

Bancroft Users Group and Supporters (BUGS)

Meeting - October 1st 7:30pm, Bancroft Pavilion, Hitchin

Notes of meeting

ATTENDEES Chair - Mike Clarke (Hitchin Forum), Notes - Kate Evans (Hitchin Forum)
Steve Geach – North Herts District Parks & Countryside Development Manager
Judi Billing - District Councillor / County Councillor
Approx. 35 attendees interested parties.

APOLOGIES Dave Munro - Secretary of Hitchin Bowls Club

INTRODUCTION

Public were involved in a 2010 consultation regarding the plans for Bancroft.

NHDC “master plan” was agreed in September 2012

BUGS was set up couple of months ago to provide a forum for interested parties to discuss the proposals for the development of Bancroft Recreation Ground.

A key issue has been the future of Bancroft Hall – but this comes under the Council’s Community Halls policy not the Green Spaces policy.

In April 2013 the Hitchin Forum decided to engage other groups to present common concerns to the council.

Many reservations are being raised.

MC introduced Steve Geach to present information about the survey being conducted and further detail about the plans.

CURRENT STATUS AND NEXT STEPS

Steve Geach explained the Parks for People scheme and its role in the renovation of Bancroft, the last North Herts town centre park due for refurbishment.

Baldock/Royston/Letchworth parks have been completed. Bancroft needs TLC as a result of lack of investment. The area has also suffered from erosion by changes consequent on the Sainsburys development and other ad hoc changes.

2 million pounds have been earmarked for refurbishment and 7 companies have submitted tenders for the design stage, which are in the final stages of evaluation. Next week (commencing Oct 7th), Price and Quality scores will be put together to determine successful tender.

The bare bones of the plan have been presented, the meat is to be added by the community. Consultants will be appointed late October, consultation before Xmas - then in February they will publish the proposals. Design consultant can look at the concerns raised and will participate in meetings such as this, for example a “Friends of” group.

Question: Why was consultation not done before the “masterplan” drawn up? Surely the consultants are limited by decisions already made.

SG The current survey was being undertaken to provide the appointed consultants with additional information to develop the current proposals. February 2014, a stage 1 lottery application will be made to Heritage Lottery Fund. Then 6 months for them to respond. If successful, will proceed to stage 2 – more detail, conservation management plans. A reminder that plans surrounding the future of Bancroft Hall is separate – all community halls have been reviewed and council deemed too many community halls and Bancroft hall at end of life.
2010 initial consultation was put on hold to see what was going to happen with hall.

SURVEY

Survey forms were available at the meeting and will also be available at the Councillors surgery Sat 5th October in Hitchin Market Place.

Online survey finished Oct 1st. Issue was raised is that online survey can only be done once on one computer. Concerns that only one member of family - also library users – only one user can do it. This means different members of same family who use the park differently could only complete one survey. In addition, if user marked their use of the park as “other” it assigned them “non User” status.

Q: Will hard copy forms carry same weight as online survey?

SG - Yes. Assurance was requested from Steve that “Others” comments will be collated since due to technical issue with the survey the “other” are being treated as Non Users of park

PLAY AREA

Judi Billing made the case for a Water Play area such as they have in Howard gardens Letchworth. It would be nice to have the same facility. Apparently there used to be a pool in Bancroft (pool/boating pond.)

Concerns raised: maintenance, cost, vandalism

SG provided the costs for the Baldock water feature- £160,000 to construct, annual maintenance costs £15,000. Lottery would contribute 80%

Question raised: Why is money available for water feature and not the buildings in the park?

Play area for older children would be good. There is only a single basketball hoop currently. Outdoor gym equipment and a skate park were other suggestions, although the latter is available at the King George playing field.

TOILET FACILITIES

Comments: This was an animated discussion. Clearly if there are young children activities, toilets are a necessity. It was pointed out that toilets are needed not only for children but also adults (people currently using bushes).

The bowls club have had to stop toilets being used by public as they are not insured.

Q The existing toilet block forms part of the park. Why is it not being considered as part of the park redevelopment?

SG responded that the toilet block neither out nor in of scheme. It might be used as park ranger base (Lottery funding includes a member of staff.) This will be reviewed when the design consultant is on board to work out the details. Council can't afford the number of public toilets currently, so need different ways to achieve that within tightening budget. It's been proposed that toilets could be part of a catering outlet which could fund their maintenance.

It was also pointed out that it is unlikely that the lottery fund would be impressed by a scheme for a recreation area with no toilets.

TENNIS

Comments Despite the talk of Post Olympics and post Wimbledon legacy, the council is closing 60% of public tennis availability in town. This is outrageous.

In addition, since 2009, lease renewal for tennis club has met with obstruction.

Proposal to allow public to use the tennis club courts is not realistic.

Concerns raised regarding public use of club courts:

- Courts cannot be left open due to vandalism
- Club relies heavily on volunteers who would need to be on hand to meet and take payment.
- Club is happy to rent the courts but needs to be at a cost which is fair vs subscriptions paid by members.
- Availability of club courts limited due to current heavy usage
- Cost might be prohibitive for casual users, children etc.
- Despite council assertion that no one uses the existing public courts it's mainly due to deterioration of those courts and if refurbished would be more widely used..

Response from SG – skeleton of the plan has been approved. Council wants to expand the sports available to the public. It's deemed that 7 tennis courts (NB includes 3 private club courts) is too much for a small town centre. The proposed MUGA allows this flexibility and would be floodlit.

Question: is there any condition for funding which is forcing the tennis court decision?

SG No.

Comments Hitchin has a huge range of football and rugby facilities but not as many for other sports eg. Tennis, badminton, netball. There is only ONE other public tennis court in King Georges Playing field.

Judi Billing was asked if the decision about tennis courts can be challenged.

The response was yes, it could be. If body of feeling in Hitchin says "we think you've got it wrong" then it can be revisited. In response to a comment that decisions have been made behind closed doors JB stated that the public can attend Cabinet meetings.

The Project Board would discuss any requests for revisiting this and send it back to Cabinet. **Straw poll** was taken regarding compromise proposal to retain 2 or 4 courts. Unanimous agreement in the room to retain the present public courts.

Multi-Use Game Area (MUGA)

Comments: Who will be responsible for changing the nets? There would be conflicts between different groups wanting to use them. Baldock tennis courts are just a metal mesh as a net and are badly designed.

Why is the council proposing these plans which go against the whole principle of the recreation ground by shoehorning sports facilities into a small part of the “garden”?

It was acknowledged however that if MUGA facilities existed it would encourage a wider range of activities, eg lunchtime netball leagues. The park ranger could be responsible for managing this area.

BOWLS

Comments Parking is required for elderly members (who form the majority) carrying bowls any distance. Visiting clubs will not come and play if they have to pay for parking.

If Hitchin Bowls club goes down, there would be a domino effect. Contractor for greens is used by various clubs which keeps costs down for all.

SG: This is a recreation ground, not a car park. Safety issues currently. Car access needs to be limited and contained.

Suggestion: What about using land from removed tennis courts as a car park? There needs to be provision for contractors to come in and mow the grass etc.

Recreation should involve indoor/outdoor, winter and summer.

Q: What is set in stone? What can we influence and how?

SG: Hall is out of scope of this plan.

Q Where will electrical supply for tennis club come from when hall is demolished?

SG: Tennis club will have its own electrical supply.

Comment: Currently maintenance of the pavilion is done by the bowls club with council subsidising materials.

Bowls club would ideally like a pavilion overlooking green. This could reinvigorate the bowls club, attract more visitors and increase members of bowls club.

Question: Has there been any exploration of sports funding bodies? For example Holwell Bowls Club received Sports Council funding.

Response: At the moment Parks People Lottery funding is the proposal.

Q: Has anyone actually requested more green space vs sports space?

Suggestion: If the Bowls club were to have their own pavilion, then the existing pavilion could be extended to support the needs of other users, throughout the year. The more the facilities are used would mean less anti social behaviour.

Straw poll for this suggestion was unanimous in favour.

Suggestion: Top green becomes car park, lower green for bowls. The car park could then be accessed from Sainsbury entrance. Or a scheme such as used at Archers Gym/Swimming pool where users get free parking if using the facilities. As the Almshouse car park is part of title of Recreation club, it should be possible for a similar scheme could be used here also. Biggest concern about this suggestion was that the Almshouse car park is always full. Recreational sport should not be cramped in one area, must continue to look at all parts of the park.

Sustainability: Why providing public toilets pay for itself, when other parts of park are separated out? Should be considered as a whole.

SECURITY

Question: Are there any plans for security improvements to entrance to park?

SG: There would be a Parks Ranger on site. Options being looked at include CCTV, improved lighting, historical railings. Gates that automatically close at dusk which prevent people getting in but allow people to get out were mooted, as installed at some other sites.

Comment. This would not work for those wanting to access the park for the tennis club/pavilion etc. after dusk.

OTHER COMMENTS:

Several comments were made that the Bancroft development is being imposed by people behind closed doors.

There should be a line of communication between the Parks scheme and community hall.

The proposal for groups to use the Town Hall will not suit all.

The point was raised that the initial 2010 consultation yielded three key "wish list" requirements: 1) Public toilets 2) Refurbish tennis courts 3) Replace Bancroft Hall.

To ignore the wishes or opinions of the number of people coming to the park for indoor activities is not acceptable.

Bancroft Pavilion could be improved and extended to accommodate community groups and raise money. The provision of a separate green side facility for the bowls club would allow this to be considered.

NEXT STEPS

Next meeting proposed in 4 weeks.

A formal letter to be prepared to present to the Project Board for consideration.