

Storm over newt

STOUR VALLEY: Heritage centre bid 'will not be derailed' by discovery

By Alistair Nelson

THE man behind plans for a controversial heritage centre in the heart of the Stour Valley claims the apparent discovery of protected Great Crested Newts in the area should not derail the bid.

Campaigners fighting the Horkesley Park tourist attraction have made a last-ditch effort to defeat the proposals which will be put before Colchester

Borough Council's planning committee next month.

The Stour Valley Action Group has claimed that the discovery of a protected species of newt in a pond near to the 117-acre site off London Road in Great Horkesley raises questions about the original environmental surveys which were carried out.

Will Pavry, the group's chairman, said: "Great Crested Newts may seem like a small issue, but this does show that their surveys are out of date and were inadequately carried out in the first place.

"We have similar concerns about the bat surveys which were carried out. Bats are also a protected species and we believe they are roosting in the buildings which they intend to knock down."

Peter Gaskin, who lives near to the site and discovered the newts, said: "Our area of outstanding natural beauty and its protected species are too precious and too vulnerable to be entrusted to the ethos of businessmen and developers, whose priority will

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always be fee-paying visitors and maximum profit."

Stephen Bunting, of Bunting & Sons, the company behind the scheme, accepted that because the application was submitted in February 2009, some of the surveys may be out of date.

However, he said that these surveys could be carried out after the application had been determined and subject to their satisfactory completion.

"Horkesley Park is a very large site and we are proposing to create many new habitats such as hedges, trees and bog areas which we hope will attract species like newts and bats," he said.

"The whole project is in limbo at the moment and we are waiting



DISCOVERY: Peter Gaskin with a Great Crested Newt he found on Fishponds Hill, Great Horkesley
Photo: ANDREW PARTRIDGE

for it to happen. Having spent 10 years working on Horkesley Park we are not going to give up now - so many people want this to happen and the pluses of the scheme for the area are overwhelming."

The plans for the heritage and conservation centre, which is on the boundary of the protected Dedham Vale area of outstanding natural beauty, include a country park of more than 100 acres, an art gallery and craft studios.

Bunting & Sons have said that the

£25million centre would attract 485,000 visitors a year and create hundreds of jobs.

The application will be discussed by the planning committee at a public meeting in Colchester Town Hall on May 26.

To view the application visit www.colchester.gov.uk and search for the application number 090231. For more information visit the applicant's site at www.horkesleypark.co.uk or the campaign group's site at www.stourvalleyaction-group.org.uk