

Opponents to countryside centre sound rallying call

Buntings family says Constable paintings would go on show

Wendy Brading

OPponents of a proposed multi-million-pound visitor centre in the heart of Constable Country are to lobby councillors in a bid to stop it being built.

Established family firm Bunting and Sons wants to create the Stour Valley Visitor Centre, described as a celebration of the English countryside, at Horkesley Park.

Colchester Council's planning officers are recommending councillors support the project when they consider its merits next month.

However, the scheme has also received hundreds of objections.

And one of the opposing groups, the Stour Valley Action Group, is calling on protesters to attend a crucial meeting at Colchester Town Hall on February 28 to show the strength of feeling.

Will Pavry, chairman of the group, said: "Our task now is to convince the councillors on the planning committee they must reject the application against the advice they are likely to receive from their officers but in line with the findings of their own planning policy

department and external consultants.

"The level of objection from hundreds of individuals and many organisations, including the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Project, the Dedham Vale Society and CPRE Essex, is overwhelming."

The group also points out the area of outstanding natural beauty has specific protection under the National Planning Policy Framework.

It says the centre would not qualify as a regional attraction and points out consultants Britton McGrath suggest it would

make an annual loss of £1,799,000.

Hector Bunting, a partner in Bunting and Sons, however, rejected the idea the centre would make a loss and said it was in line with national planning policies.

He said: "A business plan has been submitted to the council which shows the scheme is viable in the short and long term.

"Britton McGrath's assessment is based on incorrect visitor numbers and is, therefore, fundamentally flawed. The Horkesley Park scheme and business plan have been vigorously tested

by independent experts, all of whom conclude the business plan is realistic and robust."

The family also says it has made provision for the centre to carry original Constable paintings which were seen as critical by one consultant to attract visitors.

Kate Bunting, who is also a partner in Bunting and Sons, said: "The arrangements for obtaining these is commercially sensitive. However, the provision of these will be part of a planning condition agreed with the council."

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