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## **THE REGENERATION OF BOGNOR REGIS**

Arun District Council has asked for ideas relating to the "regeneration" of the Regis Centre and Hothamton sites in Bognor Regis to be submitted for consideration by the Council.

Bognor Regis Civic Society believes it is wrong and short-sighted to be considering just these two sites alone and that the future of the whole town should be considered as an entity. This was the intention of CiViC's original Masterplan, created in 2000, and of Arun's Masterplan which followed it.

The Society also believes that the overall purpose of any scheme and likely effectiveness of any redevelopment in contributing to that purpose must be borne in mind at all times. It is not enough to be blandly saying "this will contribute to the town's economy" without real evidence that this will actually be the case.

The Society also believes that it is wrong to be trying to deal with this in a short timescale. In spite of what consultants and developers (who want the work) may say, the property market is not in good shape at present, and will likely take some time to properly recover yet. Meanwhile, the land in question is not going away and will continue, most of the time, to increase in value. In addition, the dynamics of the property market may well change, offering opportunities that do not exist at present.

There is therefore plenty of time to create, evaluate, consider and consult on ideas, both for the short term and long term, and for the moment we wish to concentrate on short term ideas which can be immediately delivered.

### **CLEAN IT**

The whole of Bognor Regis needs thorough cleaning, together with a programme of regular cleaning put in place to maintain that cleanliness. This means thorough cleaning of all highways footways and the seafront (particularly removal of chewing gum), cleaning of the interior and exterior of all buildings in public ownership (including those leased to others by the Council), removal of moss, grass and miscellaneous growth, cleaning of street furniture and signs, removal of accumulated rubbish etc. including litter from grass verges. The scruffy nature of

our town is exemplified by the scruffy "sun" sculpture at its centre, and this must be removed from sight. Bognor Regis must not look scruffy and dirty any more!

This is a massive and ongoing task, made necessary by lack of proper attention to cleanliness over the years. There has to be a new and positive attitude towards this, to ensure that it happens with due and continuing enthusiasm.

In addition, a programme of encouragement, perhaps through competitions, public campaigns etc., has to be put in place to ensure that all property owners acquire the enthusiasm to similarly clean and maintain their buildings and land. This could be a project for the Town Manager.

## **PAINT IT**

Those parts of the town and public buildings, car parks etc. which cannot be cleaned and are painted must be repainted and made to look smart. Even some parts which are not currently painted should be considered for painting in order to smarten them up. Perhaps the Regis Centre would qualify for this. Similar to above, property owners must be vigorously encouraged to paint their own premises, and keep them painted, maybe encouraged by grants or offers of free paint. The owners of Fitzleet House must be encouraged to paint the scruffy parts in attractive colours. Arun must repaint all car park markings. The Highways Authority must repaint all white and yellow lines and other road markings, and paint or replace any scruffy road furniture. Everywhere there is paint must be repainted and kept smart and painted by a regular programme in the future.

## **REPAIR IT**

Those parts of the town which are sub-standard and cannot be improved by cleaning or painting must be repaired or replaced. This includes all the roads and car parks, and the highway authority must play its part in the regeneration of the town by smartly repairing the roads where necessary. Not untidy patching, as has happened in many places, but proper smart resurfacing. Also the repair and replacement of all broken paving slabs in the footways, and all uneven, displaced and chipped kerbing; once again, there must be no untidy patching, just smart clean re-paving which does not show up those parts adjacent in a poor light. And also the repair or replacement of all damaged or scruffy street furniture, signs, lamp posts, trees etc.

This, and the paragraphs above includes all the accesses and entrances to the town. Whichever way visitors come into the town they must see a smart clean tidy town in good order. The signposting must be smart, efficient and effective and people must feel welcome and wanted. First impressions count for a great deal.

Also, particular attention must be paid in all this to everything that can be done to smarten up our seafront and promenade, and make it comfortable and welcoming to visitors of all ages. Can they easily get down to the sands? Are there

comfortable places to sit? Where do they go to get food and drink? Can they easily shelter from wind and rain? Are there fun things for children (and parents) to do? Are the public toilets clean, bright and wholesome, and are there baby-changing facilities? And special attention to minor additions and decoration which can make such a difference, such as palm trees and flowers in planters in lots of locations, bright and smart flags, banners and bunting in many locations, closer attention to bright and cheerful street lighting etc.

### **PROPERLY EXPLOIT FREE PARKING**

The current 2 hour free parking scheme must be extended to all town centre car parks, and there must be efficient signposting leading visitors to the car parks, and directing them to others if the one they are in is full. This can be funded by commercial schemes related to the parking, including advertising in the car parks themselves. The Fitzleet multi-storey car park must be thoroughly cleaned and painted throughout, with better lighting and less cramped parking bays.

In addition WSCC must bring Bognor Regis into line with all other Arun District towns and remove on-street parking charges (except possibly for the seafront), substituting 1 or 2 hour free parking in those areas.

### **CONSIDER USING "NON-SCHEME" IDEAS**

A large number of individual ideas which do not form part of an overall scheme have been proposed, and inevitably there will be many more. These ideas can be incorporated into almost any scheme, or used even if there is no scheme at all. And some of them are 'stand-alone' in other parts of the town area, such as "RAF Bognor" proposed by Mike Jupp, and "Glenwood Lakes" by the Civic Society. There are others more suited to the town centre area, such as children's paddling pools, coloured multi-fountains, the tallest flagpole in the world, a massive offshore geyser, the Bognor Blimp and many more. Any of these can be explored and maybe used during the initial period of maintenance and improvement, which can help to publicise the town and provide immediate attractions.

### **MARKET IT**

The newly refurbished town must be effectively and continuously marketed to a clearly identified target market, highlighting all the advantages of our town centre and leisure facilities, and how easy it is to get here and park -- and to get out and go home. In particular we have the strongest marketing tool of the lot in free parking, which can be powerfully marketed to our target market, which is NOT within the town, but within, perhaps, a 25 - 40 mile radius. A co-ordinated and carefully planned continuous marketing programme need not cost a great deal if done properly, and is ESSENTIAL if we wish to draw people to the town with money in their pockets.

## **FUNDING**

Most of the need for the above work has come about because of the neglect of the town by local authorities over a great many years. Cleaning, painting and repairing is an essential function of any property owner and the evidence that this has not been carried out is before our eyes. This lack of attention has leaked into the psyche of property owners in the town, resulting in the same kind of neglect. "Why should we bother if the Councils can't be bothered?" is regularly heard.

This applies to both the District Council and the County Council, and it has to be said that over the past decades both these Councils have taken many millions of pounds of Council Tax from the greater Bognor Regis area, but at the same time have neglected their duty to the residents in terms of proper maintenance.

Now is the time for this to be put right. In relative terms, when discussing past redevelopment proposals running into £25 million-£100 million, the potential cost of the above work is quite small, yet has the potential to bring massive dividends in increased footfall. And it has to be remembered that even if grandiose schemes DO happen, they will still be heavily handicapped if the town continues to look scruffy.

So this work has to be done anyway -- why not NOW and see what effect it will bring even before embarking on any grandiose schemes? It might even be found that the grandiose schemes are not needed after all.

Arun District Council has reserves of some £14 million. Not long ago it also received £2.7 million from Butlins for a new lease on their site, which many said should have been spent on Bognor Regis. It is time for Arun to spend some of this money on the work outlined above, perhaps as a mark of respect to the Bognor Regis area which is its biggest Council Tax earner in the District.

In addition, it is time for WSCC to be contributing to Bognor Regis regeneration, and their contribution must come in the form of all the necessary maintenance to the highways outlined above. They have already carried out some work, and there are parts of our highways which are much improved. This job must be properly finished throughout the town.

Further funding can be obtained by imaginative commercial exploitation of the free parking scheme, including the sale of advertising in the car parks. There are many valuable business opportunities in the provision of a free service of value, and with a Town Manager in Bognor Regis there is no reason why these cannot be exploited to the full. The Town Manager must be given a proper budget to carry out this work, together with the necessary facilities.

## **CONSULTATION**

The Civic Society believes that the public should have the opportunity to consider the above proposals and the reasoning behind them in Arun's forthcoming consultation. The reason being that a consultation which concentrates solely on construction schemes, large or small, will not be complete without the option to consider an initial programme of maintenance and improvement, combined with longer term careful consideration of other potential schemes when the property market may have improved.

We also believe that Arun's forthcoming consultation must be scrupulously fair and honest and must be seen to be so. If it is not seen to be so it will, in the eyes of the public, immediately invalidate itself and invite objections and dissent.

In particular it is vital that the public should have the opportunity to express their views on all the ideas that have been submitted and not just a selected few; they should also have the opportunity to state, if they wish, that they do not favour any of the options listed. And most importantly, the consultation must be confined to Bognor Regis and the immediate area surrounding.

There are two reasons for this: firstly, those outside the immediate area will not have knowledge of all the issues, background and important factors that will be needed in order to make an informed decision -- and it will not be satisfactory for Council literature to fill this gap as it will inevitably be perceived to be slanted. And secondly, there is, quite sensibly, no precedent for consulting district-wide on an individual town issue: Bognor Regis people have not been consulted on matters to do with Littlehampton, or Fontwell, Walberton, Angmering or anywhere further afield and nor would they expect to be, even though those matters might affect their Council tax commitments. The consultation must be confined to those who will be most likely to have proper knowledge of the matter, and be most likely to be significantly affected by it.

Lastly, we do not believe it is sensible for the Council to rush into a consultation of this complexity in the run-up to an election. Election issues will inevitably confuse the public, whose attention will undoubtedly be focusing on other Council matters, and this will run the risk of distorting the results of a consultation that is extremely important. Better by far to wait until after the election, do the job properly and without haste, and allow the new administration time to settle in and consider the results.

## **LONGER TERM OBJECTIVES**

There is nothing wrong with the term "regeneration," providing it is used in its proper context of genuinely improving the economic, structural and social aspects of the town. The problem arises when it is improperly used in relation to mere redevelopment of sites within the town and which does nothing to make any kind of real difference. For some time now it has been improperly used to impart

respectability to schemes which are no more than redevelopment of a site for profit. This must change.

In the long term it is important to recognise all the sites within the town that may be ripe for redevelopment as part of a co-ordinated programme which will genuinely deliver facilities which will be attractive to visitors on a long term repeat basis. Also to provide attractive and comfortable places to relax and socialise, convenient, attractive and comfortable shopping, easy access to public and private transport, and smart, viable facilities for all the normal activities that go on within a town of this nature.

As part of this there have to be facilities for homes, and in doing this we must very seriously consider the demographics of the town and whether this offers opportunities for changes to be made.

And we also have to consider very carefully indeed how the town can be filled with people with money in their pockets, who will provide the life blood for our shops, cafes, restaurants and entertainment facilities. One way of doing this is by having quality offices at the heart of the town, close to public transport so that they do not contribute to traffic problems. All our neighbouring significant towns have such offices, but we have none.

At present the market does not allow speculative office building so this cannot be done, but the market will inevitably change in time. This is one very significant reason why it would be unwise to rush to fill available sites with flats or other unproductive buildings, which will then preclude any better options in the future. This does not say that there should be no flats at all, but it must be recognised that over the past three decades there have been hundreds of flats built in Bognor Regis, yet this has produced no regeneration at all -- in fact quite the reverse.

An ideal site for quality offices was recognised in both the CiViC and Arun masterplans, this being the Hothampton site. It is close to public transport and the town centre, yet also convenient for the gardens and seafront. Eventually there will be a major company that, with today's electronic business practices, will be able to relocate to almost anywhere and will recognise the attractiveness of Bognor Regis and its ready and inexpensive labour market. This will happen eventually if we work at it, but it will not if we build flats, shops or entertainment centres on the site.

And in all this it is vital to remember that the Regis Centre site is very special. Not for nothing did Arun call it the "Leisure Heart" and the "Jewel in the Crown." This is the last town centre seafront leisure site available, and it is inevitable that developers eye it hungrily as a site for flats and/or hotel. But this would be disastrous as it is vital to have a concentration of all-year-round, all-weather leisure facilities on this site, suitable for all ages of visitors and residents alike. And preferably housed in and around an attractively iconic building which at least reflects the heritage of the town. Careful consideration must be given to the nature of such leisure facilities; will they encourage people to come back to the town on a repeat basis? Will they have to be housed in an unattractive windowless box of a

building, unsuited to the site? Will they damage other facilities already here? Will they be financially viable? There is much more to consider, but the use of the site in this manner will provide the vital connection between the town centre and the seafront. A block of flats will do just the opposite.

Whilst flats and affordable homes have no place on the Regis Centre site, they are nevertheless necessary to provide homes for people and to provide funding for the leisure. There is an ideal site for this adjacent to the Railway Station, where the Covers building now stands. Covers can function just as easily out of town, and this site could contain a considerable number of affordable homes, within easy reach of the town, schools and public transport.

Closer to the Station entrance on this site there could be a transport hub for buses to stand, and this hub could share improved waiting and ticketing facilities in the Station itself. Close by there could be a small decked car park which would allow people to leave their cars and use public transport, and this would also serve the northern end of the town.

Lastly, a caution in respect of the enticing prospect of building large theatres or conference centres. Almost no provincial theatre or entertainment centre in this country makes any money, and most of them have to be heavily subsidised by the local authority. A close example is the Chichester Festival Theatre which has to be subsidised in millions with public money. This is not an option in this district, and so it is vital that any proposal of this nature is supported by a detailed business plan from an unimpeachable and authoritative source, to show that it is likely to be wholly viable for the foreseeable future. Without this assurance this kind of development must not happen. We will end up with an enormous white elephant.

It is also easy to be seduced by the words "conference centre," but this is a hugely competitive market. Butlins may or may not find this market profitable, or it may just be an adjunct to their core market, but regardless of this we do not have their highly effective marketing machine, and never will.

**Careful consideration of all the foregoing will, we believe, lay the foundations for an effective plan to be consulted on and prepared which could see the gradual improvement of the town's fortunes. But there MUST be a proper co-ordinated and thought out plan with serious and genuine objectives. Anything less than this is just filling sites with buildings.**

