

OUR BATTLE IS OVER

Family firm gives up on Stour Valley Visitor Centre scheme after Pickles rejects appeal

By JAMES CALNAN
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A 13-YEAR battle to transform Horkesley Park has come to an end after communities secretary Eric Pickles rejected a planning appeal.

Bunting & Sons has been trying to create the Stour Valley Visitor Centre on 101 acres of land partly in the Dedham Vale.

The family firm, which last year entered administration, wanted to create gardens, art and craft studios, a Suffolk Punch breeding centre and an art gallery.

But Mr Pickles yesterday revealed he backed the decisions by Colchester Council's planning committee and an independent inspector to reject the planning application.

Stephen Bunting, senior partner of Bunting & Sons, admitted this was the end of the road for Horkesley Park.

He said: "We're hugely disappointed by the outcome of the appeal."

"We agree with the inspector's report that the Horkesley Park planning application would have delivered benefits, but needless to say we do not agree that on balance this is outweighed by other considerations."

"We're very grateful for all the support we've received over the many years we've been working on the planning application."

"We're very sorry we will not see the project come to fruition and feel the people of Colchester have sadly missed out on what would have been a wonderful attraction."

The family firm claimed Horkesley Park would attract 316,250 visitors a year and create 150 jobs.

In February 2013, Colchester Council's planning committee went against the recommendation of officers and chose to refuse the planning application after a heated, four-and-a-half-hour meeting.

Bunting & Sons appealed against the decision, but went into administration shortly after last October's hearings.

However, it is understood administrators Deloitte and new financial partners Pigeon Investment Management were keen to create Horkesley Park if planning permission was forthcoming.

Will Pavry, chairman of the Stour Valley Action Group, said: "We're obviously delighted it's been refused."

"We feel it's a vindication of the decision by the council in February 2013 and we think it's a wonderful result."

"After 13 years of struggle, we've now finally got Horkesley Park refused."

Bernard Jenkin, MP for Harwich and North Essex, added: "This comes as a huge relief and a vindication that what protesters have been saying is valid."

"This is fantastic news for the future of Dedham Vale and the Stour Valley."

But Colchester MP Sir Bob Russell said the decision was "bitterly disappointing".

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

"It is a huge, lost opportunity - one which was backed by the Essex Chamber of Commerce which could see all the economic advantages."

The Gazette asked Bunting & Sons and Deloitte about the future for the Horkesley Park site, but did not receive a response.



■ Backed rejection - Eric Pickles



■ Disappointed - Sir Bob Russell



■ Celebrating - residents who opposed the plan for Horkesley Park

Picture: SEANA HUGHES CO93372

By MEGAN FRENCH
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THE benefits of Horkesley Park would not outweigh the damage it would cause, an inspector found.

Despite new jobs and a boost to the local economy, the planning inspector, who led a four-day inquiry into the plans, felt the scheme would harm the Stour Valley.

Communities secretary Eric Pickles backed the inspector on every single point raised in the report.

It considered three main points:

- Whether it was in a sustainable location;
- The impact on its surroundings;
- Whether there were any planning considerations which needed to be taken into account.

The Secretary of State also

Why the scheme was turned down

took into account the inspector's comments that at the inquiry, the council's witnesses, the evidence, and that of third-party objectors was essentially unchallenged by the appellants nor tested by cross-examination.

Writing on Mr Pickles's behalf, Christine Symes said: "Like the inspector, he concludes the scheme is in an inherently unsustainable location in accessibility terms and

it would not be consistent with national and local policy objectives intended to conserve the landscape and scenic beauty of the area of natural beauty."

"He further concludes the scheme would irrevocably harm the setting of the Grade II listed Chantry (a former rectory in the grounds)."

"Like the inspector, he considers, while job creation and economic growth go some way towards offsetting the harm the

scheme would cause, the cumulative harm in this case is such it would clearly outweigh the benefits of the proposal."

"He concludes the scheme does not comply with the development plan overall and it would not represent sustainable development."

Under certain circumstances, the decision can be challenged by making an application to the High Court within six weeks.

FOR



Robert Leng, president of Essex Chambers of Commerce

"I'm extremely disappointed. "A great opportunity has been missed for a meaningful tourist attraction and obviously the jobs and impact on the economy that goes with it."

"Reading some of the findings, I find some of the reasons for refusal very strange, to say the least."

"The first one refers to a remote location."

"In fact, the centre was on the A134, which is a higher classifi-

cation than Colchester Zoo and other places of similar interest."

"I have long maintained Colchester needs one or two other major attractions before it can really call itself a tourist centre, and that would certainly have been one of them."

"It will be interesting to see what alternative use that area is put to. The objectors might find there's a development which affects them far more meaningfully than a heritage park."

AGAINST



Roger Drury, Dedham Vale Society planning officer

"I'm delighted the importance of protecting the countryside and particularly the Dedham Vale area of natural beauty had been recognised by the inspector and the Secretary of State."

"We'll be able to use it to protect the countryside."

"What the recommendation does say is Colchester Council's Local Plan is one in which all sorts of applications should be based on in future."

"From my point of view, as the

planning secretary for the Dedham Vale Society, it gives me a very useful yardstick for future applications which would have an impact on the Dedham Vale."

"The important thing is people use the Dedham Vale and understand the value of the nature which underlines it."

"If we get too many people focused on one small area, that's going to impact on the quality of the area and its value as a recreational resource for Colchester."

TIMELINE FOR HORKESLEY PARK PLAN

- April 2001: Bunting & Sons first put forward plans for a John Constable Heritage Centre at Horkesley Park. It was limited to the site of the old greenhouses and the lakes area.
- June 2001: Application withdrawn. The statement from Bunting & Sons said the decision was made in view of local opposition to the size of the proposed development.
- September 2001: Permission was granted for use of part of the London Road site for light industrial use.
- September 2003: Application for the Horkesley Park Heritage and Conservation Centre submitted to Colchester Council. The application is never registered by the council.
- December 2003: Application returned to Bunting & Sons for environmental study to be carried out.
- April 2005: Document for the environmental study is submitted.
- September 2005: Application for the centre is resubmitted with detailed environmental study.
- March 2006: Application withdrawn to enable appropriate amendments and improvements to be made.
- March 2009: Bunting & Sons resubmits planning application for the London Road site for the fourth time. Centre would include a Chinese garden, art experience boasting Constable paintings, gift shops, countryside experiences and exhibitions and a centre for rare Suffolk Punch horses.
- May 2011: Colchester Council rejects the application.
- June 2012: Planning application submitted for the Stour Valley Visitor Centre.
- February 2013: Colchester Council refuses the application after a heated debate. The meeting is held in Charter Hall, Colchester, to accommodate the public who wanted to attend.
- April 2013: Appeal lodged with planning inspectorate.
- October 2013: An inquiry is held into the appeal.
- April 2014: The appeal is rejected.