

Exmouth Residents Association

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An Open Response to the Feasibility Review for the proposed Exmouth Visitor Gateway Centre (EVGC)

The committee of the Association considered this report on Thursday 20th October 2005. These notes have been drawn up after that meeting. They have been produced in an “open” format because it now appears that the EVGC will be the subject of council meetings before our meeting with EVGC representatives on 15 November 2005. The Committee feels that councillors and other interested parties should be aware of our views before these council meetings.

Whilst the Committee would have liked to ratify the proposals and give its support to the project it does not feel that it can reasonable do so with the limited amount of information supplied to it. In particular it can see problems associated with the envisaged number of visitors to the Centre and their impact on traffic flows and parking. The Feasibility Review does not provide any information on how these problems will be resolved.

We also feel that the new “Unlocking Exmouth” proposals do not support the world class aspirations of the Centre and that if it is to go ahead the changes to the estuaryside should not only be in keeping with this world class proposition but also shaped around it to obtain the greatest visual impact on arrival.

The Committee will reserve any approval for the project until after representatives have attended the meeting currently scheduled for Tuesday 15 November 2005 at 17:30 and received a formal response on the points made in this report which will form the basis for discussion at that meeting.

1. General Comments – The committee was concerned about the report itself for a number of reasons:

- a. The Feasibility Review does not provide any information on what we consider to be the major issues nor does it discuss the pros and cons considered when making a judgment on viability. This report excluded any comment on traffic and parking.
- b. The report was clearly marked as ‘abridged’ and all attempts to obtain an unabridged copy have been resisted until now (26 October copy obtained by direct phone call to Locum Consulting), initially because the report was not completed and then because the unabridged version was thought to be “commercially sensitive”, one of the justifications for refusing publication under the Freedom of Information Act. We are not happy with this.
- c. The absence of any comment on the issues that we felt were important has meant that we have spent an inordinate amount of time trying to work out for ourselves how residents of this town will be personally affected by any development.
- d. The wording in the report is unnecessarily obscure when plain English would have been more helpful to the reader, for example, “needs to see demonstrated project outcomes that provide economic benefits commensurate with the scale of the funding bid”, “a single purpose vehicle company”, “an indication to the massing, orientation and concept of the EVCG”. In our opinion this writing style is unnecessarily verbose and makes the report difficult to assimilate. Simple ideas are hidden under a mass of unnecessarily pretentious language.

- e. We are concerned that councillors appear to have ratified the proposal with no more information on how problems may be resolved than we have been given. “Let’s go ahead and sort the problems out later” does not seem a considered way to commit people to a venture of this type.
 - f. The Committee is also concerned that this project is not being exposed to the rigour in questioning and examination to which a public project like this should be subjected. There is an overt “warning off” of anyone who seeks to ensure that this venture is properly thought through. The involvement of so many people in public office with the project team means that few searching questions seem to be being asked. Constructive questioning should be deemed an essential and not a negative activity.
2. **Key Issues** - The Committee felt that there were a number of issues which we consider particularly important (and in some cases “show stoppers” if we cannot receive satisfactory assurances about the possible ways in which they will be resolved before we could consider recommending the project to our members).
- a. **Parking** – The Imperial and adjacent car parks are frequently full, or nearly so, during the summer when the majority of visitors can be expected. Furthermore the latest “Unlocking Exmouth” proposals suggest siting a supermarket nearby.
 - i. How is it intended to accommodate the extra cars which will want to park for long periods of the day?
 - b. **Traffic on the Exeter Road** – Following the implementation of the new traffic light arrangements at the end of the old Exeter Road it is now frequently the case that the vehicles “back up” in all directions particularly on Marine Way coming from the town centre and on the Exeter Road from the Exeter direction. It is often difficult to get out of side roads into the Exeter road now and this can only get worse if traffic from Exeter increases.
 - i. What are you intending to do to ensure that we do not experience gridlock when the Centre opens?
 - c. **Exmouth Town Quay** – Karime Hassan has openly stated that, if the Heritage Centre goes ahead on the Peninsula, the Exmouth Town Quay proposal will be shelved. Formerly we were informed that the Quay could be considered under the same umbrella as the Centre. Whilst we acknowledge that the feasibility of the Quay concept still needs to be assessed we feel that it is important to Exmouth for a number of reasons. Firstly, it might provide a safe all-tides launching facility for boat users, which is essential to a town like ours, secondly, it would provide another route by which visitors could arrive to visit the Centre and thirdly, it could complement the Centre by creating another interesting location to tempt tourists to linger in our town. If the Quay is feasible we could be missing a golden opportunity for this town by consigning it, uninvestigated, to the planning dustbin!
 - i. Why must the Quay project be lost?
 - ii. Why was this not made clear earlier?
 - iii. What are your thoughts on this?
 - d. **Land ownership** – The Association has stated clearly in the past that it is in principle against the sale of publicly owned land. Once sold land can never be repurchased, a fact we have learnt to our cost with the Magnolia Centre. We believe that any land should be leased on a short term lease, say 25 years, with stringent conditions to ensure that it cannot be resold nor its use changed in a way that would be considered undesirable at that time. Activities on the site should also be dependent on the council’s approval at the time and the site should revert to the council if the Centre should for any reason close or seek to change its use.

- i. Will the land be sold or given to the future owners of the Centre?
 - ii. If leased how long will the lease be for?
 - iii. What contractual terms will be incorporated in any lease to ensure that the Centre is only run and developed in a way approved by future councils and that it cannot be sub-let or sold?
 - e. **World Class** – The documentation emphasises that the intention is to develop a world class centre in a dramatic setting creating a “sense of arrival”. We agree with this vision if the Centre is to go ahead. The new “Unlocking Exmouth” proposals however do nothing to promote this image and, in the case of one option, even suggest building housing round the corner from the suggested site on what is the nearest car park! We feel that if this project is worth doing then it is worth putting the effort in to make the whole of the estuary into something with a “wow” factor for the approaching visitor. As they arrive they should be confronted firstly with this unique estuary and then with the Centre developed to demonstrate its magnificence. Similarly the town centre, and particularly the Strand area should be enhanced in a way that would encourage the anticipated international visitors to linger, admire the tranquillity and spend more money to inflate the local economy. If this is all worth doing let us put time and creativity into ensuring that the whole estuary front is an awe inspiring spectacle for all who go there. Let’s get it right!
 - i. What is your opinion on this point?
 - ii. What is the view of Locum Consulting about the proposals for the surrounding area? Do they complement the world class theme for the Centre?
3. **Other questions on parking** –
- a. **Ownership**
 - i. Who will own the parking used for visitors to the centre?
 - ii. Will the parking be charged at the same rate as the other parking in the Estuary area?
 - iii. Who will collect the parking charges?
4. **Location** – Committee members were not convinced that the best location for the centre is on the Recreation Ground. Alternatives suggested but not agreed were:
- i. On stilts opposite Manchester Street with direct access to the town centre from a rear entrance.
 - ii. On the existing lorry/coach park where the ground is uncontaminated.
 - iii. The Heritage Coast part of the Centre should be near Orcombe Point where it would be adjacent to the start of the Heritage Coast
- The Project Group is reminded that policy EN7 says that the Recreation ground can only be built on if there is “not any reasonably less damaging solution” We would like to know why other sites, including those mentioned above have been rejected.
5. **Technology** – The report says that the centre will use a “new scale of technology in its interpretation - particularly in the use of webcams or remote cameras”
- a. Are you able to explain what is particularly new about this approach?
6. **Existing Uses** – The land is currently used for a number of activities some of which are mentioned below. Whilst small numbers of local people take part in these activities they are none the less important to them and we would be interested in how the proposed development will impact upon them.
- a. Fun fair/circus.

- b. Dog walking.
- c. Kite sailing and training (Note: This appears to be an activity where Exmouth is recognised in being one of the leading sites for it.)
- d. Board sailing
- e. Kite flying
- f. Grass skiing with kites (This may not be the correct terminology)
- g. Parking along the edge of the Recreation Ground area.
- h. Boat launching down the slipway.
- i. Boat recovery from the estuary.

7. Opening Hours –

- a. Have you given any consideration to the hours that the Centre might be open? If so, what are they? Will it be open after dusk?
- b. What, if any, uses are being considered that might continue after dusk?
- c. Will lighting be used to illuminate the Centre and the surrounding area after dusk? If so, what steps will be taken to ensure that the light does not reflect on or light up the river.

8. Security – The proposed site for the Centre is currently fairly isolated and hidden from the town. Do you anticipate any of the following problems and, if so, what do you plan to prevent them from spoiling the facility:

- a. Vandalism.
- b. Graffiti.

9. Flooding – At high spring tides the area to the back of the Imperial Car Park is prone to flooding, a situation that will get worse if global warming continues. This is obviously not only an issue for the Centre but for all the “Unlocking Exmouth” proposals.

- a. What advice has the Environment Agency given on this?
- b. Will the remedial work currently planned for the Recreation Peninsula include work to increase the flood defences in this area?
- c. What are your thoughts on this?

10. Public consultation –

- a. At what stages in the project do you expect to seek public approval for it?

11. Other Comments – Whilst these are not strictly relevant we felt that it would be worth mentioning them now in case any of them had been overlooked. They are not intended to be in any way critical and are only included to generate useful discussion. The points are raised in no particular order:

- a. North Berwick, upon which this concept is based, relies on a captive group of gannets on a rock that is not readily accessible from the shore. Hence cameras provide a good way of observing the birds and, because of the density of the population, there are always large numbers of birds to be seen on the screen. What differences do you envisage here, where these static concentrations are not always present, may be less evident during the summer and where many cameras may have nothing in view for significant periods of time.
- b. Ornithologists will tend to want to actually go to see the birds.
- c. The Centre, for its success, is going to be heavily dependent upon being novel in concept and using of leading edge technology. What is sensational today will be old hat

in a few years time or if other ventures of this type are built elsewhere. The central concept is based on the North Berwick Centre which is already several years old.

- i. How will Exmouth's Centre keep ahead of the "game" and will it be able to afford to do so with the continuing need to upgrade and replace equipment?
- d. The centre will be heavily dependent on communications.
 - i. Is there adequate telecommunications capacity locally to service this need?
- e. Maintenance of the technology could be quite demanding.

GDM – 28 Oct 2005