

Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce Maidstone Economic Development Group

Minutes of Meeting held on Tuesday 14th January 2014
The Gatehouse, Archbishops Palace, Mill Street, Maidstone, ME15 6YE

Present: John Taylor(JMT, Chair); Keith Grimley(KG), Bill Moss(BM), Chris Blundell(CB), Victoria Wallace(VW), Nick Baster(NB), Colin Davies(CD).

1.	<p>APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE Jo James(JJ), Nick Rowell(NR), Mandy Bearne(MB), Cllr Malcolm Greer(MG), Rob Edwards(RE), Heather Nowak(HN), John Foster(JF), Allis Beasley(ABE).</p>	
2.	<p>MINUTES OF LAST MEETING Approved.</p>	
3.	<p>MATTERS ARISING Nil.</p>	
4.	<p>PROPOSED ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AT J8 JMT said that due to the importance of this development that The Chamber had made representation to MBC in support of the Application. The benefits of the proposal combined with the potential loss of two major employers from the Borough were behind this decision. The Applicants are currently involved in further discussions with MBC, notably regarding the landscaping aspects of the proposal. CB said that the landscaping issue was crucial. JMT said that The Chamber would not become involved in detail issues such as this.</p> <p>VW said that while she understands the Chamber's position, the proposal would be a disaster for the three local tourism businesses. She believed that the employees concerned would be travelling across country and given the current problems in Leeds with road subsidence then there was a need for a proper road strategy. JMT agreed and emphasised the view of The Chamber that a bypass was desperately required.. He was disappointed by the lack of response from local politicians and felt that both MBC and KCC were ignoring the issue.</p> <p>VW believed that there were brownfield sites in North Kent which were better suited to the J8 development and believed that there were now two more proposals for development in the vicinity of J8.</p> <p>BM said that the lack of a Leeds-Langley bypass meant that Park&Ride was the only solution to the Town's traffic problems. JMT disagreed and that The Chamber should apply pressure through the K&MEP and thus to the LEP with regard to the bypass issue.</p> <p>CB said that the infrastructure with Maidstone, as the County Town, was a disgrace and that there had been no progress over recent years. JMT concurred that there was no real plan in Maidstone and thus there will continue to be piecemeal developments over future years. Infrastructure is now at a critical point and this needs to be strongly represented to the LEP.</p> <p>KG said that he had assumed that something would be happening based on the increase in the MBC housing target but there appeared to have been no application for Growth Fund money. BM added that details of the housing target should be released by the end of February.</p> <p>JMT summarised by saying that the MEDG was concerned at the lack of a cohesive strategy for development in Maidstone and the related infrastructure issues.</p>	

5. **NEWNHAM COURT REDEVELOPMENT**

JMT's initial comment was that The Chamber did not currently have a stance regarding this proposal. BM said that one objection raised by TCM was that the proposal was for 45,000 square metres which is equivalent to Fremlin Walk plus another one-third. He believed that MBC were happy to support a figure half this size. It is believed that DHA are hoping that the Application will be considered by the February Planning Committee Meeting but if rejected it would almost certainly go to appeal.

BM said that the proposed Debenhams would be smaller than House of Fraser and that the proposed Waitrose would be similar to Sainsbury's. Of more concern are the seventeen addition units each of which would be similar in size to Boots in King Street. He felt that visually the proposal would be an issue given its location near an AONB and the entire proposal ran counter to the Government's Town Centre First campaign. The Maidstone East site would be suitable for this development especially as the former Royal Mail Sorting Office is now part of the site. He was concerned about the density of buildings on the site, traffic flow problems plus the possibility of Town Centre businesses relocating to the site. He will arrange for a copy of the proposed development to be circulated following the Meeting.

JMT felt that it would be difficult to argue against a small increase in size but a doubling in size plus a foodstore was a different issue. The main issue is whether the development could be accommodated in the Town Centre. Approval of the Next development across the road from Newnham Court makes rejection more difficult. He felt that the decision was in the balance and that MBC were in a difficult position. The proposal could go to Inquiry on Appeal.

CB felt that population in the area had remained static and given the Fremlin Walk, Bluewater and other developments he questioned whether this additional development was really needed. Access to the location is primarily from the north of the Town. He felt that the Application was premature.

JMT noted that once again infrastructure was an issue and the Application only involved tinkering with the problem. He did note that the inclusion of retail food in the proposal was a factor that may weigh in its favour as the development would not be solely retail consumer outlets.

VW commented that the Town Centre was already a traffic jam so why put another supermarket in the Town Centre? The justification for the J8 development could also apply to Newnham Court. CD added that Waitrose wanted to be in that location because of the catchment area which included Bearsted. The development would attract people who would not otherwise travel to Maidstone.

BM said that the Application expected to have a 4.7% impact on food retailers in the area and a 3.18% impact on other retailers. He noted that the development would only provide 850 car parking spaces whereas the similar sized Hempsted Valley Shopping Centre offered 2,300 spaces. He believes that the Officers will recommend refusal.

JMT said that The Chamber would only comment on two aspects of the proposal namely the concern over additional consumer retail sales outlets and the lack of solutions to infrastructure issues. These issue need to be satisfactorily addressed otherwise the Application is premature.

CD pointed out that the development would be sharing the KIMS roundabout for entrance to the site. Once again MBC seems to be the weak link in the

	<p>chain.</p> <p>JMT said that he would put together a draft response. He also agreed with other Group Members that either MG or Chris Garland should attend a future Meeting in order to reassure the group regarding their concerns. He said that he would approach Chris Garland directly.</p>	
6.	<p>LOCAL PLAN</p> <p>Covered in Items 4 and 5.</p>	
7.	<p>TOWN CENTRE FUTURE</p> <p>BM said that the Maidstone Club was to become a restaurant, possibly a Sushi bar. He also said that following the High Street Regeneration that there could be a further phase involving either Gabriels Hill, Earl Street or the lower end of Week Street. JMT said that Gabriels Hill was the key next item for regeneration and that KCC would provide 50% of the funding. In order for the project to proceed MBC would have to find the other 50%. A response was needed from MBC regarding funding and timescale.</p> <p>It was noted that all feedback from the lower High Street regeneration had been positive and that the Chicago Rock Café was to reopen as an Irish Bar.</p> <p>BM said that Granada House in Lower Stone Street was losing money and that something would be happening with this property. He also said that there will be an exhibition in the Chequers Centre in February displaying potential redevelopment options.</p> <p>BM said that he understood that something might be happening with regard to the second part of the old Army & Navy store and also that the proposed supermarket development at the Powerhub was becoming active.</p>	
8.	<p>LOCAL ECONOMY UPDATE</p> <p>Deferred to next meeting as NR was not present. JMT said that he had just received the latest Savills Commercial Property Report which showed growth in all sectors. He would arrange for copies to be circulated.</p>	
9.	<p>ARMED FORCES COVENANT</p> <p>JMT said that there had been a meeting of the Maidstone Steering Group. There was a lot of support for people coming out of the Services and some help for PTSD sufferers. Not enough was being done to integrate Armed Forces Personnel with their local communities and there was a need to provide assistance before people left the Forces. BM noted that Forces personnel were helping with the Urban Blue Bus.</p> <p>KG said that Canterbury College had become the first FE College in the UK to sign an Armed Forces Covenant and details were circulated to the Meeting.</p>	
10.	<p>BUSINESS INCUBATION CENTRES</p> <p>JMT said that there was no progress. CD said that Roy Laming was opening a facility in Medvale House and that there was also a small Hub facility in Starnes Court.</p>	
11.	<p>CHAMBER UPDATE</p> <p>CD said Trevor Sturgess had joined The Chamber and that he was offering editorial services. He has also signed up a Polish Solicitor in Sevenoaks. He said that there was a high level of interest from business wishing to join The Chamber and to become involved in Maidstone. He said that he was now focusing on getting larger companies to become Members.</p> <p>JMT felt that The Chamber needed to highlight the activity in, and attraction of, Maidstone. Maidstone needed a better PR machine.</p>	

17.	<p>AOB</p> <p><u>Business Relocation</u> – KG said that Companies would like to move to Maidstone but there was a lack of suitable facilities, especially to the northern side of the Town.</p> <p><u>KCFG</u> – NB asked about KCFG input to the Meeting and JMT said that he would arrange for the latest KCFG Barometer to be circulated but that it needed to be refined in order to be of more value.</p>	
	The meeting closed at 16:30.	

Date of Next Meeting: Tuesday 11th March 2014.