

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER

October 2009 No. 98

THE NEXT TOWN TALK

Will be on NOVEMBER 17TH
at 6.15pm at Benslow
Music Trust

The FULL COUNCIL MEETING to decide the fate of our Town Hall will be on 3 December at Gernon Road, Letchworth.

COME AND SHOW YOU CARE ABOUT HITCHIN!

FUTURE TOWN CENTRE GROUP MEETINGS:

23rd November 2009

18 January 2010

15 March 2010

All at 7.30pm in the Lucas
Room, Hitchin Town Hall.

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THE TOWN HALL: THEIR PARALLEL UNIVERSE

“There is a lack of a comprehensive business plan” – *Chairman of Scrutiny.*

“The project is *feasible*, but is the cost valid?” – *a Letchworth Councillor, speaking personally.*

“Museums should preserve heritage, not destroy it” – *former lecturer in the history of building design.*

“The process that you have followed may be realpolitik, but it is not democracy” – *Hitchin Forum spokesman.*

“The Town Hall is the heart of the community” – *Hitchin Councillor.*

“Where do we go from here if you really do consider yourselves above scrutiny?” – *Director of Hitchin Initiative.*

The above quotes are taken from some of the excellent presentations to Cabinet at the meeting on 20 October about their plans for our museum and Town Hall. They effectively sum up some of the criticisms of the proposals:

there *is* no business plan; it seems that the fate of the existing museum is that it could be sold, for the highest price it will fetch, as a ‘redundant building’; the estimated cost of £3.4m is very close to the £3.5m they have for the whole project, including a new Resources Centre. Nobody has any idea what might be found once builders start messing about with the redevelopment of a 100-year-old building;

however much the gym is smartened up, it will never replace the main hall in terms of both capacity and quality of environment, and there will be no secular building in the town capable of holding 500 people.

The councillors asked a few perfunctory question of the developer’s architect and then agreed that the whole thing is a truly brilliant idea and the people of Hitchin are a lot of whingers who insist on looking a gift horse in the mouth. If we were cynical we might think they had made their decision before the meeting and were just pretending to have a discussion!

Another gem that emerged from the fog of obfuscation was that they have still not put into place the trusteeship requirements for the gym and workmen’s hall which have been outstanding for at least two years and for some considerable time before that.

So despite the plans having already been thrown out by the Hitchin and Letchworth Area and Scrutiny Committees, and the appeals by community representatives at the meeting, Cabinet in its collective wisdom sided with people living very close to the Town Hall who complained about the noise and disturbance in the street that sometimes occurs when large events are held in the

hall. This was not relevant to the matter in hand and should be an easily solvable problem by contacting the Council’s excellent Environmental Health department. The disturbance to neighbours is just another example of poor management by NHDC, but it gave them the excuse they needed to pursue their party line.

They say they have consulted us. In my dictionary, “consultation” is defined as “to deliberate together, to confer”. Sure, they consulted for 4 years by means of the Arts, Museums and Heritage Forum, and then totally disregarded everything that group said. They have NOT consulted us on the one subject on which they should have: their basic premise that the Town Hall is the best place for a museum. The key point which they seem totally unable to grasp – or rather are determined not to acknowledge – is that this starting point is the issue on which nobody in either the community or the Area Committees has had a say. **That** is the issue on which we wanted – and still want – consultation. NHDC should therefore not be too surprised that the community of Hitchin is not over the moon about their project.

The Editor

DOUBLE YELLOW LINES EVERYWHERE?

A local parking issue in Standhill Road and the surrounding area, which suffers considerably from all-day parking by people who choose not to use the town's car parks, has wider implications for Hitchin and indeed the whole NHDC area.

A solution to the parking problems in the road had been arrived at after months - even years - of discussion and consultation. A workable CPZ (residents' parking scheme) was finally agreed and approved by the consulting engineers, the NHDC officers and councillors and the residents: a really good example of working together. All the papers had been prepared and were about to be issued but last week the new Portfolio holder, Cllr Tom Brindley, ordered a halt to the proceedings.

He then instructed the officers to draw up a new plan using only double yellow lines.

At an unpleasant meeting at Geron Road, the Portfolio Holder said that, now he was responsible for Transport and Planning, all support for CPZs had been withdrawn district wide. CPZs which are losing money or only break even are being reviewed with a view to finding a solution (= significant permit price rises or closure).

He advised that all parking issues would in future be resolved by yellow lines (preferably double as they need less policing) and that if the residents did not like it, then they could park elsewhere

as there was plenty of public parking available in Hitchin. He made it clear that this principle applies not just to us but to all the NHDC area. He also made it clear that residents were only one of the stakeholders and were not the major consideration. The Triangle scheme got started just in time!

It would seem that this is a major shift in policy and appears to have been brought in arbitrarily, as our councillors were as much in the dark as we were. It appears that this new policy is not a result of the recent Parking Review but is driven by Value for Money criteria. The Review, we understand, does include CPZs as a solution to be considered - but, it would appear, not by Cllr Brindley.

THE TOWN CENTRE GROUP

Members are reminded that meetings of the Town Centre Group are open to all members of the Forum. There are 6 meetings a year, and the usual agenda includes reports from the Police, Town Centre Manager, Community Development Officer and Hitchin Market Traders. Other town centre topics for discussion are the Town Hall, Hitchin Museum, Churchgate, the latest Hitchin Committee and Town Talk and any other NHDC meet-

ings/issues like the Hitchin Transport Plan, Land Allocations, pigeons etc, plus any town centre planning applications.

Anyone interested in the varied issues affecting our town Centre will be warmly welcomed. Future meeting dates are: 23 November, 18 January and 15 March. All are held in the Lucas Room in the Town Hall at 7.30 pm.



CONTACTING US

We have been working on our website. You can now contact all our group leaders via email from the site: just go to the "Contact us" page, scroll down and click on the link which will open up an email to the appropriate person.

ISSUE GROUPS

As trailed by our Chairman in the last Newsletter, we have now set up 5 Issue Groups:

Arts - leader Ann Heymans

Green issues - leader Chris Honey

Planning - leader Ellie Clarke

Transport - leader David Borner

Youth - leader Leslie Mustoe,

and we have hopes of establishing one for Sport if we can find someone to lead it.

At the AGM in November the group leaders will each speak briefly about what their group does/hopes to do, and what kind of help they need. There

will also be an opportunity for members to join a group or groups of their choosing. If more people get actively involved in the work of the Forum, the more we can achieve for Hitchin.

WEST OF HITCHIN

Hitchin's greenbelt land is at risk! North Herts District Council's Local Development Framework set out their planning and spatial vision for the region in 2007. This incorporates growth targets set within the original East of England Plan (to 2021) which is accountable to government targets and policy.

In the North Herts' Core Strategy and Development Policies Document, NHDC defined their preferred options for applying this to the district to the year 2021. Although the Core Strategy and the Preferred Options Land Allocations paper have still to be agreed, NHDC produced an **Additional Land Allocations Sites Paper** in July 2009 for public consultation.

This Paper includes all the supplementary sites put forward by developers and landowners. Many of them are completely speculative and are clearly contrary to established and emerging policy. The sites to the south and west of Hitchin, which have been promoted in connection with a possible bypass, are completely unjustified. Development in this area was a discounted option in September

ber 2007, so the inclusion of these sites now is completely contrary to the draft Core Strategy, unless that has changed, in which case the public should have been informed prior to this consultation.

This site is being promoted as a way of funding a south-western bypass of Hitchin. The line of such a road would presumably run from the A505, to the south of Charlton, between Gosmore and Hitchin, and between St Ipployts and Hitchin to the A602. Such a bypass has been talked about for many years, but has never been adequately justified either as a local distributor road or as part of a strategic route. It is not in any road programme, so far as we are aware. To allocate land for development solely based on the possibility that a case for a bypass might be presented is completely inappropriate.

The site is almost wholly in the Green Belt, and its development would conflict with the purposes of including land in green belts: it would be a huge extension of the built-up area of Hitchin; it would cause the coalescence of

Charlton and Gosmore with Hitchin; it would be a massive encroachment into the countryside; it would have a dramatic effect on the setting and character of the town.

The site identified is capable of accommodating at least 12,000 dwellings (at the national indicative minimum density of 30 dwellings per hectare). This is far in excess of Hitchin's housing needs, and is about double the housing requirement for the whole of North Hertfordshire excluding the proposed expansion of Stevenage for the period 2001 to 2021 given in the East of England Plan. *It even exceeds the housing target of 9,300 dwellings for the period up to 2031, based on an assumption made in the 2009 East of England Plan, that the annual average rate of provision after 2021 should be the same as for the period 2006 to 2021.*

The West of Hitchin Action Group (WHAG), the Council for the Preservation of Rural England and Hitchin Forum oppose such large scale destruction of vast areas of green belt around our town. The response from residents has been phenomenal, with over 1000 people signing over 4,800 site specific objections. These were all handed to NHDC's Strategic Planner, Andy Beavan on September 14th, the end of the consultation period.

The same developer has also submitted the proposal to the East of England Regional Assembly (EERA) and it appears in the new East of England Plan, which takes forward present thinking to 2031. 10,000 houses to the west of Hitchin have been included in some of the scenarios up for public comment until 24th November 2009.

<http://www.eera.gov.uk/News/news/2009/sep/say-future-east-england/>

WHAG has been assured that EERA will take the objections presented to NHDC in September as part of their consultation on the Plan.

Meanwhile the decision to be taken by NHDC on their original Local Development Framework Core Strategy has been delayed yet again and will not be presented to cabinet until the spring of 2010, as has the decision to be taken by Luton and South Bedfordshire on their housing expansion into North Hertfordshire www.keolg.org



HITCHIN ARTS FORUM

Are you interested in the Arts in Hitchin....theatre, concerts, choirs, art groups etc?



Are there issues that you think Hitchin Forum should be involved with or could help with? There is already the Town Hall/Museum debate.

If you would like to become more involved or have an issue that you would like to raise please contact Ann Heymans on 01462 433281.



RANTOLOGY TO REALITY

We *rant* about a lot of issues in Hitchin: Luton east expansion, Stevenage west expansion, East of England development proposals, Land Allocation in and around Hitchin, Luton and possibly a Hitchin bypass, overdevelopment in Hitchin, Churchgate, Hitchin Conservation area, Hitchin Urban Transport Plan, possible incineration in Hertfordshire, recycling and zero waste, NHDC's Climate Change Strategy, the Town Hall, Hitchin Museum, pigeon infestation, the effects of the expanding night life in Hitchin, the state of the public realm and many more.

Have I left any out? Oh yes the High Ropes Project for the Dell. Why? Because it will not leave enough *sand* for people who ignore the consequences of Peak Oil and

Climate Change in which to bury their heads! Not only do people not realise that ignoring these threats will reduce their life quality and shorten others', but that they will have suffocated in the *sand* anyway and that their survivors will have to waste energy digging them in deeper (6 foot?) into the *sand*. You might argue that this is an altruistic act providing nutrients to the *sand* for green growth as a new sustainable energy source. Stop, you need not pay such a high price!

Instead I suggest extracting fellow Hitchinites from the *sand*, getting them resuscitated and joining me in starting Hitchin Transition Town to reduce fossil fuel energy, increase renewable

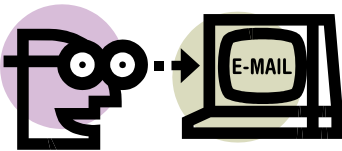
energy and revive Hitchin's economy by using local shops and services as much as possible. This will produce a much more sustainable future built on rock rather than *sand*, a raw material useful for double glazing and for casting wind turbine blades, bicycles and other low energy artefacts. Much more useful than having to fill bags with it to combat rising water levels!

To prevent capital punishment by *sand* and to change *rant* into *reality* contact me at [c h r i s - honey.design@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:chris-honey.design@yahoo.co.uk) before the *sand*glass runs out.



..it will not leave enough sand for people who ignore the consequences of Peak Oil and Climate Change in which to bury their heads!

MEMBER COMMUNICATIONS

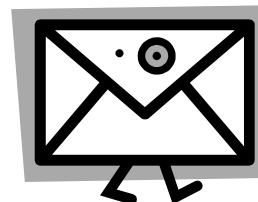


As members who use email will be aware, we sometimes send out emails either to highlight important issues of which members would want to be aware but where deadlines may have passed before the matter can be covered in a Newsletter, or where immediate action is needed. This both keeps our members abreast of developments as they occur in rapidly-changing situations, and saves on our printing and postage costs.

There is, however, a percentage of our membership for whom we do not have an email address. This could be for the obvious reason that you do not have or use email, but it may be that your email address has changed and we have not been given the new one. We do encourage those of you who are online but are not on our e-circulation list to give our Membership Secretary your email address so that we can keep you informed. We will NEVER give or sell your details to anyone else, and will only use your address for Forum communications.

For group members, it would be very helpful if one or two online members could offer to receive emails from us and pass them on to the rest of the group. That way everyone is kept up to date and can take part in any urgent action that may be needed.

Thank you for your cooperation!



The Secretary, 34 Benslow Rise, Hitchin SG4 9QY 01462 450494

Member of: Hitchin Town Centre Initiative
Campaign to Protect Rural England

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President: Michael Ransom

