

Minutes of the

ROADS, PLANNING & AMENITIES COMMITTEE MEETING OF THE BOARD OF CONSERVATORS OF ASHDOWN FOREST

1430, Monday 9 October 2006

Ashdown Forest Centre

Present: Mr F. Marshall (Chairman), Mr R. Beal (Ranger), Cllr F. Brown, Mr L. Gillham, Mr P. Glyn, Cllr R. Parsons, Dr H. Prendergast, Mr J. Spicer

Also present: Cllr J. Barnes, Mr F. Whetstone

Apologies: Cllr D. Elkin (new ESCC appointee), Cllr S. Radford- Kirby, Mr R. Thornely-Taylor

1) Matters arising from last meeting

Both Mr Spicer and Mr Whetstone brought up local feelings about the enforcement of bye-laws. Mr Beal and Dr Prendergast said that protecting the Forest through the bye-laws was a paramount part of their jobs and of the Board. Mr Gillham thought there was no disagreement about enforcement itself but about the tone of communications.

Mr Barnes said that certain things need to be laid down: that the Board is tightening up on the bye-laws and, as temporary custodians of them, would be in breach of its own statute not to enforce them. It needs to be made clear that if people are seeking exemption from the bye-laws then they need to seek permission. Bye-laws are there to be enforced, otherwise they are brought into contempt.

Mr Parsons said that bye-law encroachments were on the agenda of all Committee meetings. Some encroachments may have been going on for a long time and rectifying the situation may be difficult. Enforcement is tough and stressful. He thought very few Forest residents would be unaware of the bye-laws. Dr Prendergast said that bye-laws are the main theme of the letter he has sent to every Forest resident and Commoner in the last three years. Mr Spicer doubted, on the evidence, if people read it.

Mr Beal said that on the South Chase there are currently about 60 bye-law encroachments. He uses letter templates to contact the relevant property owners and has the letters signed by Dr Prendergast. The Committee agreed that letters should be so signed.

Mr Gillham said Commoner Conservators are expected to know what is going on and to be able to respond to local people. The Committee agreed that a notice of impending prosecution of those breaking the bye-laws should be sent to the Board. Both Mr Barnes and Mrs St Pierre made the point that the Board should not interfere with the decision of staff to prosecute when necessary.

2) Access issues/encroachments/bye-law breaches

i) The Committee discussed in detail the shared access track to two properties, Hobgoblins and Paynes Hill, Duddleswell. Mr Marshall read out a statement in which he

apologised to the owner of the former, Dr M. Campbell (present at the meeting), for not having brought issues about the track to the attention of the previous RPA meeting.

Mr Glyn said he wanted to declare an interest in that his business has employed Dr Campbell. He said he would not vote on this account.

In referring to a letter from Dr Campbell, Mr Marshall made it clear that Dr Prendergast is fully authorised by the Board to enforce bye-laws, including putting in dragons teeth or barriers, as in this case, in order to protect the Forest. Several members of the Committee made the point that turning circles for vehicles visiting or servicing properties should be within the curtilages of those properties, not on the Forest. The point of the discussion was that Paynes Hill, for topographic reasons, could not have a turning circle within its curtilage, but that Hobgoblins could.

Mr Beal showed the Committee photographs of where he had installed dragons teeth in order to prevent vehicles turning on Forest land, in breach of Forest bye-laws. No one had approached Forest staff to seek permission for such turning. After a site meeting with Mr Marshall and the owners of Paynes Hill, a barrier was installed to replace the dragons teeth, and keys were given to the owners of Paynes Hill and to WDC (for its refuse collection vehicle) so that the barrier could be unlocked when required. No keys were provided to the owners of Hobgoblins. The use of the Forest for vehicles visiting this property is, therefore, unlicensed. Mr Gillham said that the barrier seem to achieve what the Board is trying to achieve and he was surprised at the poor state of the Forest there. Mr Barnes expressed concern about damage to the Forest and thought that it would be wrong to differentiate between “essential” and other vehicles.

At this point, Dr Campbell interjected that she would look at the ‘island site’, that forms a part of the Hobgoblins property, as a place for vehicles to turn, instead of on the Forest. The Committee expressed its appreciation at this suggestion. The Committee agreed to leave further decisions about unlicensed use of the Forest to the north, where a track splits in two, to Mr Beal, Dr Prendergast and Mr Marshall.

ii) Kidds Hill junction

With reference to Item 1 of the 17 July 2006 meeting of the RPA Committee, Dr Prendergast said that he had had no response from Matthews to a letter he had written on 21 July. He had twice telephoned (3 and 4 October) to try to talk to Mr Mark Matthews. The Committee suggested that a recorded delivery letter be sent, indicating that ESCC is ready to do the restoration work. If no payment is received within a set time, the Board would go to the County Solicitor in order to get the restoration work done or to seek reimbursement of any costs incurred.

iii) Access to the A275

Dr Prendergast said that an acknowledgment of receipt had been sent by the RICS in response to the joint application made to it by Cats Protection and the Board on the seeking of expert determination about the access. The Committee welcomed this news.

iv) The ‘Lamberts Way’.

There was a brief discussion about the ‘Lamberts Way’ where ESCC is proposing to designate a bridleway onto the Forest from the road near Newbridge. Mr Barnes suggested that, at the end of the process of designation, it is put on record with ESCC

that riders will need to get permits once they leave the bridleway and enter the Forest. Dr Prendergast said that this point had been made clear in correspondence with ESCC.

3) Planning applications

Mr Glyn raised the issue of powers delegated to Dr Prendergast as Clerk to comment on planning applications. Mr Parsons emphasised that the Clerk has delegated power from the Conservators. After some discussion it was confirmed that Dr Prendergast, as Clerk, could comment on applications for developments that are “small” and “uncontentious” – although it was recognised that the extent of contention – or, as Mr Barnes, suggested, “degree of significance” - may not always be clear at the outset. For larger, more contentious applications the Clerk could approach the Chairman and come up with a view and more serious ones still could be brought to the RPA Committee as a whole, either informally via email or formally through Committee. It was acknowledged that time might not always allow wider consultation.

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

i) Dr Prendergast said that a post of Amenity and Information Officer had been recommended by the Parkin report (under the guise of Visitor Services Manager; see p. 118) and had been further backed up by the Forest Centre Working Party (at its meeting on 28 July 2006). As a result, he thought it would be useful to bring a job description to the Committee in case the opportunity arose for funding such a post. He looked forward to receiving comments prior to approaching ESCC for a job evaluation; without this it would not be possible to ascertain the costs of such a post (which was due to have been presented to the last Board meeting [18 September; see minutes of the RPA meeting of 17 July 2006]).

Although the Committee was reminded of the Working Party looking into personnel requirements, there was a view that the job description was a useful document to see. It was suggested that any feedback and comments are forwarded to Dr Prendergast.

ii) On volunteer recruitment, Dr Prendergast said that there are insufficient numbers of volunteers to run the Information Barn adequately at present, let alone if further opening hours are to be scheduled. A recruitment drive is being planned, with an open evening scheduled for the evening of Wednesday 22 November. Mr Barnes was prepared to come to the event. Mrs St Pierre suggested contacting the Lewes Bureau of Volunteers (for which Mr Barnes said he had a contact).

5) New installations on the Forest

Dr Prendergast drew the Committee’s attention to the new welcome board outside the Centre and the four new interpretation panels at Goat, Hindleap, Forest Centre and Church Hill car parks. Since the installation of five new memorial benches in the summer, orders have been received for another four. Plaques on seats being replaced will be kept at the Centre. Dr Prendergast also drew attention to the display of new bye-law signage that will be installed in due course.

6) Visitor numbers at the Centre

A table was presented showing visitor numbers to the Information Barn at the Centre each month since April 2003. Numbers are gradually increasing – as is the average visitor spend – but the Barn is still costing the Board a lot more (ca. £12,000/year) than it gains through any profit. Dr Prendergast said that he had approached ESCC about introducing brown-backed signs at Wych Cross, another recommendation of the Parkin report.

7) AOB

Mr Barnes suggested that Chelwood Vachery is kept on the agenda of Committee meetings. At a meeting last month hosted by WDC to launch the Wealden Historic Gardens Survey, the Vachery gardens, comprising both the private and Forest parts, were “considered of special interest in a national context”. Dr Prendergast said that he has been leading conservation parties at the Vachery through the summer.

Mr Parsons read out some changes to the tennis court lighting at Forest Row Sports Club. The application to install lighting has now been approved.

Mr Glyn suggested documents are sent out before meetings. Dr Prendergast said that, on this occasion, those required for this meeting (for agenda item 2) could not have been done before the day of the meeting.

It was suggested that the Board’s website has some wording stating that it is under development and will be revamped soon (this is being done by a volunteer).

Mr Marshall said the last works to Whitehouse Farm will be completed by Christmas. Only when everything is in order will the builders be paid the remains of their due (£5k). The contract with Mr H. Osborne also needs to be signed.

The meeting finished at 1655.