

EHDC NORTH PLANNING MEETING – 28 APRIL 2010

Just three days after the London event, Alton staged it's own marathon in the main hall at Alton College! In a meeting which lasted over four hours council members of the EHDC North Planning Committee considered the three planning applications relating to the Molson Coors/ Vale Retailing development and the third application from Tesco to develop the Mill Lane site. Taking them in the order on the agenda.....

The Junior Football Hub Council officers recommended that this application be approved, and claimed that the Hub would not constitute a change of use for the land. However, councillors expressed their concern about so much development taking place in such an important recreational open space – it would substantially change the character of Anstey Park. Furthermore, it was also in the important “Strategic Gap” which separates Alton from Holybourne, and in which development should only be allowed in very exceptional circumstances. One councillor described it as the “privatisation” of an otherwise open piece of public land, and other issues raised covered the roadway, traffic and parking. So, when it came to the vote, the result was 1 in favour (it would be unusual for the chairman to vote against the officers’ recommendation), and 13 against! What a great result! Everyone recognised the need for proper sports facilities for young people – but the proposed Hub was simply the wrong answer.

The Upgrade This application referred to the changes needed to the present Alton United FC football pitch on Anstey Park if it is to be used by Alton Town FC. Again, council officers recommended approval. The main issues were the addition of floodlighting and parking around the area. There was much discussion of lux levels, lux contours and light spillage, with the general conclusion that we had to accept what the experts tell us, backed up with their computer modelling. The same applied to the highways authority conclusion that parking was not a problem. Councillors were nervous about going against such evidence, which might leave the council (and us, the council tax payers!) open to financial penalties should the “expert” view be upheld on appeal. So, to no one’s great surprise, councillors voted 13-2 in favour of the upgrade.

The Coor’s Supermarket This was only an outline planning application, so the factors to be determined in detail were no more than the general principle of the development and the access to the site. Council officers recommended refusal. There was general recognition that a second supermarket was needed in Alton to provide much-needed competition to Sainsburys, but councillors highlighted many aspects of this solution which were unacceptable. Transport was again a major issue, with the highways authority unconvinced that the traffic network could be sustained. Interestingly, however, the highway authority was not concerned about access to the site. Apparently, all can be solved by allowing HGVs to use the cycle lane! The biggest laugh of the night greeted the assurance by Mr Wall, of the highways department, that all transport issues had been addressed using nationally tried and trusted computer modelling! In the end, the application was refused by 13-0. It was particularly pleasing that, at the chairman’s initiative, an extra reason for refusal was added, referring to the harm which the supermarket would do to the general character of the area and it’s adverse effect on the local amenity of the neighbourhood. Another important result!

The Tesco Supermarket This was Tesco’s third application to develop their site at Mill Lane. Councillors noted that although the declared retail area had been much reduced, the overall scale of the building remained unchanged such that increased retail space could easily be introduced in five years time. There was also great concern over transport and traffic flow, especially at the Spittlehatch junction at the west end of Mill Lane. The latest plan is to have two mini roundabouts there, and, once again, we were assured that computer modelling showed this to be acceptable. Somehow, practical experience seems to suggest otherwise! Anyway, the application was refused by 14-1.

Conclusion In the end, perhaps a better result than we might have expected. The refusal of the Hub, and the extra reason to refuse the Coors supermarket were particularly significant results. We wait for further developments, but meanwhile, well done to all those who lobbied, argued and influenced to achieve this outcome.