

STOUR VALLEY VISITOR CENTRE

Battle lines drawn

■ Buntings reveal business case for centre kept secret so far

James Calnan

A BUSINESS plan published by Bunting & Sons says a visitor centre in Constable Country would attract more than 300,000 people and £7.5million in spending a year.

Bunting & Sons appealed against Colchester Council's decision to refuse its application for the Stour Valley Visitor Centre at Horkesley Park.

A planning inspector will hear the first of 12 days of evidence on October 1 before making a recommendation to the Government.

Documents published ahead of the hearing reveal how much Bunting & Sons expects to spend and make on the project, details previously kept secret.

It says Horkesley Park will attract 316,000 visitors a year who will spend £7.5million on entry tickets,



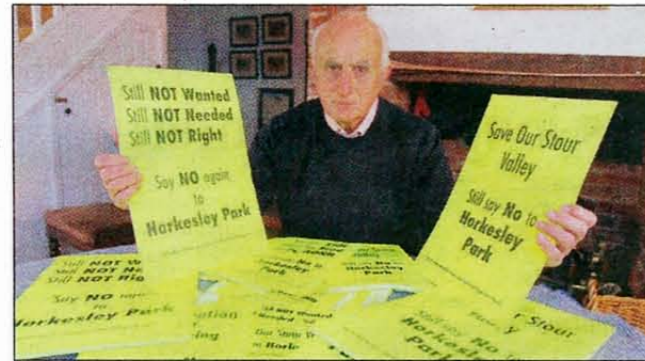
Appeal: Stephen Bunting.

refreshments and souvenirs.

The centre will cost £12.9million to build.

Stephen Bunting, a partner at the firm, said: "Our QC, Patrick Clarkson of Landmark Chambers, has stated we have a winnable case."

"Sir Michael Hopkins, our world-renowned architect who has been heavily in the scheme, is fully behind the appeal and has said he



The answer remains NO: Campaigner Will Pavry.

expects it to be successful."

The business plan was one of the main areas of concern when the application was rejected in February.

The documents reveal there are eight differences of opinion the inspector must resolve before making his recommendation.

Will Pavry, chairman of Stour Valley Action Group, opponents of the scheme,

Community Centre and Colchester's Moot Hall.

Also speaking against the appeal are Sunday Times columnist Charles Clover, representing the Dedham Vale Society, Little Horkesley Parish Council, the Dedham Vale and Stour Valley Partnership and the Colne and Stour Valley Countryside Association.

Buntings has hired consultants to speak on its behalf. Colchester MP Sir Bob Russell is scheduled to offer his support.

The centre would be on 101 acres and include gardens, art and craft studios, a Suffolk Punch breeding centre and an art gallery.

Buntings lodged an appeal against Colchester Council's decision after a five-hour debate in Charter Hall.

A minister is due to make a final announcement on the project in January.

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said he had seen nothing to change his mind.

He said: "We're confident the council will put in an extremely good defence of its decision to reject this application."

"We are working with the council to give it any information it needs."

The group has hired a solicitor who specialises in planning appeals, to attend the hearings at Langham

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for appeal hearing

■ Parties are preparing their arguments for a 12-day hearing

Horkesley Park expected to earn £7.5m

AN average visitor to Horkesley Park would spend £25, a newly published business case reveals.

The business plan was not seen by councillors who rejected the application in February because of commercial sensitivity fears.

The applicants had argued whether the park would be a success or not was not a valid planning ground for refusal.

During the debate, 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."

Now, ahead of October's planning inquiry, the

business case has been published in full by Bunting & Sons.

The controversial claim that 316,250 people would visit each year – disputed by consultants acting for Colchester Council – is based on the catchment area and comparisons with existing attractions.

The business plan states Horkesley Park would be a year-round attraction, although its busiest month would be August, when more than 50,000 visitors are expected.

An average visitor, the case predicts, would spend between £10 and £16 on ticket entry. During a typical four-hour stay, they would pay out for refreshments and

souvenirs, bringing their average outlay up to nearly £25.

The business case states: "By way of comparison, a trip to the cinema with a drink and a snack would cost around £15 per head for two hours of entertainment, or a couple of games of tenpin bowling with a fast food snack and drink would cost about £15 per head for around an hour and a half."

As a result, income at Horkesley Park would total £7.5million a year.

Once costs are taken into account, the company's trading profit would be just short of £3million.

The park would employ 146 full and part-time

Key questions the inspector must rule on:

- Will Horkesley Park bring benefits to the public?
- What will be its impact on the Dedham Vale area of natural beauty and the Stour Valley?
- Are two aspects of the proposal, a Chinese garden and the Chantry Art gallery, which would potentially include John Constable paintings, feasible?
- How many visitors would flock to Horkesley Park and the Stour Valley Visitor Centre each year, and would they largely drive there by car or find alternative modes of transport?

workers.

The business case also reveals development costs are predicted to total £12.9million, including £500,000 for a promotion campaign ahead of the launch.

It states construction costs would be kept down through various measures. For example, the Chinese Garden, with a value of £1.5million, would be sponsored by another party.

Colchester Council, in its statement of case ahead of the hearing, said it was not convinced two key aspects of Horkesley Park – the Chantry Art Gallery and the Chinese Garden – would significantly boost visitor numbers.