

HORKESLEY PARK HERITAGE CENTRE PLAN IS REJECTED

DAMAGE TO AREA WOULD OUTWEIGH BENEFITS

Buntings vow to fight on despite spending £1.5m on the failed bid

By LAUREN OLDERSHAW
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BUNTING & Sons spent £1.5million on its failed bid for Horkesley Park heritage centre, it has been revealed.

But the family firm will continue to fight for approval for the centre in the Dedham Vale after it was rejected by Colchester Council.

Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, said the family would be foolish to appeal because it would lose even more money and would also leave the taxpayer out of pocket.

Stephen Bunting, senior partner with the firm, which has worked on plans for the £25million centre for ten years, insisted



■ Dashed – Ben, Hector, Tom, Stephen, Daniel and Kate Bunting by their disused greenhouses

received over 28,000 representations of support for the proposals.

“The scheme will be an important draw for tourism, providing a wealth of information and education about the countryside, benefiting bio-diversity and wildlife habitats, while creating hundreds of jobs”.

Kate Bunting, a partner of the firm, said the scheme had been rigorously tested by independent specialist consultants, who had concluded it would deliver a raft of benefits.

She said: “We consider

Horkesley Park to be a sustainable site and the activities proposed are a logical extension of our business and the horticulture that has been carried on there for many years.”

“The scheme will be an important draw for tourism while creating hundreds of jobs

Campaigner Mr Pavry said: “We think they would be very foolish to appeal. It failed on so many levels. It would cost them a great deal of money and the taxpayers. I am hoping they will see sense.”

Bill Watson, chairman of Little Horkesley Parish Council, said it was a good project hamstrung by the location, adding he had sympathy for the Bunting family.

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“We are fully committed to the Horkesley Park scheme and the benefits it will deliver

the planning officer’s report and its approach to policy was fundamentally flawed.

He said: “The report gave the committee members incorrect guidance on how they should determine the application.

“Councillors attributed great weight to it and predictably went with the planning officer’s recommendation to refuse the application.

“We are fully committed to the Horkesley Park scheme and the benefits it will deliver and we shall continue with the proposals until they come to fruition.

“Once the official confirmation of the decision is received from the council we will start moving forward with the appeal process.”

Mr Bunting insisted Horkesley Park will be an asset for the borough.

He said: “The council has



■ Hooray – members of the Stour Valley Action Group celebrating the rejection of the plans for Horkesley Park

Picture: STEVE ARGENT CO45419_17

Campaigners delighted at the scheme’s failure

CAMPAIGNERS welcomed the fact the countryside has been saved from the Horkesley Park development – described as “effectively a shopping centre”.

More than 200 people for and against the plans packed into the Moot Hall on Thursday, to hear the debate.

After almost four hours, councillors agreed with the planning officer’s recommendations to turn down the proposals.

Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, said: “We are very pleased the councillors found in line with the officer’s recommendation and rejected it.

“We listened very carefully to what the councillors had to say and one of their chief concerns was loss of peace and tranquillity and that is something we have said all along.

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“It was quite clear it is effectively a plan for a shopping centre and there is a fear it could lead to further development in that area.”

Bunting & Sons wanted to turn dilapidated greenhouses on the site into a country park, art gallery, show gardens, food and horticultural centre and extend its work to breed Suffolk Punch horses.

Dr John Constable, a descendant of the artist whose life and times would have been remembered in the centre, said he did not think the centre would have wider appeal to people.

“I still return to the Stour valley, go fishing on the river, and enjoy the outstanding beauty. I now bring my son and I want him to be able to bring his son and this will not be possible if this centre goes ahead.”

Supporters of the conservation centre insisted it would create jobs. They said there had been no concerns raised by council highways departments about the traffic generated by the estimated 400,000 visitors a year.

Kate Bunting, one of the partners in the company, said she understood people did not like change, but added: “What we have here is an amazing opportunity. The surveys and reports show this is a flagship project.”

The committee heard Colchester MP Bob Russell supported the plans because they would bring real benefits to the town through private investment, with no cost to the taxpayer.

Stephen Bunting, senior partner, said he did not feel there was any bad blood between the firm and the campaigners.

Council is ready to defend refusal

THE heritage centre’s main building would be as long as almost half of Colchester’s High Street.

Alistair Day, planning officer, said it would span a distance equivalent to the top of the High Street at its junction with Head Street to outside Marks & Spencer, and would stretch back to where Culver Square is.

Members of the planning committee

said they were torn by the plans because they welcomed the ambition and benefits, but could not overlook the damage they could potentially cause.

Councillors voted 11 for and one against to turn down the scheme.

Edward Gittings, the Buntings’ planning consultant, claimed the council’s planning report was legal-

ly unsafe, but this was refuted by spatial policy officer Karen Syrett.

Speaking after the meeting, Nick Barlow, councillor responsible for planning, said the council would vigorously defend its decision, if required.

He said: “We’re ready to defend it because we believe it is based on solid grounds.”