

Battle lines drawn over Horkesley Park plans

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Development due to be considered by council next month

THE battle lines have been drawn in the war of Horkesley Park.

Plans have been drawn up for a heritage and conservation centre in an area of outstanding natural beauty in the Dedham Vale.

Campaigners have been lobbying for and against the scheme which is estimated will attract 485,000 visitors a year.

With the consultation period now closed, leading groups have given their support – to both sides.

Among those opposing the £25 million development are the National Trust, Natural England, CPRE Essex and the Dedham Vale AONB and Stour Valley Joint Advisory Committee.

The National Trust, in its objection, said the proposed development was “likely to have the potential to irreparably damage the tourist locations within the Dedham Vale which the National Trust and partners have striven so long and hard to cherish”.

All the neighbouring councils have registered their opposition including Babergh Council, Great Horkesley,

Little Horkesley, Boxted, Dedham, Nayland with Wisington, Leavenheath, Lamarsh and Alhamstone and Stoke-by-Nayland Parish Councils.

Others against the project are Gainsborough’s House Museum in Sudbury, the Dedham Vale Society, Suffolk Preservation Society, the Colne-Stour Association and Nayland and Wisington Conservation Society.

Grave concerns have also been expressed by the Environment Agency and English Heritage.

Colchester Council’s own spatial policy team has recommended the planning committee reject the proposals.

The team considered the tourism and job-creation benefits of the Horkesley Park proposal have been overstated and, in any case, are outweighed by the negative traffic and

landscape impacts of its large scale.

It said: “The proposal fails to make the case set by national, regional and local planning policy for exceptional status to merit its development in a rural area.”

The Stour Valley Action Group, which is leading the fight against Horkesley Park, claims the centre would destroy the peace and tranquility of the Dedham Vale.

It also claims the village roads would not be able to cope with the level of traffic which would be generated by the centre and that retail development should not be permitted in the area.

However, there is also support for the application from leading groups.

The East of England Development Agency (EEDA) has backed the plans, as have the Essex Chambers of Commerce, Banham Zoo and the Suffolk Horse Society.

Colchester MP Bob Russell has also spoken out in favour of Horkesley Park, saying the economic benefit of a major tourist attraction would help the town’s economy.

In a letter, EEDA added: “It will contribute significantly to the region’s aspirations to maximise the value of green infrastructure, regional culture and the natural environment.

“The creation of the new facilities will also bring significant benefits to the region in terms of tourism and provide a significant number of jobs.”

More than 31,000 representations have been submitted to Colchester Council regarding Horkesley Park.

These include a petition of 22,839 signatures collected by Bunting and Sons before the application was lodged, but which the firm said was relevant to the latest application.

Colchester Council is due to consider the application next month.

Horkesley Park heritage and conservation centre is proposed to be based on 117 acres of land off London Road, Great Horkesley, of which 101 acres would be a country park.

The project includes new buildings on the site of redundant greenhouses, an art gallery, show gardens and nurseries.