

# **Tourism and Beach Road Toilets - Paper for Town Council 2nd. March 2017**

## **Historical background**

There has been a dramatic change in the life of Wells that has taken place over the last few years. Since 1974, the town has lost its self-government through the handing of local governance to Cromer; it has lost almost all of its industry; it has seen the incursion of incomers, not only those who have come to live in Wells but those who do not live here. 31% of houses are either second homes or holiday lets. Houses have become too expensive for many local people. Many local people feel that they have lost their town and have said so.

There have been positive changes. The Wind farm development brought money into the town. It may well do again. Tourism has brought a lot of money into the town. Those who are nostalgic for the way the town was can forget that we have a thriving economy, a longer tourism season, a good school; employment for builders, plumbers, electricians, carpenters, those who clean houses or work in restaurants.

On the other hand, as the District Council's own documentation pointed out four years ago, tourism is an ephemeral, seasonal, low wage economy and much of the money which comes into the town either does not stay here or does not trickle down to its residents. Moreover, unless controlled it is in danger of damaging even destroying the values which are so attractive to visitors.

## **The present situation**

In short there is an understandable anxiety amongst local people about losing what is good in the town and having no say in the changes that are happening. The District Council has not invested in the town and does not appear to listen to the views of the Town Council on planning matters. There is also a limit to how many tourists our roads, our car parks, our beaches and our facilities can cope with without damaging the community, the natural environment and the character of the town.

The proposed development has focused many of the concerns expressed above to the point where those who attended the meeting on February 13<sup>th</sup> wanted no change save the refurbishment of the toilets and new facilities.

## **The Proposals – costings**

The District Council needs to raise money to cover the loss of Central Government grant which will reduce from £2.2m this year to nothing in 2020. It has concluded that it can deal with its problems, in part by raising £300,000<sup>1</sup> from 'Asset Commercialisation' in four towns in the District, including Wells. It has refused the option of raising Council Tax. The land on Beach Road at present costs £15,000 a year to maintain the toilets. The proposed three storey development would cost in the region of £1.26m<sup>2</sup> which would come from reserves and/or the sale of land in other parts of the District. It would produce an income of in the region of £63,000 per annum.<sup>3</sup> (These figures come from a local developer's calculation in the absence of figures from the District.) No figures are available for the cost of buying/leasing a plot of land from Holkham estates for the building of a new toilet facility or the cost of maintenance which has been proposed as part of the concept but it is more likely that this will cost money to obtain, develop and run so reducing the income above. It is, from the District's point of view, a better return than it is as present receiving which is a negative figure. It would be good to know what net income the District expects.

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<sup>1</sup> Information from Mr. Blatch of NNDC

<sup>2</sup> Calculation from 700m<sup>2</sup> the total area of the Beach Road site.

<sup>3</sup> Based on 5% return on capital, a very reasonable return by today's standards.

## **The Proposals – other values**

The District contends that the development will add to the tourism offer of the town, providing it with new and better toilets and additional eating facilities in a town which are held to be good for the town's income. What it will not do is to give local people greater control over their town, bring income to local people, or deal with their housing problems.

## **The Town's response**

The proposed building is in a conservation area looking over the marshes and the children's playing field. Comments at the meeting included

- a belief that 100 restaurant covers are not needed;
- that additional tourism puts pressure on the enjoyment of the town by residents, increasing traffic on a busy road and raising safety concerns;
- concerns about the financial claims;
- concerns about large chains moving into the town and altering its character;
- effects on local businesses;
- the importance of preserving the character of the Quay;
- whether the planning process can be independent of the proposals;
- the repetition of inappropriate developments which have already taken place.

A number of people commented on the failure to examine the option of increasing Council Tax. Since that time, 477 local people, 31 retailers and 16 cafes and restaurants have indicated their opposition to the proposals. Our member of Parliament Norman Lamb has expressed his concerns about local consultation.

## **Some conclusions**

- It is agreed on all sides that it is necessary to have improved toilets together with additional facilities, such as showers, baby changing etc. This is a minimum. It would be worth investigating whether Wells could take them over and run them, initially with support from the District through a Service Level agreement. This seems, at present, to be the most likely solution acceptable to Wells though its financing is problematic and it would not meet any of the District's objectives.
- A more suitably designed lower aspect building incorporating revenue raising facilities such as to blend in with the rest of the conservation area which would include toilet and other facilities. The most effective means of raising revenue would be rented apartments, though whether these could be accommodated with public toilet facilities may be thought problematic. Some such new building has been suggested by a number of townspeople.
- Underlying this is the need for the town to have greater access to Second Homes Council Tax which is supposed to be for 'community related expenditure' but which is accessible only through a grant system in which any one grant is limited to £15,000.
- That is why a full and detailed consultation is necessary in which there is full transparency sufficient for the viability of any version of the project to be explored. The present argument that 'commercial sensitivity' prevents coherent discussion is impossible. It has argued in any case to be illegal.<sup>4</sup> Answers need to be forthcoming on these matters from the Cabinet.
- Thus I suggest the creation of a working party from the town to lead the negotiations to ensure that consultations are full and comprehensive. *Roger Arguile March 2<sup>nd</sup>. 2017*

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<sup>4</sup> Letter of Peter Cook dated Feb. 21<sup>st</sup>. Local Government Act 1972 (as amended) Schedule 12a part 2 para 9