

Buntings: We will show Constables...

...but art critic says there is 'no realistic possibility'

Caroline Tilley

BUNTING and Sons has reaffirmed its commitment to displaying original works of art by John Constable if it gets permission to open a visitor centre.

It plans to open the Chantry Fine Art Gallery as part of the Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park.

Critics say the fine art proposals are unrealistic. However, Hector Bunting, a partner at the firm, said the gallery will display original works of art by John Constable and his contemporaries, as well as a wide range of other East Anglian artists, particularly if they have strong connections with the Stour Valley.

He revealed Bunting and Sons' fine art consultants include very experienced and highly respected experts.

Mr Bunting said: "The creation of an art gallery in the Dedham Vale Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty that will display original paintings by John Constable and other artists of the region will be a major coup for Colchester and the area."

Robin Duthy, managing director of Art Market Research and a Little Horkesley resident, has compiled a list of all Constable artwork sold in the last five years, which shows 76 pieces changed hands in that time at a cost of £27.9million.

Mr Duthy said: "People have been saying, where are the Constables coming from? Have they bought any? Have they got any money to buy them? They haven't answered the question."

Stour Valley Action Group, which is against the proposals, asked art critics to assess the plans.

William Feaver, art critic, curator, historian and broadcaster, said: "I can state with absolute certainty there is no realistic possibility of any national institution lending works by Constable to the proposed gallery.

"Nor is there any likelihood of private owners - most of them known to me - lending either.

"No museum would be prepared to lend to a commercial venture of this sort."

Kate Bunting, a partner at Bunting and Sons, said: "We understand the

Stour Valley Action Group, set up to object to Horkesley Park, has encouraged people to write to the paper attacking what the council's consultants state are key attractions of Horkesley Park, seemingly in an attempt to sway public and councillors' opinion. It is a pity it attempts to detract from celebrating the wonderful benefits that will be delivered by Horkesley Park".

The Stour Valley Visitor Centre is the fifth version of the scheme put forward by Bunting and Sons in the past 12 years.

The family firm says the visitor centre, on 117 acres of land, will be a celebration of the English countryside. The project will include a 101-acre country park, a demonstration nursery, wildflower meadows, art and craft studios, an indoor display ring and a sculpture trail.

Colchester Council will make a decision on the plan at Charter Hall on February 28.

caroline.tilley@nq.com