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Cllr Mrs Linda Huggett
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Dear Councillor Huggett

Proposed Sale of Charteris Road Car Park and Woodford Library Sites

Thank you for your letter of 24th August on the above matter.

I am grateful to you for reminding me of the public consultation that took place on the development brief for the Charteris Road Car park site. I did not have any involvement in it but understand from colleagues that it was something of a shambles. I believe that, in the first instance, neither you nor your two fellow Monkham's councillors even knew that it was being scheduled. The necessary rescheduling meant that the consultation took place during August, a less than ideal time in which to obtain full participation from members of the public. Whilst the redevelopment of the site and the replacement of the library would be of interest to and affect residents right across Monkham's ward and, for that matter, neighbouring wards, formal notification of the consultation was limited to those living in the immediate vicinity. Using an erratically delivered free issue newspaper, which in many houses finds its way immediately into the recycling bin, was hardly an appropriate way to notify other residents of a matter as important as this – since when did the Yellow Advertiser become the official communication organ of Redbridge Council?

Notwithstanding the flawed consultation process, I acknowledge that a development brief emerged which incorporated the very real concerns of those who took part. However, the imperative then was somewhat different to the situation we are looking at today. Then residents were led to believe that any development on these sites arose from the need to replace the library – which is certainly not denied – and that they would be helping to specify planning criteria for improving the built environment in the Broadway area. The imperative now is quite blatantly for the Council to sell off the two sites for the maximum sum possible in order to help fund the £40+million Olympic Pool project that the Cabinet has committed itself to.

The two sites are potentially the most valuable pieces of real estate in Redbridge, particularly if the planning constraints contained in the development brief for Charteris Road are removed, eg, and especially "development should not exceed four storeys". You say they will not be removed and the sale of the sites will not proceed if the requirements render development unviable. No doubt you are advised by council officers who will or should have carried out development appraisals. However, common sense suggests that a low rise scheme cannot be viable after a developer has paid the Council several million pounds (since we have to assume the Council needs something of that order to make some inroads into its funding requirements) for a largely unserved site and is being obliged under section 106 to incorporate inter alia a public car park, (open without charge at certain times of the day and night), a modern library and perhaps some affordable housing. You are being disingenuous or incredibly naïve if you think that in these circumstances prospective developers are not going to press for the tallest and highest density apartment block they can physically construct on the sites.

And, with money being the object of the exercise, I think we can be fairly certain that the Council will capitulate and compromise the planning criteria, as it has done so many times previously in granting planning consents - perhaps you would care to explain how, with regard to the QMC site, Telford Homes was able to add another storey and increase substantially the housing units as a modification to its consent without having to make a new planning application?

In connection with the proposals for the sale of the Derby Road car park site you have told residents that, if a sale goes ahead, they will have the opportunity of commenting on the developer's scheme through the normal planning process. No doubt you will tell us that the same applies here. That is not good enough. The Cabinet will have made promises to the developers in the course of negotiations for the sales and by the time the consultation process begins it will be too late to withdraw them (developers having expended time and fees for the scheme design in line with the promises extracted) and too late to return the sale proceeds as they will have been committed to the pool project. A sale conditional on obtaining planning consent, if such a practice is lawful in circumstances where the authority is seeking to maximise the price of its site, would not quite do the trick for the Cabinet as there would remain uncertainty over whether the value would actually be realised until final determination. I might add that, if attempted, it would also display utmost contempt for the local residents - ("we'll see if we can get it past them, if not you don't have to buy the site").

We could of course debate the merits or otherwise of high rise apartment blocks. Some may view them as an effective means of accommodating large numbers of people in reasonable comfort, particularly at a time when there is a housing shortage. They have their place but, as we have learned over the past forty years, they are also recognised as contributing to various environmental and social problems. One thing is for sure, a high rise block on either or both of the subject sites would not be, and I quote your letter, "of appropriate scale and sympathetic to the character and nature of the conservation area to preserve the village like atmosphere" of the Broadway.

Those petitioning for the halt to the process of sale of the two sites are telling the Cabinet that, given the secrecy surrounding the whole issue, they do not believe that it intends to respect their concerns over the built environment in the Broadway area. Further, that even if the intentions are good, given the need to raise substantial funds rapidly, they do not trust it to look after their interests. If you are as anxious to ensure that the Broadway is protected and enhanced as you claim you are, then you should stand up and tell your Cabinet colleagues that you are not prepared to sacrifice the attractiveness, tranquillity and charm of Woodford for a project of questionable benefit elsewhere in the Borough and that these sites (along with Derby Road and the Viaduct sites in Church End) should be excluded from the land sales plans at the present time.

Petitioners recognise that change is inevitable and also want to see enhancements to Woodford in a way that brings benefits to local residents, businesses and those from neighbouring wards and boroughs that patronise the amenities. They are calling for a full and wide consultation on a realistic and comprehensive strategic plan to conserve and develop the Broadway area. Given the strength of feeling on the issue I hope that you will support them in this plea.

Yours sincerely

Dr Geoffrey M Seeff
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Vice Chairman
Chingford and Woodford Green Liberal Democrats