

ANSTEY RESIDENTS GROUP

www.ansteyresidents.org.uk

Town Clerk
Alton Town Council
Town Hall
Market Square
Alton,
Hampshire
GU34 1HD

21 February 2010

Dear Town Clerk

1. As we pause before becoming involved in the Vale Retail & Molson Coors outline planning application to EHDC, it is an appropriate time to reflect on what has happened to date. The Anstey Residents Group (ARG) Committee finds that there are many aspects of the proceedings so far which are unsatisfactory, and which can be considered under two main headings. Some are major causes for concern such that, depending on the response of either yourself or the Town Mayor, the ARG Committee may have to consider pursuing them further. The others are of less significance, but which, if acted upon, should help to improve future proceedings.

MAJOR CONCERNS

2. Extra-ordinary General Meeting on 13 January 2010 The original date of the full council meeting was 13 January but it was postponed because of bad weather. It was ATC's intention that this meeting should go ahead on that date despite:

- No results of the public consultation being available from ATC, Kinetic PR or Coors despite the fact that this was a pre-condition for approval as per Minute 14 of 27 May 2009.
- Detailed plans of the proposal not being available on the ATC web site. These were available at the Town Hall but it is a reasonable expectation (particularly due to the bad weather) that they be available on the web site by 6 January rather than just 3 hours before the intended start time on the 13 January.
- Prior to the 13 January the only meetings that ATC held were with the Coors agents plus the sports clubs - for example the meeting on 8 December 2009. No planning officers were present. ARG were not invited, despite having made numerous requests for meetings with ATC Councillors which were all refused. (ARG did have a meeting with Cllrs Bradford and Joy on 17 December, but only on the basis that planning officers Adrian Ellis and Tony Whitty also attended. Futhermore, we were not allowed to discuss Coors as no formal planning application had been submitted, notwithstanding the fact that councillors, council

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officers and the sports clubs had been in discussion on the outline proposals for some months. There was also a meeting on 1 February with some councillors as well as the sports clubs. Too many participants left insufficient time for all necessary points to be made.)

- The meeting would have been held in the Town Hall which would have denied attendance to the over 100 local people who attended on 10 February.
- The 13 January meeting date seems to have been set by Coors agent Chris Glanfield as his letter of 11 December stated that he was looking to meet the full council on or around 13 January.

The clear conclusion from these points is that ATC were prepared to vote with insufficient information and without seeking or indeed allowing any views from Alton residents. We should not have to rely on snow to protect democracy.

2. Meeting on 10 February 2010. This meeting was unsatisfactory from many aspects. Amongst our specific concerns are:

- a. Support from Alton Town Football Club. It is evident that there are still outstanding issues which prevent the ATFC from giving wholehearted endorsement to the sports relocation plan. A letter of such endorsement was conspicuous by its absence from the agenda documentation, there being one such from Alton United Football Club. No councillor commented on this.
- b. Public Consultation. Notwithstanding attempts to ignore, ridicule or even reject the published results, councillors voted to express their satisfaction that public consultation had taken place. The report on public consultation by Kinetic PR, clearly relevant since it was included in the agenda supporting papers, showed that 68% of the Alton people consulted reject the Coors package (supermarket on Coors plus relocating sports to Anstey Park). In view of this result, ARG does not understand how it was possible for the councillors to vote in favour of granting licences to build on town land and to advertise their intention to dispose of the land by lease to sports clubs. The result obtained by Kinetic PR is supported by over 420 signatures on the GoPetition web site plus over 700 people on FaceBook opposing the relocation of football facilities. None of these expressions of public opinion have made any impression on some councillors, whose minds are clearly made up to the contrary. The six councillors who voted in favour of the motion have been invited to identify the public consultation process and its results, which together led to their satisfaction. To date, none of the six have been able to articulate their reasons.
- c. Sport England. At the meeting it was claimed by Councillor Smith that the sports relocation plans for Anstey Park had the support of Sport England. I have personally spoken to Mr Ed Lockert, the case officer at Sport England offices in Reading, and he tells me that they received a letter dated 14 December

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from Ian Newton, Leisure Architect to Glanfield Holmlund, asking for comment and support for the plans, but have yet to reply. If Councillor Smith has any other documentary support for this highly significant claim, then this should be produced. Furthermore, at the meeting it was apparent that Councillor Smith's claim came as a surprise to yourself and to the Town Mayor, and your consultation together suggested that the claim was wrong. In this case, the Town Mayor should have corrected Councillor Smith then and there.

OTHER ISSUES

3. Submissions. The ARG Committee submitted two letters for councillors - one relating broadly to all aspects concerning the relocation of sports facilities and the other specifically addressing the important issue of public consultation. It is believed that these were submitted in time for inclusion with councillors' agenda papers. However, they were not included in the papers available to the public at the meeting. Please explain what happened here.

4. Stating the Facts. The ARG tries as much as possible to use only the facts available, without embellishment or exaggeration. However, it has been noted that on several occasions councillors support their arguments with evidence or conjecture which does not bear much scrutiny. For example:

a. ARG Activity. Cllr Crocker has claimed that ARG “accosted” people at the Assembly Rooms during the public consultation on 27/28 November. Talking to people (most of whom approached ARG) on public land was certainly not “accosting”. He also said that ARG members were in the public consultation which was hardly surprising as ARG members are also Alton residents. ARG sought permission from Greg Burt to be present, and at one point the ARG representative was personally invited in by Kinetic PR staff for discussions.

b. The Size of Anstey Park. Councillors have made various claims about the size of the proposed football developments in relation to the overall size of Anstey Park, all of the order of some 4-6%. No more than a glance at Area 2 on the Sports Facilities Location Plan, issued with agenda papers on 10 February, is sufficient to show that the area lost will be at least 20% of the available green area in Anstey Park.

c. Beneficiaries. It was claimed that 1,500 would benefit from the football hub - a figure calculated from each of the 500 members having two parents who support the relocation. This of course raises all sorts of questions about single-parent families, brothers and sisters in the club from the same family - to an extent which renders the figures meaningless.

d. Dogwalkers. It is clearly incorrect to claim that Anstey Park is only used by dogwalkers - even more so when number is dismissed as just 30.

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These are just some examples where more care is needed to identify and to stick to the facts. Conjecture can all too easily become justification for the point being made.

4. Conduct of Meetings. You will be aware of many expressions of disquiet at the contribution made by the Alton & District Youth Council team at the meeting on 10 February. In his introduction, The Town Mayor said that only people who had registered would be allowed to speak. We believe that only Katen Patel registered, however the Mayor did not stop his colleagues from speaking. We all found that the tone and words they used about other groups such as “appalling”, “disgusting”, “only interested in house values” extremely derogatory. No other speaker spoke in this personal and insulting way. These speakers should have been stopped, particularly since they did not address the council, but turned around to direct their remarks at the public. As a further point, should the main speaker's relationship to a councillor have been stated?

In conclusion I trust that ATC can see that these are important issues which need to be addressed. It is too late to correct the problems arising with the meetings held so far. However we look to ATC to ensure that they are not repeated as we move forward to further meetings/votes on the whole Coors planning application. I look forward to receiving your early response to this letter and based on your response we will decide whether to raise our concerns to the appropriate people in EHDC.

Yours sincerely,

GRAHAM HILL

Chairman : Anstey Residents Group

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