

Minutes of the

FINANCE AND GENERAL PURPOSES COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1430, Monday 20 February 2006

Ashdown Forest Centre

Present Cllr R. Parsons (Chairman), Mr P. Glyn, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Cllr A. Reid, Cllr R. Stogdon, Cllr F. Whetstone (arrived at 1535), Mr A. White

Apologies Mr M. Cooper

Also present Cllr J. Barnes, Mr L. Gillham, Mr F. Marshall

1) Apologies

Mr M. Cooper

2) Board's Annual Report

Proposal for content and form

Cllr Parsons said that in the past two years there had been reports *to* the Conservators written by Dr Prendergast and other staff. The 2003-2004 report was four pages long and comprised text alone; the 2004-2005 report was 14 pages long, colour printed and contained three images.

Cllr Reid said that it was important to communicate aims and achievements and that the idea of a report was “splendid”, although it should not demand too many resources. Financial data, he suggested, could be represented by a pie chart. Cllr Barnes thought a report a very important educational tool for the public and for explaining to the ESCC cabinet (and other grantors) the policies and purposes for which the Forest receives grants.

Given that audited accounts do not come before the Board until September, the Committee agreed that a report could be published before this date on the Forest website and that the accounts could be added later.

The Committee recommended that the idea of producing an annual report *from* the Conservators goes forward to the Board.

3) Financial accounts

Dr Prendergast went through the notes attached to the Income and Expenditure to date (17 February 2006). Concerning the consideration, and funding, of the Centre business plan by the Ashdown Forest Conservation Trust (AFCT), there was a question about how quickly the Trust could reimburse the Board. Mr White (the current treasurer of

AFCT) said that a new treasurer needs appointing and that any withdrawal of funds could take at least a month after that.

Some changes were suggested to the presentation of the accounts. Fees and licences for 2006/2007 were uplifted by the amount agreed at the 7 November 2005 FGP meeting, namely “the rate of inflation to the nearest full number”.

On the new barn at Whitehouse Farm, Mr Gillham said that, for the £88k expenditure on it, the Conservators had also acquired an asset of greater value, namely in the form of two acres of land as well.

Mr White hoped that it would be possible to allocate payroll costs to Amenity and Conservation so that the Board can see full costs of work in these areas. Dr Prendergast replied that the time-sheets being filled in by staff in this financial year will allow this to be done. The Committee agreed that a time-sheet exercise need not be done every year, but every five years.

In answer to requests from members, Dr Prendergast said he would find out the latest position about a proposal to erect a mobile mast at the Nutley telephone exchange and about investigations into the wayleaves paid by utility companies.

Cllr Parsons said that the Clerk can currently sign cheques up to £5,000, but this is now below a helpful level, for example the monthly cheques payable to the Inland Revenue. The Committee approved the rising of the level for his signature to £6,000.

Cllr Parsons thanked Mr White for his work on checking the accounts, especially with respect to cash flow.

4) Access issues

In answer to a question from Cllr Parsons, Dr Prendergast said he had heard no more from WDC about progress on the construction of affordable housing at Old Forge Lane. Were the development to go ahead, the Board would need to consider an appropriate access licence fee. The Isle of Thorns access is being dealt with by the Urgency Committee.

Dr Prendergast said that 122 of the 525 properties that pay for a Forest access have a Perpetual Licence (i.e. 403 do not). He pointed out that these fees for the Licences are set at the FGP Committee meeting in November when the estimates for the forthcoming year are considered. There is no standard calculation across all Perpetual Licences for the annual inflation increment for the Acknowledgement Rent; rather it is based on the RPI at the month prior to the month of the purchase, rather than e.g. the date of 1 April for the financial year of purchase. The existing wording of the Licences necessitates a time-consuming calculation for each individual licence.

After discussion the Committee recommended that the fee for new Perpetual Licences should be set at a fixed rate for a period of five years and then reviewed all at once.

5) Forest Centre development

Mr Parsons said that a preliminary report from the consultant, Mr Ian Parkin, had been received. It was the role of this Committee to consider financial issues. Dr Prendergast said that the report contained no figures for expected income, making it difficult to make decisions on the investments suggested by Mr Parkin this summer.

Cllr Barnes wondered whether the sort of person (“Visitor Services Manager”) who might do temporary work over the summer is the right one for taking on development of Centre. He and other Committee members had little hesitation about the installation of vending machines. Mr Glyn said that it is important to try to anticipate the Board’s reaction to Mr Parkin’s presentation on 16 March, and to see how quickly the Board might make a decision for action this summer.

The Committee recommended that that Board should take advantage of the meeting on 16 March to take decisions.

6) Committee agendas

Cllr Parsons suggested making agendas more complete and including the name of who would make a written or verbal report. Any relevant documentation should be included with the agenda. The Committee supported this proposal.

7) Budget for PR/new newsletter

Dr Prendergast introduced the idea of a new newsletter that he had been discussing with the Friends since July 2005. He had also mentioned it at the RPA Committee meeting of 6 February 2006. That Committee had “welcomed the initiative”.

Cllr Parsons supported the idea if the Friends are prepared to pay. He suggested that it is easier to start than to maintain such initiatives. Cllr Reid said this was a serious concept and Cllr Barnes thought it a “good proposal”, and backed the use of advertorials (advertisements that look as though they are a feature; he suggested *Parliamentary Brief* as a good example of where this occurs). He did, however, wonder about distribution and the problem of editorial sustainability. Dr Prendergast said that the editorial role was not voluntary but a paid one. The Committee gave enthusiastic support to the idea of a newsletter.

Cllr Parsons thanked Mr White for his 13 years of contribution to the Forest, notably his financial guidance. He also thanked Mrs Wirdnam for her contribution, pending her re-election as Commoner Conservator.

The meeting closed at 1737 after going into Confidential Session.