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PEBHAM
Countryside Park
PROJECT

Notes from Landowners' Meeting

20 October 2005

Introduction:

The following are notes documenting the Landowners' Meeting held from 15.00 to 17.00 on Thursday 20 October 2005. They are being circulated to the landowners who attended and posted on the Pebsham Countryside Park project web site (www.eastsussex.gov.uk/pebsham) for any interested party to view.

This meeting was the first session in the community consultation programme being undertaken for the development of Pebsham Countryside Park. Undertaken by TK Associates on



behalf of East Sussex County, Hastings Borough and Rother District councils, the consultation seeks to understand the attitudes, concerns and aspirations of local people in relation to the proposed creation of a countryside park.

Meeting notes:

1. Opening presentation:

After words of welcome from Tariq Khwaja (TK Associates), Nigel Marshall (East Sussex County Council) began by outlining the project, explaining that the landfill site is due to shut in 2008 and that a 10-15 year programme is being created to develop a countryside park in the 600 hectare area between St Leonards, Bexhill and Crowhurst.

A recreation demand study is being undertaken to identify market opportunities, particularly for the southern part of the area. Drainage and wildlife studies are also being undertaken and signage is being improved in the area. The three-council team wants to work in partnership with landowners and this session is to begin the process – to hear their concerns, ideas and feelings about the proposed park and to discuss potential benefits for landowners.

2. Presentation on ideas from other parks:

Simon Woodward from recreational analysts PLB gave a presentation on other UK country parks and the impact they have on the surrounding communities and local economies, with a focus on best practice and lessons for the Pebsham Countryside Park project. The presentation slides are available to view on the project web site.

3. Questions and comments session:

There then followed a facilitated session of questions and comments, with most responses given by Nigel Marshall, Simon Woodward and Frank Rallings (Rother District Council).

Question: In the other examples presented of country parks, how much of the land was being actively farmed beforehand?

Response: Some of the land was being used for farming, some for grazing and, in other cases, it was woodland. The Pebsham case could be a unique opportunity to incorporate farming within a countryside park.

Question: When you talk about 'partnerships with landowners', what do you mean? Do your plans involve compulsory purchase of private land?

Response: No discussions have been held about compulsory purchase by the local authorities. The farmland is largely privately owned and the future has to include a constructive relationship with the owners. We want to see all parties working together to combine farming with recreation. The southern area of the proposed park is likely to be more focused on recreation with the northern areas focused on wildlife and farming. But the landowners may want to think about whether their land holds new recreation opportunities in the context of a countryside park?

Question: Farming is already under pressure and the land looks so attractive exactly because it is being farmed. It could end up being scrubland with our livelihoods threatened.

Response: There is a relatively high proportion of active farming here and an opportunity to think about whether there is a way to bring a park, farming and urban areas together.

Comment: Coombe Haven is a beautiful area and there is a concern that people could ruin it.

Question: Is the Link Road going to go ahead? The proposed route is so costly that it is likely to prove unviable and so will be shelved, which would ruin these plans for a park.

Response: The road is a separate development to the park plans. Both have independent existences.

Question: Having always lived in Pebsham, and owning the western-most portion of the proposed park area, if I don't wish to co-operate, will you compulsorily purchase my land or agree to buy it at a respectable cost?

Response: No-one is in a position at this stage to talk about buying land. But it is conceivable that one or two key sites could become a priority and local authorities, trusts or private developers involved in plans for a park may look at buying certain sites. At this early stage we just do not know.

Comment: Anyone wishing to sell their farm is in a difficult position now given the uncertainty the park project brings. In this way the park could be a hindrance, with prospective buyers deterred.

Response: There should not be a problem now as we are only at an early stage of exploring ideas.

Question: Our farm is on the northern-most tip of the land area and we have a path going through our yard. It is fairly peaceful at the moment. With the proposed park, where will the parking be and how will the paths be maintained? We could have large numbers of people walking over our land.

Response: The issue of access in the northern part of the proposed park needs to be looked at carefully. Where we deliver people to the park is fundamental and there are no specific places identified right now. Pathways could also be created to manage the routes people walk; we could also look creatively at existing rights of way.

Comment: People go where they want in the area as it is. Some people think they can go to a park and do what they want.

Response: Rangers could be used to help manage this issue and discourage certain activities. There is a lot of time to plan for ways to manage the flow of people and potentially disruptive activities. In any case, it is likely that the southern part of any park will be busier than the north.

Question: We chose to be farmers, not park keepers. What incentive is there to participate in this?

It was asked if an incentive was felt to be needed and the general view was that it was.

Question: What about our security? People wander and they can get abusive if you ask them to return to the paths.

It was generally agreed that how people behave is a key issue. It was commented that a project like this could encourage better security which will be needed anyway, ready for the new urban developments planned.

Question: If we do not want to diversify is there an incentive for us to stay farmers? Farming is part of the valley and our views need to be taken on board. Farmers do need to change but we need to find a balance.

Tariq Khwaja asked if anyone was open to considering new opportunities instead or as well as their current farming business; no-one responded.

Comment: Farming will change in five to ten years' time anyway.

Question: Rother District Council is our local council: will they really relax planning regulation and, for example, let us have a café on our farm?

Frank Rallings asked if anyone had commented on the local plan; no-one said they had. He pointed out that the inspectors report on the plan will be available in December and he encouraged those present to look at it and comment. Following consultations, the council will make a decision on whether to accept or modify the plan. If the area is not developed as a park then the planning system will stay as it is. If the land is to be developed as a park then appropriate proposals and planning applications will of course be looked at. The North Bexhill development will happen if the road happens and we can have either a managed or unmanaged urban fringe. The exercise today is to get everyone's views. We see this as important for farming, wildlife and the countryside. It may be that it remains unmanaged, but development will happen and managing it may be the best thing. We will not impose anything on anyone if it is not wanted.

Question: If inspectors rule that we should have this park then what will happen?

Response: This is why it is so important to get people's views. If people are strongly against participating in the development of a countryside park then Rother District Council is unlikely to compulsorily purchase properties. As much as anything else the council does not have the funds. It could be that no significant development takes place in the northern area – perhaps just limited change such as the introduction of equestrian activities.

Question: What rights will we have as farmers?

Response: If it becomes a countryside park there will not necessarily be a change to the rights of way. But the wider area has a fundamental shortage of open space so these proposals need to be looked at. If landowners think "no way" then we can consider park plans more for the southern side of the area.

Question: What would be the advantages to farmers?

Response: There could be commercial opportunities to provide, say, equestrian, tourist and other recreational uses.

The recreational study being undertaken, which will be ready around Christmas, will show where the shortfalls are and highlight market opportunities.

Question: Why is this study being published at the same time as the inspectors report? How can we act on the inspector's report if we do not have the market study to hand?

Response: The two reports are separate initiatives.

Comment: I wish to retire and sell up and I believe the road is the key to this being able to happen but I have grave doubts about it.

Comment: The change of land use and consequent change in business rates would make it very expensive to diversify - is likely to make it impossible.

Question: Equestrian activity keeps coming up; why?

Response: We just have a feeling that there is a market opportunity to provide horse riding activities that are otherwise lacking here. There could be a big market for themed horse riding in the Sussex countryside, the likes of which you see abroad but rarely in the UK. Another activity being looked at in the recreational study is cycling. People will pay to go horse riding, but not to walk or cycle. Horse riding is more of a commercial opportunity.

Comment: Being in the equestrian business, I know that it's difficult to hire out horses given the burden of insurance, health and safety restrictions and an increasingly tendency to sue for accidents. Living on the southern most part of the area, we will be at breaking point if hundreds of cars turn up to use the park.

Comment: One attended remarked that he spent all of his youth freely playing on the farms and wandering around the open area with no problems. He asked if information could be given about Cuckmere, which is a similar scheme. How has it worked?

Response: The farm at Cuckmere is open to the public and works well, with many visitors.

Comment: People go there to visit the farm, so it is a different case.

Question: Can you not improve the paths without calling it a "park"?

Response: Yes this can be looked at. The "park" label is not fixed: we could look at other names, or it could be applied only to the southern area.

Question: Can you define what you mean by a "managed area"?

Response: It is a matter of how people are allowed to enter the area and use the land.

Question: Can we put the park up to be managed as a whole entity, with landowners playing a key part in it and being financially involved?

Response: Yes this could be looked at.

Question: What about vandalism – visitors breaking off tree branches and the like?

Response: This would need to be looked at along with all the other security and access issues that have been raised.

Comment: A reservoir could be put in. All the water currently goes into the streams and rivers straight to the sea. Surely the water could instead be diverted to a reservoir. There is already a water shortage and, as new houses are built, you could put pipes in. If not, put a shallow lake in anyway, it would be good for the birds and wildlife.

4. Close:

Tariq Khwaja closed the meeting at 17.00, saying this should be regarded as the start of conversations about plans for the park. He explained that other meetings and exhibitions would be taking place as part of the consultation, to get views from a broad cross section of the community, and he promised that notes from this meeting would be issued to all who took part.

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.



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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