

Heritage centre opponents urged to carry on fighting

But firm behind Horkesley Park plans says it will be an asset

By Wendy Brading

A BATTLE cry has been issued for opponents of the new Horkesley Park development to fight on.

A new application, called the Stour Valley Visitor Centre, has been submitted to Colchester Council.

The bid is the fifth for heritage and visitor centre at Horkesley Park, Great Horkesley, in the past 11 years.

Bunting and Sons, the firm behind the project, says the new plans have been drawn up based on previous feedback.

The fresh plans show the centre would be expected to attract 316,250 tourists a year and create 150 jobs.

Kate Bunting, partner at the firm, said: "We have taken account of everything we should have done.

"We have even made slight changes to the building in

light of the feedback we were given at the consultation.

"We truly believe the centre will be an asset for the community, an amenity for local people and a draw for tourism, providing an outstanding celebration of the English countryside."

If the application is given the go-ahead before the end of the year, the firm hopes the 117-acre attraction would be open by spring 2014.

The firm has appointed architect Sir Michael Hopkins to redesign the plans, which do not include any new build in the Dedham Vale area of outstanding natural beauty.

Elements such as an underground building, a lecture theatre and a specialist garden centre, have also gone.

Total floor space has been reduced by 30 per cent while shop space has been cut 86 per cent.

Among the additions to the plans are an indoor display

ring, where Suffolk Punch horses would be on show to visitors, and a "field to fork" production, which traces the food journey.

The firm is staying tight-lipped as to how much the development will cost or how much it will cost visitors to get into the park although details have been released to Colchester Council.

But opponents say the plans are just scaled down versions of those rejected last year which would still destroy the peace and tranquillity of the Dedham Vale.

Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, said: "The new plans are, in essence, more of the same although slightly scaled down. The potential impact on the area is just as unacceptable as far as we are concerned.

"Under the new national policy framework, viability is a key requirement but the business plan has not been published. The new plan has

a reduced retail area but we believe there is a still a substantial level of retail space."

Mr Pavry said he understood 7,000 letters were due to be sent out by Colchester Council to people who had commented on previous applications.

Once those had been sent, he expects a 42 day consultation process to start.

He said: "We would urge everyone who is opposed to this development to write to Colchester Council to make their feelings known.

"It is still proposed as a massive theme park anticipating over 300,000 people descending on the Stour Valley annually which would be quite unacceptable to the community.

"It would cause irrevocable damage to the peace and tranquillity of the Dedham Vale area of outstanding natural beauty and would create a precedent for retail activity in a countryside location."

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An asset, a draw and a celebration: Kate Bunting, of Bunting and Sons, says the Stour Valley Visitor Centre will be a plus for the countryside.