

Axe falls on bid for £25m heritage centre as inspector rejects appeal

Campaigners celebrated last night after controversial proposals to build a £25million visitor centre on the Suffolk-Essex border were rejected at appeal by a planning inspector.

The saga of the proposed Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park is now over after a 13-year battle to get permission for the 100-acre attraction.

Bunting & Sons, the company behind the centre, said it would have created up to 200 jobs and attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each year. Included within the proposals were an art gallery, gardens, a Suffolk Punch breeding centre and animal displays.

Stephen Bunting, senior partner of Bunting & Sons, said: "We agree with the inspector's report that the proposed visitor centre at Horkesley Park would have delivered a raft of benefits, but needless to say we do not agree with the inspector's comment that on balance this would be outweighed by other considerations.

"We are extremely sorry that we will not see the proposals, which have been subject to the appeal, come to fruition and feel the people of Colchester and further afield have sadly missed out on what would have been a wonderful attraction."

Revised plans were rejected in February 2013 by Colchester Borough Council despite planning chiefs recommending approval. The proposal had been scaled down the new buildings within an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty but around three-quarters of the site would have still been inside it.

The decision was appealed but yesterday it was announced that the inspector had thrown out the plans.

Mr Jenkin, MP for Harwich and North Essex, said: "I am hugely relieved, it's a vindication of the campaign to protect Dedham Vale and the Stour Valley. I am sorry that so much effort has gone into a project which could not happen but it's very, very good news for the future of Dedham Vale.

"There has to be a balance between economic development and the protection of the environment. The inspector felt the environment should come first in this case."

Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, said he was "delighted" with the decision. "It would seem to be the entirely right decision, there's been strong opposition to it over the last 13 years," he said.

"This should be the final nail in the coffin for Horkesley Park. We have always thought that the claimed benefits were vastly overstated and would be far less than what was projected."

But Sir Bob Russell, MP for Colchester, said it was a huge lost opportunity and pointed out that the centre had been backed by the Essex Chambers of Commerce. "This is bitterly disappointing news," he said.

"It represents a huge loss of vital investment in the borough of Colchester which would have boosted tourism and the local economy and created scores of jobs."

■ Stephen Bunting with the 3D model showing the original proposals for the Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre; Picture: CONTRIBUTED

