

GRG NEWS January 2010

Best wishes to all for the New Year.

Unfortunately, as far as the airfield development is concerned, the news is not very good. The economic downturn caused Persimmon to rethink the Grove Airfield development, but as you are aware, the project is being brought forward once again. Discrete discussions have recently taken place between Persimmon/Taylor Woodrow, Vale of White Horse District Council Planning Dept and Grove Parish Councillors.

It is undoubtedly true that a major housing development on the site will provide housing for a large number of families, and bring additional income to parish and district councils. It may also provide funding for facilities that are currently lacking. However, in the current economic climate, it is unlikely that a developer will provide generously for community projects, especially if development of the site proves unusually costly. It has been established that the site is flood-prone, and the Vale planners' reluctance to recognise this raises concern among local residents that the development may put their homes at higher flood risk. There are also colonies of legally protected wildlife species on and around the site, which must be given appropriate protection.

Local people have learned to be wary of promises from our local authorities. When the site was first proposed for development, there were solemn undertakings that traffic and other assessments would be completed before planning permission was considered. The implication was that consent would be granted only after any problems highlighted in these assessments had been satisfactorily addressed. So far, these assessments have not been produced. Strange to say, although it is a requirement to produce these assessments, Local Planning Authorities are not obliged even to read them, so planning officers can avoid taking responsibility for any part of them.

More worrying is that developers, rather than District Council planners, provide the information upon which council planning decisions are made, and people affected by those decisions are kept in the dark until everything is finalised. Inaccuracies are not challenged or corrected. For years, Vale planners appeared to wrongly believe that most of the airfield site drains into Letcombe Brook!

An item from the Parish Council minutes of 1st December is quite revealing.

It outlines Persimmon's proposed timetable. Apparently, in July the company intends to submit an outline planning application. [In 2006, land in Oxon with planning permission cost almost £2.5M/hectare.] Vale planners appear to have made no comment about this timetable, and therefore presumably they have no objection to it.

What will this mean?

Unless this schedule is contested, Persimmon's contractors will prepare the essential Environmental Impact and Flood Risk Assessments AFTER outline planning permission is obtained! Do you believe that a Planning Dept that apparently failed to recognise the slope of the site will ensure the accuracy of Persimmon's assessments or will the documents be accepted without criticism?

Do you regard this situation as satisfactory? Are you happy to pay inflated home insurance premiums if the site drainage proves inadequate? If nobody questions these actions the Vale will assume that everyone willingly accepts this situation.

Especially in light of events since the District Council's adoption of the Local Plan, there is a need for local people to be given the opportunity to see and comment on these assessments BEFORE any planning application is considered.

- It has taken more than five years for Vale planners to publicly recognise the true slope of the site (seemingly preferring to accept false assurances from vested interests rather than spending five minutes with an OS map).
- It was suggested that residents of the new development would be employed at IBC Harwell or Milton Trading Park. However, traffic on the connecting length of A417 is now at the road's capacity and A338 traffic is close to capacity.
- In July 2007 floods affected more than 50 homes in Grove and the Hanneys.
- Photos taken at the time confirm that the airfield site is prone to flooding after heavy rainfall.
- Re-development of the St Mary's School site and the proposed 1500 homes at Charlton will increase surface water flow into Letcombe Brook.
- Treated wastewater from those two sites, together with the 2,500 new homes on the airfield will add around 2M litres/day to Letcombe Brook. Is this being taken into account?
- The County Council plans a additional 2,000 homes on the airfield site, making 4,500 in total, which will add another 1Ml/day wastewater into Letcombe Brook.

All these factors indicate the need for an independent, up-to-date assessment of local conditions to be openly discussed before planning permission is contemplated. Without it, homes in the area may be put at heightened flood risk. Although the worst effects of the previous misunderstanding of the site slope may have been avoided, it is far from certain that the real situation will be adequately dealt with. Isn't there a need for the Planning Authority to demonstrate to local people that their concerns are being competently addressed? Will Persimmon demonstrate their confidence in the final drainage scheme by guaranteeing to pay any increase in the cost of flood insurance for Grove & Hanney residents? – Pigs might fly!

- How can an adequate site drainage scheme be devised without a detailed appraisal of the flood risk?
- Who will scrutinise the assessments, and who is responsible for approving the drainage plans? Doesn't the Vale employ a drainage engineer?
- Council taxpayers pay for these services; shouldn't our legitimate interests take precedence over the developer's and shouldn't we know the identity of the responsible council officers?
- How can any local householder have faith in a drainage scheme unless Vale officers publicly declare their confidence in it?
- Do you think Persimmon will allocate ample area for flood prevention, or offer the minimum area (at £2.5M/hectare), hoping that their figures won't be checked?

The Parish Council made enquiries through the Vale concerning the endangered wildlife species on the site. The official response made clear that suitable provision for their protection must be made by the Vale, and approved by DEFRA. A licence from that body is required before any construction work is permitted. The Vale is obliged to appoint someone to ensure compliance with protection measures stipulated by English Nature.

- Have these arrangements been put in place?

The Vale Planning dept made no comment about the route of the proposed 'Southern Access Road' although it would contravene the Wildlife Protection Act.

- Will the Vale ensure the eventually agreed line of this road complies with the law?

There are only a few months left to ensure that local communities do not suffer as a result of any failure by the Vale to comply with procedures and obligations. It is important to remind the Vale of its responsibilities, so that they are not overlooked. Although recent reorganisation of the Vale Planning dept may bring fresh minds to this development, asking relevant questions may be the only means to ensure that local concerns are properly considered. At present it is likely that the developer will have a free hand to comply or ignore requirements as he sees fit, perhaps with dire consequences for some local people. Enquiries to Mr. Adrian Duffield at VoWHDC Planning Dept should bring the necessary answers and assurances, but if these questions remain unanswered, planning permission will probably be given and aspects affecting our lives will be left to Persimmon to decide. Ask yourself the question "Do you think you'll be better off in that case?"