

DEVELOPMENT OF THE BASS SPORTS GROUND, ANSTEY ROAD: THE WAY AHEAD

A PROPOSAL BY THE ANSTEY RESIDENTS GROUP

BACKGROUND

For many years Molson Coors, the owners of the Bass Sports Ground on Anstey Road, have sought to replace the current sports facilities with development which will maximise their return on the sale of the land. Just in the last five years, three previous outline planning applications¹ for housing and one outline planning application² for a new supermarket have all failed.

Development of the site is constrained by the requirements of Planning Policy Guidance 17 "Planning for Open Space, Sport and Recreation" (PPG 17), which obliges the developer to relocate any sports activities displaced by the development to as good as or better facilities. Provision for relocation of bowls and tennis has been made without controversy. However, the relocation of Alton Town Football Club (ATFC) has caused years of acrimony and planning blight, in which various elements of Alton have been unwillingly pitched against each other in a struggle to protect their respective interests. ATFC relocation remains unresolved.

The starting point for this assessment is the decision on 18 November 2010 by Planning Committee (North) of East Hants District Council to refuse planning permission for a Junior Football "Hub" on Anstey Park³. This application was a modified version of one rejected earlier in the year.

Construction of the Junior Football "Hub" was the key to the removal of ATFC from the Bass Sports Ground. The plan was for ATFC to move to the facilities currently used by the Juniors, Alton United Football Club (AUFC), on Anstey Park, and planning permission for the necessary upgrading of these facilities had been obtained⁴. AUFC would then be relocated to a new "Hub" on Anstey Park, to be built on previously open space within the Strategic Gap between Alton and Holybourne.

PRESENT SITUATION

The present situation is now assessed to be:

- Molson Coors still wish to develop the whole of the Bass Sports Ground site, thereby maximising revenue. However, they have stated publicly that the development will not be for retail use.
- This development of the whole site cannot be achieved without ATFC relocation.
- Based on informal statements by Molson Coors, there are no other possible sites for ATFC.
- Molson Coors can appeal against the refusal of planning permission. However, the Planning Committee (North)'s decision was effectively a decisive and unanimous rejection based on fundamental planning considerations.

Further options therefore need to be considered. The covenant offers a solution.

¹ F30667/009 Outline application for 184 residential dwellings – withdrawn 2006

F30667/010 Outline application for 150 residential dwellings – refused 11 December 2007

30661/11 Outline application for 150 residential dwellings – withdrawn 14 October 2008

² 30661/13 Outline application for a new supermarket – refused 28 April 2010

³ 33615/005 Junior Football Hub – refused 18 November 2010

⁴ 52457 Upgrade of Existing Facilities – approved 28 April 2010

THE COVENANT

On 15 July 1935, a covenant was signed between Alton Urban District Council and Courage & Co, the owners of the sports ground, specifying that the ground should be used only as “a private open space”. The covenant is still in effect, and is now between East Hants District Council and Molson Coors as the legal successors to the respective original signatories.

However, the covenant also allows the owners to erect at any time (having given twelve months notice) dwelling houses “not exceeding ten in number” on an area shown on the plan accompanying the covenant. This development strip covers approximately one third of the 2.27 hectares of the site, and runs the full length of the sports ground where it fronts onto Anstey Road.

THE COVENANT SOLUTION

There is a solution to the problem which builds on the terms of this covenant. Its principal features are:

- Houses are built on the development strip reserved for this purpose by the covenant.
- ATFC main pitch, stand, clubhouse and training facilities are moved south to the remaining two-thirds of the ground.
- The bowls club is relocated as planned.

It is worth examining the site using “Google Earth”, which gives a good idea of the space available. It also shows nearby housing developments, whose density can be mentally superimposed onto the covenant development strip (approximate location shown in yellow):



The planned demand for and provision of housing in Alton is a relevant factor. Guidance on this is provided by EHDC planning officers’ brief to councillors when the supermarket application was considered on 28 April 2010. On page 69 of the agenda notes it is stated:

“The site has not been allocated for housing in the Local Plan and would therefore be considered a potential windfall site. When the Council undertook its Strategic Housing Land Availability Assessment (SHLAA) it indicated that there is a surplus of housing land in the Central Hampshire area, which includes Alton. There is, therefore, no requirement to provide additional land for housing in the Central Hampshire area.”

This plan differs from all its predecessors in that the prospective home owners will know exactly the conditions surrounding their property at the time of purchase. There is therefore no loss of amenity to householders, as has been the case with the supermarket application and the upgrade of the AUTC ground to accommodate ATFC. Sympathetic design which, for example, places the stands and other buildings between houses and football pitch, would help to mitigate any interference.

ASSESSMENT OF THE COVENANT SOLUTION

The advantages of the Covenant Solution are:

- It provides revenue for Molson Coors. Obviously this is less than would be achieved were the whole sports ground to be developed, but with no other location available within Alton for ATFC, then relocation within the site must be the only viable solution. Land development, like politics, is “the art of the possible”.
- ATFC receives a new ground, with purpose-built and up-to-date facilities. Compared with earlier plans, this would involve little extra net cost, since there would no longer be the requirement to construct the Junior Football “Hub” nor to upgrade facilities at the present AUFC site. Mr Jim McKell, Chairman of ATFC, has stated for the record that :

"It is acceptable for Alton Town Football Club to be moved to the back of the Coors playing field as part of the Covenant Solution proposed by ARG".

- The bowls club will be relocated as planned.
- The street scene is sympathetically improved.
- Anstey Park is no longer threatened with development, and retains its current areas of open space available to all.
- AUFC remain at their present location.
- The terms of the covenant are upheld.
- The planning process is simplified, since all development is on one site.
- The scheme will have strong local support.
- An excessively long-running source of friction within the Alton community is finally laid to rest.

CONCLUSION

The Covenant Solution in concept offers clear advantages to all parties concerned in establishing the future for the Bass Sports Ground.

RECOMMENDATION

It is therefore recommended that Molson Coors commission a professional assessment of the viability of the Covenant Solution.