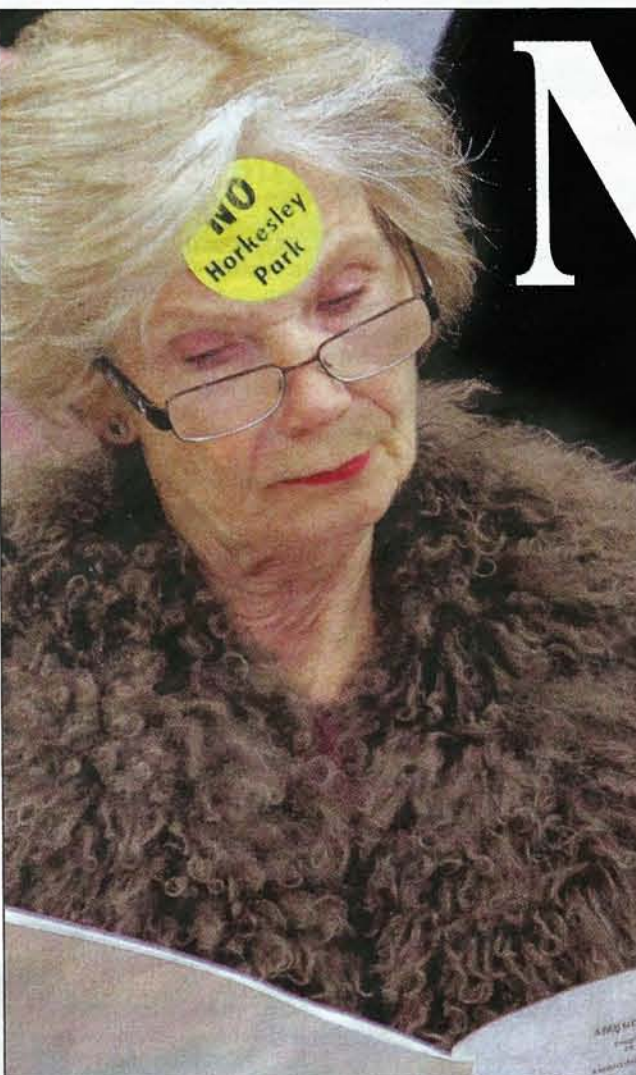


STOUR VALLEY VISITOR CENTRE BID



NO will cost you

■ Firm is confident of success in appeal

Ryan Jennings

TAXPAYERS will foot the bill when the Stour Valley Visitor Centre application is approved on appeal, it has been warned. Bunting and Sons' application for the centre at Horkesley Park was refused by ten votes to four at a meeting attended by 350 people at Charter Hall, Colchester.

Minds made up: Anna Ramsay and Hannah Gordon with NO stickers worn by many at the meeting. Pictures: Steve Argent C074897-07

accept any other company wanting to invest millions in the borough with open arms – look at Williams and Griffin. "But we have told Bunting and Sons: 'We are not interested in you', which is very worrying for me." "The council will have to appoint a barrister and I am pretty certain we will lose on appeal and have the costs of it awarded against us



because, from the debate, the grounds for refusal will not be sound. "It is the council taxpayer who is going to pay for this." Mr Oxford was concerned councillors concentrated the debate on the business case. He said: "Committee members believe they know more about business than the experts. "Why would a company like Bunting and Sons commit to invest somewhere in the region of £25million if it thought for a minute it would fail? "We seem to have the only Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty in the country which does not want to encourage tourism." Stephen Bunting, senior partner at Bunting

and Sons, said the company would not give up until the visitor centre was built. He said: "We are fully committed to the Horkesley Park scheme and the benefits it will deliver. We shall continue with the proposals until they come to fruition. "Once the official confirmation of the decision is received, we will start the appeal process. "An appeal will be very costly for the council. The councillors' decision to vote contrary to the recommendation and advice from the planning officers will be at the expense of Colchester Council. "We are confident of success at appeal." Tim Young, borough councillor responsible for planning, has urged the company to submit a new application. He said: "I would hope Bunting and Sons would consider the reasons put for-

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dear, say Buntings

■ Council urges company to rethink and submit fresh proposal



Campaign is not over

CAMPAIGNERS admit the fight to stop a visitor centre being built in the heart of Constable Country is a far from over. Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, said: "We have to hope a planning inspector will see the application for what it is – a mish mash of ideas which is not needed in this location." John Alexander, chairman of Nayland Conservation Society, said: "We will continue its opposition until this ill-conceived scheme expires." Charles Aldous, chairman of the Colne and Stour Valley Conservation Group, added: "I would hope the planning officers who form the grounds for refusal will make it so it is

unappealable." Dr John Constable, the great-great-grandson of painter John Constable, said: "The Stour Valley is a very special place, both for visitors and residents, and development in and affecting the area of outstanding natural beauty, needs to be carefully regulated to prevent the loss of a major cultural and environmental asset. "The council's decision is a victory for common sense – the Horkesley Park proposal just wasn't right for the area." Hope: Will Pavry.

Objectors in the majority

A total of 350 people attended the meeting at Colchester's Charter Hall. About two-thirds were objectors, and some gave out stickers at the entrance and had the word "no" painted on their faces. The Bunting family also attended the four-hour meeting.

Cricket club back plans

Great Horkesley Cricket Club, which has traditionally played at The Chantry in Horkesley Park, say the plans would guarantee the club's long term future. Graeson Laitt, acting chairman, said: "The visitors that attend the park are likely to watch some cricket and that is likely to bring in new sponsorship, and other funding possibilities, as well as new members." Mr Laitt also said new investment could help the club start a colts side.

What next?

February 28, 2013 Plans for Horkesley Park refused by ten votes to four by planning committee. **March/April 2013** Bunting and Sons to receive official reasons for refusal. **March/April 2013** An appeal must be lodged within a year of the decision notice, but the firm says it will appeal as soon as it receives the notice. **October 2013** An appeal hearing held by a Government planning inspector, should be held within six months. **November 2013** A decision would be inspected within six weeks of the appeal hearing.

The fifth plan in 12 years

The Stour Valley Visitor Centre would be built on 117 acres in Horkesley Park, creating up to 100 jobs. Its plans include a 101-acre country park, a Suffolk Punch horse attraction, a central building with an indoor display ring and a fine art gallery. The application is the fifth proposal to be drawn up in 12 years, but the only one to come before the planning committee. The plans were drawn up by architect Sir Michael Hopkin, whose previous projects include the Olympic Velodrome. No figure has been placed on the cost of the centre, although previous plans estimated it to be in the region of £25million

Business case was the nub

Ryan Jennings

IT was the confidential business case which caused councillors to call the application for the Stour Valley Visitors Centre into question. Bunting and Sons refused to make the business case public, due to commercial sensitivity. Although Colchester Council's planning committee refused the application on the grounds of the damage it would cause to Constable Country, the issue of viability dominated the debate. Members said the lack of detail meant they could not support the attraction. Nick Barlow, councillor for Colchester's Castle ward, said: "We cannot make a decision on viability when all we have in front of us are black lines. "The advantages, and there are some, are far outweighed by the damage it would cause. He added: "We would be closing the Dedham Vale off to people in approving this. It would be very dangerous to let this go through." Mark Cable, councillor for Dedham and Langham, said: "Whichever way I look, this application is covered in secrecy, especially around

the business case. I am not prepared to approve this application." He added: "This will cause real harm to the heart of the area of outstanding natural beauty." Nigel Offen, councillor for Shrub End, said: "If we are to make a decision on viability, we should be given all the information, which we are not. "I am uncertain about viability and cannot support this application." Mr Offen added: "We can demonstrate potential harm, that should be enough. "It astounds me there is no market research in front of us. "Is there a want for this? Is there a need for this? We just don't know." However, Kate Bunting, partner at Bunting and Sons, said: "Fear of failure is not a planning matter. "However, this unsubstantiated fear pervaded the committee and affected councillors' decisions. "Attitudes such as this stifle business and deter entrepreneurs and do nothing for tourism or business in Colchester." "The council's planning officers and their consultants are satisfied regarding viability and supported the application accordingly."

Applicants: Stephen Bunting and Kate Bunting.



Positive: Hector Bunting and, left, Ben Bunting.

Miss Bunting said the business plan, which will remain confidential, showed the proposals were robust, deliverable and financially sound in the short and long term. Bunting and Sons said the centre would attract 316,250 visitors each year. Ticket prices would vary according to the season, and there would be group and season ticket offers. Business experts recommended the standard adult entrance price should be £10. Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, said: "The rejection is fantastic news. We always knew the proposals had many problems and councillors, like us, were concerned about the viability issue. "Councillors did not accept they could take the risk without seeing the business case and I think keeping that confidential was a large mistake on the Buntings' behalf." Tourism experts the Essex Chambers of Commerce, consultants Sykes Leisure Projects and Visit East Anglia said tourism in Colchester had not performed to its full potential and Horkesley Park would encourage more people to come to the area. ryan.jennings@nqe.com