

Minutes of the

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

1430, Monday 6 November 2006

Education Barn, Ashdown Forest Centre

Minutes

Present: Cllr R. Parsons (Chairman), Mr M. Cooper, Mr P. Glyn, Dr H. Prendergast, Cllr A. Reid, Cllr R. Stogdon, Mr R. Thornely-Taylor, Cllr F. Whetstone

Also present: Mr L. Gillham, Mrs R. Marriott, Mr F. Marshall, Mr J. Spicer

1) Apologies

Cllr J. Barnes

2) Declarations of interest by Members of a personal or prejudicial nature

None was declared.

3) Finance items

i) 2006/2007 half-year figures; 2007/2008 estimates

Mr Parsons said that income from HLS is excluded from the figures; the first cheque is due in early February. Mrs Marriott agreed to look into the reason for the 2006/2007 estimate of £45,000 for Forest Rates and Acknowledgement Rents.

ii) Cash flow forecast

Again Mr Parsons said that the figures excluded HLS. Some mistakes were pointed out that Mrs Marriott said she would look at.

iii) Fees for 2007/2008

These were agreed.

iv) Proposed Forest Rate for 2007/2008

This was agreed.

v) 2004/2005 accounts – update re. approval by Audit Commission.

Mr Glyn said that an apology letter had been received from the Audit Commission for the delay in looking at the accounts after some pressure applied by Mr Barnes.

Mr Parsons read from a letter from the District Auditor (DA), Audit Commission, of 30 October “to close the audit of the 2004/2005 financial statements”. The letter said that the Board’s accounts for that year did not comply with the requirements of the Financial Reporting Standard 17 (FRS 17) on pension liabilities and assets. Two options were

presented for the 2004/2005 accounts: either to complete a draft of the accounts revised by the DA although this would still mean that the accounts are qualified, or to present them in the proforma being adopted for the 2005/2006 accounts under a new 'limited audit' scheme.

Mr Glyn said it was reprehensible that the Board had not known about this problem six, let alone, 18 months ago. Secondly he was disappointed that the Board's accountants had not drawn the problem to its attention. Several members commented on the letter's poor standard of English.

After some discussion the Committee felt it was not yet in a position to make a recommendation to the Board on which option to use. Mrs Marriott said she would contact the District Auditor about his view on the issue. Mr Reid offered to ask ESCC staff for an opinion on the DA letter and Mr Glyn agreed to seek information about FRS 17 from the Board's accountants.

vi) Riding permits

After some discussion the Committee recommended the reintroduction of summer and six month permits for £50.00 – starting on 1 April 2007. Rebates (for members of the Ashdown Forest Riding Association and for children) would be in similar proportions to the full rate.

Mr Marshall said that the Board is losing a lot of money from people not buying permits and Dr Prendergast added that abuse is widespread among local people of the Forest bye-law requiring a riding permit. The Committee agreed on the value of a 'carrot-and-stick' approach that both announced the reintroduction of these permits alongside warnings that the Board will prosecute riders without permits.

4) Major projects

i) Higher Level Scheme (HLS)

With reference to Item 3 of the FGP meeting of 4 September, Dr Prendergast confirmed that HLS will pay for a) winter conservation work already contracted, b) work that had been funded by Countryside Stewardship Schemes in the past, and c) in-house work (for example the preparation of the heathland management plan by Mr Marrable).

Dr Prendergast added that under the Natural Environment and Rural Communities Act 2006 (that succeeds previous acts such as CROW 2000) "Every public authority must, in exercising its functions, have regard, so far as is consistent with the proper exercise of those functions, to the purpose of conserving biodiversity." In this respect Natural England would expect the Board (via its support from ESCC) to fund the *maintenance* of heathland; HLS funding, by contrast, is for its *restoration*.

ii) The Parkin report

The only actions taken have been the introduction of a cash till into the Information Barn, the start of a volunteer recruitment campaign (with an open evening at the Centre on 22 November), and an enquiry, now two months old, to ESCC about the introduction of brown-backed signage. Mr Reid asked for a copy of correspondence on this.

iii) Whitehouse Farm

Mr Marshall said that a guarantee from the builders has not yet been obtained for the security of the feeders and the final payment to them (of ca. £5k) has not yet been made. Furthermore, Mr Osborne has also not yet signed the agreement.

5) Bye-law contraventions

Mr Parsons reminded the Committee that the Clerk has the authority to take people to court. Dr Prendergast and Mrs Marriott reported that, via the County Solicitor, £177 was recovered from a Tunbridge Wells who had previously been cautioned by the Police for fly-tipping on the Forest in August. The costs were for the clearing up of the fly-tipping.

6) Any urgent item of which the Chairman has notice

No matters were raised.

The meeting ended at 1630 and the Committee went into Closed Session.