

MPs voice concerns over Horkesley Park scheme

Questions over visitor numbers and impact of traffic on roads

Wendy Brading

TWO senior politicians have voiced their concerns over proposals for a new heritage and conservation centre in the Dedham Vale.

Established family business Bunting and Sons wants to open the Horkesley Park centre on land off the A134.

The project, set in 117 acres, is described by the firm as a celebration of the English countryside.

It would feature a country park, art gallery, show gardens and Suffolk Punch breeding centre, as well as exhibitions and a specialist garden centre.

Earlier this month, Colchester MP Bob Russell gave his support to the scheme, saying it would generate much-needed jobs and create

a major tourist attraction.

Mr Russell also countered concerns raised over traffic using the narrow country lanes.

Now Bernard Jenkin, MP for Harwich and North Essex, and Tim Yeo, MP for South Suffolk, have both spoken of their concerns about the impact such a development might have.

Bunting and Sons predict the heritage and conservation centre would attract 485,000 visitors a year – the same number as Colchester Zoo.

But Mr Jenkin, whose constituency includes Horkesley Park, said: "I am principally concerned about the potential impact on the Dedham Vale area of outstanding natural beauty (AONB), which clearly will be affected by the proposed development.

"The proposed 485,000 visi-

tors per annum would have an impact on its peace and tranquillity.

"Tranquillity was one of the reasons this particular AONB was designated in the first place."

Mr Jenkin said he was also concerned about the effect of the traffic generated by the visitors travelling to Horkesley Park.

The Buntings are to run a bus to ferry visitors from Colchester town centre and North Station.

But concerns have been raised by opponents to the scheme that cars will still be travelling along the narrow country roads.

Mr Jenkin added: "I am concerned the traffic reviews carried out by the highways authority have failed to fully address the impact on the secondary roads in the area.

"The impact on small roads and on the surrounding villages needs to be properly evaluated.

"The A134 is already a notoriously dangerous road and increased traffic can only lead to increased accidents."

Mr Jenkin also questioned the economic viability of the scheme.

He said: "Sales of food, garden products and other merchandise are forecast to account for over 75 per cent of projected revenues.

"The danger is that the forecast for visitor numbers is not achieved and then intensification of retail activity is employed to address the shortfall.

"I know this is certainly not the intention of the applicants, but they may be forced to sell on the development. The planning permis-

sions would make the site attractive to a retail buyer."

His concerns were echoed by Mr Yeo, who said: "I have had concerns about this development from the start.

"I know there may be benefits, but I think, on balance, the effect it will have on the area will be adverse.

"We are not short on tourist attractions in this part of Essex and Suffolk and I think there will be a danger it puts too much strain on local resources and increases traffic.

"The other issue is the danger the scheme may not be viable.

"If it does not turn out to be economic, we may find there is a request to make it even bigger."

Colchester Council is due to consider the application on May 26.

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