action Group strongly opposed over the potential increase in traffic to the area and the level of space dedicated to retail.

But Bunting & Sons, the company behind the scheme, appointed UK architect of the year Sir Michael Hopkins to redesign a scaled down version of the plan.

On Friday, CBC announced on its website: "I wish to advise you that based on our full professional analysis of the merits of the proposal the Planning Service's balanced recommendation will be favourable."

Kate Bunting, Partner of Bunting & Sons said: "I am delighted that the council officers are supporting our planning application to create The Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park. The planning officers have thoroughly reviewed the application and have appreciate the benefits that Horkesley Park will deliver."

But chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group Will Pavry said the campaigners would do "everything they can" to stop the application being approved.

He said: "We are surprised and appalled by the recommendations of the planning officers. We can't understand how they came to this conclusion.

"The application appears to be contrary to the Borough Council's local plan and the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

"Furthermore we understand that the East of England regional plan has been withdrawn by central Government and can no longer be considered part of the framework so there is no way it should go in.

"We will do everything we can to over turn it. We will be seeking a meeting with planning officers.

"The council has been extremely secretive in the release of information, which contrasts very much with the previous applications.

"They are obviously going to credit the number of jobs but there's no guarantee and the plans are only slightly smaller. The impact on the AONB remains the same."

The plans project smaller annual visitor numbers, from 485,000 to 316,000 while the number of employment opportunities has decreased from 200 to 150.

The size of the new buildings for Horkesley Park has been reduced by about 30% while the retail space has been cut by 80% but some new buildings have been introduced.

CBC's cabinet member for planning, Tim Young said: "I am unaware of any secrecy with this application compared to any previous applications.

"I understand our officers to be very open and transparent and willing to give out as much information as possible."

He said the reason the application was going to be recommended for approval was because additional information had come to light, including the park being in the "top flight" of East Anglia's tourist attractions.

However, he said the main reason it had been seen favourably by officers was because of central Government's National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF).

"If the application meets the NPPF we can't go against that and have to be careful if the council refuses it and an appeal takes place because it's the council that picks up the bill. But of course nothing has been decided yet.

"Sustainability will be carefully explored."

He said a meeting with senior planning officers and the Stour Valley Action Group had been scheduled for January 3.

The application will be included on CBC's planning committee agenda for February 14.