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PRESS RELEASE

Wokingham Town Centre Masterplan

How great our disappointment and how little our surprise that the Borough Council, having asked the local community for its views on the Draft Town Centre Masterplan, has now issued a final draft for approval by the Council Executive this Thursday 24 June that is almost identical to the earlier version. The Council received 653 representations from individuals and organisations. Apart from minor grammatical and factual corrections, the only change of any substance is to reinstate on various plans the access from and to Howard Palmer Park which exists at present, in order to rectify a mistake.

The energetic campaign to save The Redan from destruction is swatted away with the circular argument that it is an area identified for regeneration and then ducked entirely by saying that demolition or refurbishment will be for the planning process to decide. Another admirable tactic to avoid addressing matters of concern is to say that specific building developments – particularly on Elms Field and the Carnival Pool site - are ‘indicative’ or for ‘illustration purposes only’, as if they are mere doodles on a diagram. Again, the reader is to be reassured that this will all be for healthy debate when planning permission is sought.

Perhaps the prize for circumlocution goes to the standard paragraph replying to significant and often expressed requests for evidence that the economic state of the town centre is so dire as to justify building on green open space at Elms Field: “The level of retail growth provided for by the masterplan is consistent with the level of retail growth forecast for the town centre to 2026”. But it turns out that the predicted growth is based on the assumption that productive retail units will be built on Elms Field, another brilliantly circular argument. And where is this evidence? In a Retail Study Refresh of February 2010, we are told, and from ‘market and viability advice, including a development appraisal of the preferred option (January 2010)’, none of which is available for the public to inspect.

But now for the big one. Out of the 653 representations, 581 (by our conservative count) opposed losing the green space or having buildings on Elms Field. That’s 89% of the total responses. And how many said development there would be a good thing? Just one!

When he spoke at an Open Meeting of the Wokingham Society on 17 March David Lee, the Leader of the Council, confirmed that, if there was an ‘overwhelming’ no vote for this proposed development, the Council would withdraw its plans. So there you have it; nearly 90% don’t want it and that must be an overwhelming vote by any standard of measurement.

The sad thing is that we, and many of the residents’ associations, have been asking for discussions about this issue so that the case for development can be looked at fully and fairly. We have said that, while we treasure Elms Field, we would accept the argument for some development if there was no real alternative. But instead, the concerns of the vast majority of those who have taken the time and trouble to engage in the consultation process are ignored and the Masterplan reappears in unchanged guise.

There is one last issue of substance: the Council has decided to put on hold its consideration of the Core Strategy Supplementary Planning Documents, including those relating to North and South Wokingham development locations, pending advice on housing strategy from the Secretary of State. Many parts of the Town Centre Masterplan refer to infrastructure provision to be financed from these strategic locations. In the absence now of any assurance that such provision will be forthcoming, surely it follows that the Masterplan itself should be deferred while the future housing policy, and needs of the Borough and the infrastructure requirements and funding sources to achieve the agreed level of growth, are being determined.

The Society Committee intends to raise these issues at the meeting of the Executive on Thursday 24 June. We urge people who have views on these matters to attend, whatever their opinion, and to write to let the Council know how they feel, whether they can go to the meeting or not.

Peter Must
Chairman.