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Notes from Feedback Meeting

27 February 2006

The following notes document the Feedback Meeting held at Bexhill College from 16.45 to 20.15 on Monday 27 February 2006 to present the findings of the countryside park consultation and initial design proposals for the park.

These notes are being published on the project web site (www.eastsussex.gov.uk/pebsham) for anyone interested, to review.

The meeting, attended by 73 local people, was the last in the initial community consultation programme for the



development of Pebsham Countryside Park, undertaken by TK Associates (www.tkassociates-uk.com) on behalf of East Sussex County, Hastings Borough and Rother District councils. It invited comments and questions on the consultation findings and initial design plans and explained a further, final three-week period for comments.

1. Presentation of consultation findings:

Tariq Khwaja from TK Associates welcomed people to the meeting and presented the findings so far of the five month consultation programme. He thanked people for participating and stressed that this meeting itself was part of the consultation as further feedback was being sought. The presentation slides can be found on the project web site. The main points covered in the presentation were:

- High levels of support for the project – 76% overall
- Support varied by area – 90% in some areas but less in Crowhurst (63% against) and concerns from land owners about the impact of the park
- Nature conservation is seen as the main purpose by 47%
- People over 30 regard wildlife watching and walking as priorities; young people value these too but are also keen on sports and play
- Cycling is the most popular sport amongst over-30s, chosen by 33% overall and by 42% from Hastings. 'No sports' was chosen by 30%, while 24% want riding
- Young people also want cycling and riding but are even keener on water sports (31%)
- A great many other ideas were expressed in the consultation period which are being addressed by the project team.

2. Questions & comments on the consultation findings:

Question: You mention cycling, but where would that be within the park area? Just in the south or in the natural area too?

Response: The consultation found that cycling is a priority but we did not ask people exactly where they wanted to cycle. We know it's important to people – now it's down to the project team to look at how and where this can be best accommodated.

Question: How many adults are there in the Hastings, Bexhill and Crowhurst areas?

Response: There are total populations of around 42,000 in Bexhill, 85,000 in Hastings, 800 in Crowhurst.

Comment: If that's the case then your statistics are wrong. What you've found is not 76% support but less than one percent support, as everyone in the whole population had the opportunity to respond.

Response: No that's not right. We are talking about the percentage in support amongst our *sample*. By your workings we could just as well argue that the percentage against is even smaller – a tiny fraction of a percentage point. To be clear, we are not claiming to have undertaken a census exercise across the whole population. This is a consultation with a sample of the community that we felt to be representative, including people with particular interests relevant to the park.

Question: Have we had any news on a Crowhurst representative being allowed to join the Steering Group?

Response: The Steering Group currently includes the three local authorities that are financially contributing to the project. The Interreg funding finishes in April and a development strategy will be put together by June, to be followed by the creation of a business plan. At this point the membership of the Steering Group will be reviewed.

Question: The consultation showed that the majority of people want the area for wildlife, walking and nature conservation, right? (Yes). So why touch it then? It's beautiful enough as it is at the moment so why not leave it alone? Have you ever walked around the area yourself?

Response: Parts of it, yes.

Comment:But not all of it, that's obvious. If you had, you'd appreciate how beautiful it is and not be making these plans to spoil it.

Response: What plans? We haven't outlined any plans yet. But when Nigel Marshall does outline his initial plans in a few minutes, I think you'll see that there's the idea of a northern zone that's left as natural as possible, with activity and sports focused in the southern part, especially around what's currently a landfill tip.

Comment: ...The landfill site is not within the area.

Response: Actually it is: the landfill is within the park project area.

Question: Is there a question mark over the funding?

Response: No, funds are being put in for next year by the three local authorities to progress the development strategy and the business plan. Whatever is decided, we need a team in place to pursue further funding: there are some major funding opportunities out there.

Question: Don't you think the answers you got are predictable because you called it a park in the first place? If you had called it "an area" you could have got different responses. So weren't you running a leading consultation from the start – already getting your foot one step up the park ladder?

Response: Consultations never start with a completely blank piece of paper, there's always a framework within which you need to ask people's views. In this case yes, we absolutely started with the premise of a park. This project was not our invention but long preceded our involvement; it was our brief to consult people on whether they wanted the park and what shape it should take. Even so, there was plenty of room for people to express their views and reject the park concept. Some did exactly that – not many but some, for example, told us to forget the park and build houses on the land instead.

Additional response: The concept of a park there has a lot of history as it's been zoned since 1992. There are three versions of Rother District Council plans that have included it. We have moved a long way since then and this exercise was to find out if it's supported and how it could work.

Question: What is the proportion of land privately-owned to council-owned?

Response: Approximately one third council-owned and two thirds privately-owned.

3. Presentation of initial park designs:

Nigel Marshall from East Sussex County Council presented the project team's initial design ideas for the park. The presentation slides can be found on the project web site. In short, Nigel outlined a proposed direction for the park that included:

- A northern Nature Reserve devoted to nature conservation and wildlife, with the southern area focused on sports and activities
- Access for everyone as an integral part of the park design from the outset – catering for walkers, orienteers, cyclists, riders, bird watchers and people with disabilities
- Facilities for people to find out about the local environment and to watch wildlife – through hides and using technology such as remote cameras as well as out in the open
- Many sections of new and improved woodland
- A sports area incorporating a wide range of activities from BMX and skateboarding to archery, model aircraft, bouldering and more
- Play facilities for young people
- Areas for water activities, such as angling and boating, including a 2.5km 'Coastal Park' along the seafront from Glyne Gap in Bexhill to Bulverhythe
- Areas for sculpture and other public art
- Sections in the northern area where private land owners could take advantage of new business opportunities brought by the park – such as visitor accommodation and animal centres
- The scope, longer term, to introduce a more ambitious development – perhaps of the scale of the Eden Project in Cornwall – if the right proposals and funding can be found.

Nigel also explained that the project team did not consider some activities suggested during the consultation to be appropriate for the park – mostly due to space constraints and noise - including swimming, hunting, motor-biking, kite-buggying and golf.

At the end of Nigel's presentation, Tariq Khwaja outlined the chance for feedback. He pointed out that there was a short questionnaire for people to complete before they leave. He explained that there was a further three weeks for comments to be sent to TK Associates by 22 March, when the consultation closes, by email to pebshamviews@tkassociates-uk.com or by post to Pebsham Views, TK Associates, 16 Florence Road, London W5 3TX.

Tariq then opened up the meeting for questions and comments right away.

4. Comments & questions on initial park designs & overall:

Comment (shouted during part of the presentation about keeping the two main towns apart): "Bullshit: each town should be joined together as a unitary authority."

Question: Could Nigel expand on Upper Wilting Farm?

Response: It's the freehold of Hastings Borough Council, an educational trust which would work well with the park. They could build on that.

Question: You show two access links in the north and one in Crowhurst, where is the other you've shown on the map?

Response: It's an existing bridleway.

Question: The red areas you showed for landowner diversification - is that a move to expand the boundaries of the park?

Response: No it's about recognising some facilities that landowners may wish to explore. Regardless of whether it's strictly inside or outside the boundaries of the park, these activities could complement the park. At the end of the day it's up to the landowners whether they want to take up those opportunities.

Question: Why take the park beyond the Link Road? It seems a natural border.

Response: There are still a lot of discussions to be had about this. The north will not be a park anyway, we are describing it as a nature reserve. For this reason, we've taken the Crowhurst recreation ground out as it doesn't fit with the concept of a nature reserve.

Question: So you're not including the recreational ground now ... is that a new development?

Response: Yes, as a direct response to the consultation. The border now runs up to the boundary of the recreation ground. If we were proposing a park over the northern area this might be different.

Question: The areas of grey on the map [in north Bexhill] have been designated for housing, but will the green areas behind them be safeguarded from development?

Response: Yes, this is the idea. We need green open spaces near the new development areas for recreation for the residents. The idea of creating a countryside park is to protect the green spaces.

Question: Why do you show so much car parking? We should be trying to cut down on cars. What's happened to car-free tourism?

Response: We anticipate a great deal less car parking than we would have incorporated 15 years ago, although we haven't got to the level of detail to look at numbers of parking spaces. We are talking relatively modest car parking.

Question: The town-to-town route your map shows - how wide is it? It looks very wide on the map and I'm concerned about large vehicles driving through the park.

Response: Don't worry about the width - it just looks wide so you can see it on the map. It would not be wide enough for cars. It is for cycling, walking, disabled access and horses.

Question: What type of cycling are you looking to cater for? Mountain biking?

Response: BMX, family cycling, all sorts....we've not really explored it in detail yet. We know from the consultation that there's a strong cycling movement and we need to get to grips with exactly which types in the more detailed planning phases.

Question: Out of the 952 questionnaires returned, how many were from Crowhurst?

Response: A lot 160. This is a disproportionately high number given the population of Crowhurst relative to Hastings and Bexhill.

Question: A lot of paths have been flooded this week, has this been taken into consideration?

Response: Flooding is an issue. If we were starting from scratch, we would put no paths in the SSSI, but in reality statutory rights of way are already there. We need to look at it and what we can do to help the paths be usable all year round. This can be worked through during the development.

Question: We've been told they are going to raise the levels of water, is this true?

Response: East Sussex County Council is doing some work to explore the water levels, but have no plans at this stage to increase it. It's part of a discussion to feed back on. There are a number of scenarios being looked at.

Question: Are these plans based on the assumption that the Link Road will go ahead? It's not a foregone conclusion is it?

Response: No, it's not a foregone conclusion. Some elements of the park depend on the road, yes. The sports centre and visitor attractions would have problems if there were no Link Road and would not be feasible. But there are lower key things that could go ahead, certainly the nature reserve and improved access. The general rule is that things that would draw large numbers of people could not go ahead without the road.

Question: Glyne gap station is earmarked, but if Southern Trains get their way there will only be one train an hour. Can we look at a more eco-friendly transport links including trams?

Response: These options can be looked at and were looked at in planning the Link Road. We don't have any transport experts here today to comment in detail, other than to say we support the principle of environmentally-friendly transport as far as is practical.

Question: Nigel's presentation kept talking about facilities for the under 30s, but what about the over 30s? We're mostly over 30 here; what's in it for us?

Response: The figures were taken from Tariq's report on what the under 30s wanted for sports etc. as well as what older people want.

Response: There's plenty in Nigel's presentation for the over 30s. Remember that nature, wildlife and walking were the priorities for the over 30s and a large part of Nigel's presentation was about creating a nature reserve to make these possible.

Question: Could there be angling in the nature reserve and flooded areas?

Response: The water within Combe Haven... we need to get a better handle on how we can use it. Wildlife does need to take the priority if there's a conflict but this needs to be looked at further.

Comment: Angling is the cruellest of all sports.

Question: Will there be a public enquiry for the Link Road?

Response: The planning application goes in later this year. We're not sure if there will be a public enquiry. We do expect objections to the compulsory purchase orders that will be raised for the land needed for the road. Of course the County Council doesn't want an enquiry but it may well happen.

5. Show of hands for and against:

At the end of the questions, Tariq Khwaja asked the audience for a show of hands from those "broadly in support" and "broadly against" the initial plans as outlined.

Approximately two thirds to three quarters of the audience was in support, with about a quarter against.

After this, the formal part of the meeting closed. Tariq thanked everyone for attending and reminded them to complete the questionnaires. Some people left and many stayed for informal discussions.

6. Questionnaire results:

Forty two questionnaires were handed in – i.e. from just over half of the audience.

- **Question 1** – were the consultation findings clearly presented?

Twenty nine said "very clearly" or "clearly", six "adequately" and eight "not clearly" or "poorly". Against the negative responses were several comments about the venue's poor acoustics: we need to use a microphone and speakers if we use the same venue again.

- **Question 2** – Overall, what do you think of the plans presented?

Eighteen were "strongly in favour" and 13 "in favour". Three were neutral, four "against" and four "strongly against." This equates to 74% in favour, 19% against.

- **Question 3** - what do you like best about the ideas? This open question generated the following answers (with frequency of mention in brackets):

- The nature reserve (11)
- The S sports area (5)
- Activities for the young (5)
- All of it! (4)
- Access for all (4)
- Nothing (3)
- The N/S divide (3)
- The range of activities proposed (3)
- Cycling (3)
- Wildlife (3)
- The Bio-park/energy park (2)
- Angling (1)
- How the ideas fit with people's wishes (1)
- The clarity of ideas (1)
- Preservation of green space (1)

- **Question 4** – What, if any, are your concerns? This open question generated the following answers (frequency of mention in brackets):
 - Public/visitor invasion (5)
 - The threat from NIMBYs/farmers stopping the park (5)
 - Cycling will be under-provided (3)
 - Lack of money (2)
 - The Link Road (2)
 - Intrusion into farms (1)
 - The Link Road is being used as blackmail (1)
 - Flooding (1)
 - Don't alienate the farmers or Crowhurst (1)
 - You won't pay a proper price for our land (1)
 - Crowhurst could spoil it for everyone (1)
 - The word 'park' (1)
 - Leave it as it is (1)
 - Will these ideas actually be implemented? (1)
 - Don't let a decision against hunting include clay pigeon shooting (1)
 - Don't over-develop the south: leave opportunities for existing businesses to expand e.g. riding (1)
 - We want financial support for riding businesses (1)
 - The landfill not closing as planned (1)
 - The phasing (1)
 - Proper disabled access (1)
 - Too much parking (1)
 - Get on with it – too much planning/consulting (1)
 - Red tape strangulation (1)

Background note:

The Pebsham Countryside Park Project aims to create a high quality, sustainable park in the 600 hectare green space between Hastings, Bexhill and Crowhurst. It is designed to create a recreational area for local people and to attract visitors, thereby helping to regenerate the area.

The project is a collaboration between East Sussex County, Hastings Borough and Rother District councils. The early stages are part-financed by the European Union's ERDF fund, with the project run in partnership with French countryside initiatives in the Lille region and the Somme.



The consultation exercise is being undertaken by TK Associates (www.tkassociates-uk.com). Further views can be emailed to pebshamviews@tkassociates-uk.com, or posted to TK Associates, 16 Florence Road, London W5 3TX to arrive by 22 March, at which point the consultation will close.

Further information about the project can be found at www.eastsussex.gov.uk/pebsham or by contacting Toni Roberts at troberts@hastings.gov.uk or 01424 451432.

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