

A View from the District (August 2011)

I am still negotiating with our Housing Portfolio Holder over the purchase of the SCDC land at Wellbrook for the Parish. The original suggested price was £125K but the PFH has now raised this to £165K. There is also a problem that some of the land has been appropriated by neighbours who now regard it as their own. And of course we need to identify sources of funding before it can be brought to the Parish Council as a proposal. So nothing will happen very fast. Given the Parish's interest in the land, SCDC has proposed that the Parish Council should remove all the fly-tipping which a recent clearance has exposed. I have negotiated a refund for this to be deducted from the final agreed price.

Council met on 21 July. As always, formal business began with announcements, including one on the sale of Waterbeach barracks. Members a minister in a government which is flogging localism for all it's worth should have tried to preempt a proper discussion on the use of the site, by pontificating on its development. An emergency debate was granted in which we clearly expressed our view that it is up to us, not Mr Pickles, to decide on any planning application which may come forward.

A major item was a report from the Electoral Arrangements Committee. What had originally been a desire to sort out the anomaly of Orchard Park had grown uncontrolledly into a complex land-swap between South Cambs and the city (though Girton was never involved). So complex and controversial that the Council unanimously threw it out, and I was personally reassured by the Leader that it is very unlikely that the concept would be raised again in the foreseeable future. I know we have an internal anomaly in Girton with Beck Brook Farm being in the Parish; it looks as though we shall have to live with that.

We then moved to the compulsory purchase of dwellings in the new development of Windmill Estate, Fulbourn, where two residents are refusing to sell even on favourable terms. We were assured when we approved the idea in principle a couple of months ago (having originally explicitly excluded the possibility) that we would not have to use it: now we were told that since we'd approved in principle there is no argument against going ahead.

We had a lively debate on a motion which originated with the Climate Change Working Group (of which I am a member) to install solar PV panels on our roof. It was noted that Feed-In Tariffs could go down as well as up, and argued that this would send a message to our electors that we are a profligate council. What message will this send to our electors? that speaker thundered. Well, I hope it will send a clear educational message if we see our bills cut and a new income stream; at 42-1 the vote was clear. On savings in our electricity bills alone we should write off the borrowing for this within 12 years.

Our officers are keen on social media and eager to drag us into the 21st century: one member asked when we would see Cabinet members blogging or setting up their own websites. The Leader's answer was predictable: it's up to them. A good point at which to raise the question: Should I blog and tweet? Personally I fell such activities add little or nothing and waste an inordinate amount of time on trivia; but I'd be interested to know your views.

You may have noted in the local media that one of my colleagues has been told by officers that she must not speak in the Planning Committee (though a full member) on any issue relating to Gypsies or Travellers as she might be deemed by some to be prejudiced. To my mind this is extraordinary since we are expected to vote on the basis of a rational assessment of evidence presented, it surely matters not by whom. But it indicates again the problems of an administrative system run by volunteer amateurs (ie Councillors).

Although traffic is a County not a District issue, I stopped on my way home one afternoon to assess the layout of the temporary arrangements on Huntingdon Road at the NIAB development with the contractors, and had a very amicable discussion with the foreman. He acknowledged that the temporary cycle lane was too narrow (the plans stipulate 1.2m, and in some places his was less than 1m); we rearranged it and he agreed to monitor it. We also looked at, and solved, some problems with the temporary footpath.

If you would like a fuller monthly report emailed to you please contact me at scdc@de-lacey.org and I shall add you to the list of recipients. If you have any District Council issues you would like to discuss please don't hesitate to ask me.

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