

HITCHIN FORUM

Caring for our Town

NEWSLETTER
May/June 2014 No. 123

Chairman's Peace

I wonder what would give me peace? The thought of **Luton Airport** doubling its capacity does not. The extra flight noise and traffic which will follow the government's approval of the proposal and rejection of protest to the extension will make this a less peaceful place to be. We are pleased that NHDC's latest local **housing proposals** mean that near-doubling in size of Hitchin seems no longer to be a threat, but in the local press our MP recently seemed to encourage reckless building in this area. This is of course part of the larger problem, to expand in the south east and hope that we don't run out of oxygen. I like the campaign by the Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust to educate children about water supplies in this crowded county. Take too much out of the ground and the chalk streams dry up, and the unique associated wildlife disappears. Tell the children, who will tell their parents, and maybe things could change!

By the time the next newsletter arrives we will know if the Heritage Lottery Fund believes that **Bancroft Recreation Ground** deserves their money. Meanwhile a small step forward by the Leader of the Council in stating she hoped that henceforth its proper historical name, Bancroft Recreation Ground, could be used. Well done Cllr Needham. Amongst other concerns for its future, the possible extinction of **public tennis** is disturbing my peace, and potentially spoiling the opportunity that many of us have enjoyed in the past, of playing knockabout tennis with our children. The latest proposal is that the tennis club will be shifted, that only 3 courts will remain, and that public access will only be when the 3rd court is not in use by the club (midnight to 6am in the summer?). There has been no study of the usage of the current public courts, but anecdotally they seem to have been well used. I thought that information on tennis court usage was to be gathered in the summer, but officers seem to have made their decision already. NHDC Cabinet saw an 'Initial Design Proposal' with just 3 courts sketched in, but there has never been an informed debate about this aspect of the scheme, and Cabinet has never been asked to rule on this detail. Is there any other way of providing appropriate public access to tennis in the town? Will the refurbishment of the Rec be at the price of losing public tennis? We will see, but in the meantime do tell the Council that this is a bad move.

Part of the **Hitchin Town Hall** complex has been demolished, someone has built a wall where a wall shouldn't be (and we hope that sense, peace and partnership will prevail), and the District Museum has lottery money for a super display area. The end result could be very good. I wonder what will happen to the **old museum building** – can Charnwood House be kept in public usage? That was the wish of the donors, and we hope that will be honoured.

The town is changing. The former Post Office has been demolished prior to Whitebarn's redevelopment, giving a unique view from Hermitage Road towards the Cloisters. Now if only Churchgate could be sorted in the next year we would have something to cheer!

One cheer which will have been heard before you read this is for our **Big Hitchin Tidy Up**, nominated for the *Comet's Community Awards, Great & Green category*. Well done Judith and Ellie for organizing it and to all of you who joined in.

Mike Clarke, Chairman

Speaking of Churchgate . . .

It is well over a year since NHDC's Development Agreement with Simons was terminated. In the wings is a much more modest proposal by Hammersmatch which should be given serious consideration by the Council. Here is a transcript of a letter sent by Hitchin Forum to all Hitchin Councillors:

Representatives of Hitchin Forum and other community groups, as well as Hitchin Councillors, were invited to a presentation by Hammersmatch at The Priory on 10th April. On the 15th we had a Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting where we were able to explore some of the issues further with one of the Hammersmatch team.

The Forum is very pleased that proposals for Churchgate have continued to be developed over the last year in discussion with the Council's planning officers. We are particularly pleased that provision for flats above the shops is being pursued and that there is opportunity to create some interesting public spaces within the scheme. There are indications that the cinema may be a popular addition to the town centre, and that careful thought is being given to how this part of the development can be designed to fit within the local townscape.

We do, however, have outstanding concerns particularly in relation to the future of the market and the provision for parking. Our view is that, while the addition of a cinema may be welcomed, the long term future of the market (displaced by the cinema and associated parking) is essential to the success of Hitchin. We are therefore concerned that there has been so little progress over the last year in clarifying the needs of the market and an appropriate site. We understand that the location at Portmill West as currently shown by Hammersmatch may not be considered

appropriate in planning terms, while the idea of dispersal over the wider area is unlikely to be acceptable to the market traders, or indeed the public.

Our view is that these issues need to be explored between the Council, Hammersmatch and the market traders and a solution found as soon as possible. Our understanding from the Hammersmatch team is that they cannot dedicate more resources to the work until they have a firmer basis on which to proceed in relation to the terms of the leasehold agreement, and the Council's willingness to include the site of the cinema within that leasehold.

Hitchin Forum is of the view that with further work, the Hammersmatch proposals have the potential to meet the needs of the town, and this should be fully explored over the next few months. We therefore urge that you and other Hitchin Councillors put pressure on the Council and its officers to enter into discussions with a view to coming to a conclusion on the leasehold issues as a matter of urgency, and to take part in discussions with the market traders on potential design solutions.

The Forum, acting with the other community groups and Hitchin Initiative as part of the Hitchin Town Action Group (HTAG), will be considering whether there is the opportunity to help to inform and involve people in the town and surrounding area as proposals are developed - prior to any planning application.

Recent Planning Proposals

5 Sun Street - Wetherspoons want to convert the former Conservative Club in Sun Street to a pub. We raised concerns about the opening hours and impact on public order and residential amenity, servicing arrangements and that there were no proposals to allow for a River Hiz walkway. Significant concessions were agreed on opening hours and we understand land is to be set aside for future development of a river walkway here.

2 Churchyard - a proposal for change of use of the former Woodbridge's shoe shop to a restaurant would erode the number of small retail units available for start-ups etc and affect the setting of the Church. Permission was granted, but with a condition regarding storage of rubbish bins etc.

Housing Proposals

Hitchin Forum's planning group recently discussed NHDC's latest housing proposals. Its Chairman, Adrian Gurney gives us some detail:

NHDC published an updated Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) on its website in March: http://www.north-herts.gov.uk/index/environment_and_planning/planning/planning_policy_and_projects-2/evidence_base/strategic_housing_land_availability_assessment-2.htm. The SHLAA considers sites which may be available for housing development in a planning period ending in March 2031.

This update follows on from the consultation that took place in 2013 and a re-assessment of the sites in terms of three tests: physical ability to accommodate development, availability based on landowner intentions and financial viability. Sites which pass the tests will not all necessarily be developed, but a selection of them will be allocated for development in the forthcoming Local Plan, a draft of which is expected by the end of the year.

The main change as far as Hitchin is concerned is that the major "strategic" site south and west of the town has been declared as failing at least one of the tests. The town no longer faces the threat of a very significant change in its scale and function and this is very much to be welcomed. But there are still

proposals that will concern Hitchin Forum members:

* An area covering the old Priory Park (between Charlton, Gosmore and Maydencroft) is still included for potential development. This is an extremely important part of the Green Belt on high ground very visible from surrounding countryside, and providing separation between Hitchin and the villages, and an important recreational resource.

* There are other areas of Green Belt at Highover Farm, at St Ippolyts and Gosmore, and at Grays Lane/Lucas Lane which remain under threat, while opportunities for some housing on parts of brown field sites have been excluded (including Churchgate).

* The majority of the Green Belt sites north and west of Stevenage and east of Luton remain as possible housing areas.

We will hold a Hitchin Forum members' meeting to discuss any housing proposals which are included in the Draft Local Plan, but in the meantime, you may wish to look at the report and maps and discuss them with your local councillors.

Diary Dates

Saturday, 7 June: **Councillors' Surgery** - 10.30am - 12 noon; Hitchin Market Place.

The monthly surgery for discussing local issues with local councillors, including any new councillors elected in the May elections.

Tuesday, 10 June: **Town Talk** - 6.30pm; **Hitchin Committee** - 7.30pm; Benslow Music Trust, Benslow Lane. An opportunity to raise matters of local interest with Hitchin Councillors and to see local democracy at work.

Tuesday, 17 June: **Hitchin Forum Members' Meeting**

Presentation by Town Centre Manager, Keith Hoskins, about the latest developments following the successful five-year renewal of Hitchin's *Business Improvement District*, as well as discussion about current Hitchin issues.

The Big Hitchin Tidy Up

The Big Hitchin Tidy Up, organised by Hitchin Forum and now in its third year, took place on Sunday 6th April, with a few further “tidy-ups” undertaken just before or after that date. Here, one of the organisers, Judith Gurney, reports on the event and suggestions for further action:

It was a very worthwhile event, supported by many Hitchin Forum members and the wider public who had read about the event in the local press. 15 sites in Hitchin looked a lot better after the 60 or so volunteers had cleared at least 88 bags of rubbish – and that is not counting the many large items hauled out of the undergrowth or water, and the many cans, plastic and glass bottles that volunteers recycled themselves. We are grateful to NHDC Waste Dept which supplied black bags, and promptly collected the filled bags from various sites after the event.

We estimate that a total of at least 135 hours of volunteer labour went into achieving a very gratifying result on public land – a significant saving to the council and its taxpayers.

Feedback from volunteers has highlighted some constructive suggestions that could help make Hitchin more free from litter in the future:

* Some very badly littered areas had no litter bin near them – for instance, near Benslow Bridge, and in “The Dell” by Windmill Hill. If bins were there, at least some would-be litter droppers might use them, but also the many noble souls who quietly pick up litter on a regular basis would have a bin nearby. We plan to raise this with councillors – and it could be an opportunity for businesses to sponsor the installation of such bins, perhaps.

* In some locations, groups found evidence of fly tipping, and this has been reported to NHDC. It would be good if more instances of fly tipping, graffiti, and other damage to property and vehicles were reported – if authorities do not know about it, they cannot be expected to do anything about it. NHDC can be contacted about this by phoning 01462 474000; ask for the Licensing and

Enforcement Team who will take details of the location, and make arrangements for the material to be collected and disposed of or recycled. Be sure you are given a reference number so you can track progress on its removal. You can also report online by clicking on 'Report it' on NHDC's home page.

* Waitrose and Sainsbury's supermarkets had considerable amounts of litter on or adjacent to their premises, presumably mostly dropped by their customers. Perhaps our readers could raise this with them – both large and small businesses are often anxious to raise their positive public profile, and this would be a very simple and cheap way of doing this.

* Another area of concern raised was unsightly litter on Hitchin's railway embankments: for obvious safety and trespass reasons volunteers cannot clear these areas, but we will be putting pressure on the relevant agencies to clear up their property.

* Similar concerns were expressed about the dreadful state of the verges on Hitchin's approach roads, particularly the A602 towards Stevenage and the A505 towards Luton. Again, this is NOT a job for volunteers, and the relevant authorities do have an annual clearance – but why not ask your councillors when this is going to take place so it remains nearer the top of the council's jobs list?

* Hitchin Forum member Andy Lickfold organizes the "Friends of Walsworth Common" which meets on the 3rd Saturday monthly for an hour or two to tidy up the Common. They would welcome extra help, and in particular anybody who would like to do the same for Purwell Meadows. If you would be interested in helping, please contact Andy: andy.lickfold@ntlworld.com or 01462 624336.