

Minutes of the
ASHDOWN FOREST
ROADS, PLANNING & AMENITIES COMMITTEE MEETING

1430, Monday 24 April 2006

Ashdown Forest Centre

Minutes

Present Mr F. Marshall (Chair), Mr R. Beal (Ranger), Mr F. Brown, Mr P. Glyn, Mr R. Parsons, Dr H. Prendergast (Clerk), Mr Simon Radford-Kirby, Mrs R. St Pierre, Mr J. Spicer, Mr R. Thornley-Taylor

Apologies Mr L. Gillham

Also present Mr J. Barnes, Mr F. Whetstone (arrived 1447)

1) Matters arising from last meeting

i) *Ashdown Forest Life*. Dr Prendergast reported that how to fund a new newsletter for the public from the Board remains an issue. In order to maintain momentum with the idea, he has used the format and design developed so far to produce a new (four page) Spring 2006 newsletter for Forest Volunteers (for whom newsletters are done anyway), and has ordered a run-on of 400 copies to trial out for sale in the Centre. Successful sales might indicate the financial sustainability of the newsletter and allow for its expansion.

Mr Barnes commented that, once a small charge is put on, some businesses might like to hold a stock if they get a free advertisement. It was agreed that a minimum price of 50p be imposed, leaving people to give more if they wish.

ii) Jessop's Hill, Bell Lane, Nutley. Dr Prendergast said, after contacting both the Land Registry and ESCC, he has found that a small band of land at the site is apparently unregistered. He has taken steps to register the land in the name of the Board.

Mr Parsons said that the Board has learned recently about the value of small portions of land and Mr Barnes added that a lease, rather than sale, of the land would be worth considering or the use of a protective clause in the event of any subsequent development.

2) Encroachments/bye-law breaches

Mr Beal showed a picture of Yew Tree Cottage, Fairwarp with a sweeping lawn outside on Forest land. Whereas property owners may, with consent, have a 10 m wide fire-break if adjacent to heathland (not applicable in this case), the lawn is now 60 m wide and has been planted with trees. Mr Beal said property owners will not respond to requests for them to cease breaking bye-laws and that in certain situations only action will have the desired effect. The Committee agreed with the suggestion of Mr Barnes that it would be good practice for a letter to be sent to the property owners asking for the trees to be removed and only when this is ignored for staff to do it.

Mr Beal also showed pictures of Hobgoblins, Duddleswell where not only are vehicles associated with building development being parked on the Forest but larger ones are also being backed onto it leading to rutting. The property has no licence for a turning circle. Mr Beal said that it is his job to protect the Forest through enforcement of bye-laws, one of which prohibits the driving of vehicles onto Forest land. He has therefore inserted dragons teeth to prevent it. Neither prior permission nor a deposit licence was obtained from the property owners. He has also inserted more dragons teeth outside the nearby property of Paynes Hill where a turning circle has developed larger than what is permitted.

Mr Marshall said he had visited the properties. The problem at Paynes Hill is the difficulty of WDC's waste trucks (and also, potentially, fire engines) in turning round. Mr Beal said that he knew of properties on the Forest to where WDC sent smaller trucks that could turn easier.

Mr Marshall said that the owners of Hobgoblins said that they might claim prescriptive rights over parts of the Forest. Mr Barnes said these rights cannot be obtained if they are contested and added that it would be worth approaching WDC to ask for the imposing of conditions regarding use of the Forest when planning permission is granted for development for properties on the Forest.

Mr Marshall said that there is an attitude that, once planning permission has been granted by WDC, then the Forest has no problem.

Mr Beal said he had been threatened three times for trying to enforce the bye-laws. What Rangers would find difficult is to take action, such as installing dragons teeth to prevent bye-law infringement, and then be told that the action should be undone.

Mr Glyn said that the Board is charged with enforcing bye-laws and must support staff action. It is important to be non-exceptional, i.e. not pick and choose which bye-laws should be enforced.

Mr Whetstone said that people nowadays expect to be consulted.

Mr Parsons said that the Board cannot expect to sort out all problems, but focus on the big ones. Historically the Board has not dealt with problems early enough. Major issues have to be dealt with by the Committee and in support of staff. Dr Prendergast agreed about prioritising which problems to tackle: at any one time there are so many infringements of the bye-laws that taking court action can only be taken with the more serious and intractable ones.

Mr Radford-Kirby said that it was important that Conservators "sing from the same hymn sheet as officers". The Committee agreed that it was still supportive of the idea of an environmental byelaw officer, Mr Spicer adding that he has now come round to it after initial doubts.

3) Forest Centre development – review of the Parkin *Business plan*

The Chairman asked members to express their views on the *Plan*.

Mrs R. St Pierre said that her perspective was not that of a local person. She was very supportive of the *Plan*. It seems to have taken on board the lesson that it is vital to get as many people as possible to become stakeholders. She liked the education side of making the Centre a place to attract young people and to encourage ecotourism and the development of responsible use of the Forest. She thought the *Plan* ambitious and something to work towards and liked the idea of a café.

Mr Glyn asked members to focus on the responsibility of the Conservators. He judged that those who supported the *Plan* were also supportive of conservation and education; those were not were not so involved. He said that it was crucial that, if there were no vision for the future of the Centre, someone else will develop perhaps a much more commercial view; the Board must retain control and involvement. He thought the *Plan* thorough, that it pulled no punches and took into account uncertainty. It was vital, he said, to manage visitors. Mr Marshall agreed.

Mr Thornely-Taylor asked about the “do minimum costs”, i.e. ensuring compliance with the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA). Dr Prendergast said that, while a full DDA report for the Centre had been done in 2004, it contained no costings. The top priority remedial actions had been taken.

Mr Parsons said that, if challenged about incomplete compliance with DDA, it was sufficient to demonstrate that reasonable steps had been taken. The *Plan* takes into account full DDA compliance. He thought that the executive summary did well in setting the scene. He had started his reading of the *Plan* needing to feel convinced about the development but he now understands why people interested in the environment support it. At the same time he can see the other view that the Board has enough staff already and should not get more. However, life and funding and life have changed. He thought that the presence of a café is almost to be taken for granted nowadays for attracting people but sees that volunteers would not be able to run it. The *Plan* introduces some very interesting ideas and describes what looks to be a very coherent development.

Mr Radford-Kirby said that, if the basis of proposals is money-making, then the middle option does not succeed and even the big one struggles to break even. There is a big change, financially, but a lot for the Forest as well.

Mrs St Pierre said that one cannot avoid the fact that many more people will come to the Forest, for example because of new housing and the current emphasis on health. The issue is to be able to direct visitors to where we want to.

Mr Glyn agreed that an accountant’s view might well be that, if money-making was the main goal, then it would best be done in other ways. The Board should be looking at the bigger picture, then look at how to finance it.

Mr Whetstone said it was not sensible to set up anything that is going to make a loss. He was anxious about the amount of work required to undertake, on top of the HLS application, yet another major project.

Mr Spicer said he cannot be “enthusiastic” about developing the Centre; the thought of 100,000 visitors in this part of the Forest would be “disastrous”. He suggested that change be restricted to doing the minimum to keep the Centre going.

Mr Barnes said that the full development is going to require major funding, for which there is no plan yet. While a longer-term vision is important, focus is needed on the short-term, on maximising the way people use the Forest and on making them more aware of the Centre’s existence. The toilets need to be upgraded quickly, meeting DDA (and possibly environmental health) requirements. The sooner the catering problem is tackled the better, especially since vending machines should not lose money. He was unsure if the Board could do without a Visitor Services Manager (VSM).

Dr Prendergast expressed concern about the long-term, continuing decline in ESCC funding. He observed that, while conservation on the Forest will be funded if the bid for HLS is successful, the amenity side of the Forest, by contrast, brings in little funding; among Forest users the main income is provided by riders with permits. Mr Spicer commented that taxes pay for the public use of the Forest.

Mr Barnes was less pessimistic about ESCC reducing its support and emphasised the importance of an annual report to educate the ESCC Cabinet. There is a big future for eco-tourism which is seen as beneficial to the county. Local businesses (e.g. those in the Ashdown Forest Tourism Association) see this too. The Board needs to focus on education (many Forest users simply do not see the conservation issues), walking and the improvement of buildings, for example the entrance to the Information Barn. Increasingly visitors will come with a purpose, e.g. to watch birds, and it will be important that flexibility is built into planning. He thought that a VSM could also be an education officer.

In reply to a question from Mr Barnes, Dr Prendergast said that the Centre has already been viewed by the High Weald Unit as a possible site for staff if its bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund is successful (the bid will be made by the end of September 2006). Income from hosting staff could be useful.

On the sort of person needed as a VSM, Mr Parsons thought that there would be a difference between when the development was starting and when it was established and underway. Mrs St Pierre said it would be important to get a good person for the set-up phase, and to accept that he/she would then, the set-up phase completed, want to leave for career opportunities elsewhere.

Mr Glyn said it was important not to forget that the Centre currently loses money. He asked what plans are in hand to deal with DDA compliance. Dr Prendergast said that a new access from the car park into the Centre would both deal with known DDA issues and improve the Centre – a case of hitting two birds with one stone.

Some discussion followed about surfacing the Centre car park with grass-crete (as at Hever Castle).

Mr Radford-Kirby wondered at linking income from car parks with development of the Centre.

Mr Barnes said that the Board needs to have a longer-term idea of the bigger project even if it does not sign up to it at the moment. The full development is not yet feasible, a point with which Mr Glyn concurred, but nothing should be done that is prejudicial to it – a stepping stone approach. He goes for the 100,000 scheme (as on p. 58 of the *Business plan*).

Mr Glyn said there was nothing wrong with a vision that looks beyond the foreseeable future.

Mr Marshall said that Mr Leslie Gillham had reported to him that he liked the plan although could not see how 100,000 visitors/year could be attracted to the Centre.

After some discussion, the Committee recommended that FGP and the Board act on the first four points of the *Plan* (702, p. 102) and recognise the necessity of improving visitor services and the educational side of the Centre.

After Mr Radford-Kirby's departure, the Committee asked Dr Prendergast to ask him for advice on retailing and vending machines.

4) AOB

There was none.

The meeting finished at 1735.