

by Wendy Brading

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A SHADOW minister has withdrawn his comments on highly contentious plans for a major tourist attraction.

Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, shadow international trade and development minister, had given his backing for the proposed Horkesley Park heritage and conservation centre.

Speaking on a visit to Westwood Park, Great Horkesley, which was organised by the Essex Chambers of Commerce, he described Horkesley Park as "a prime example of a really well-integrated, new initiative which could play a huge part in putting Essex on the tourism map".

However, his comments were criticised by his Conservative colleague, North Essex MP Bernard Jenkin, who said Mr Clifton-Brown did not "know anything about Essex" or the controversial development.

Now Mr Clifton-Brown has withdrawn his comments.

Shadow minister backs down over Horkesley Park

Speaking to the County Standard, he said: "I feel I was misled. I had no idea the issue I was speaking on was such a controversial planning matter.

"If I had known all the evidence, I would not have discussed it. This is a matter for local people, not for a shadow spokesman."

Mr Jenkin has asked for the application to be decided through a public inquiry because it is a departure from

Colchester Council's strategic plan.

He said the application was also potentially in conflict with a number of national planning policies designed to protect areas of outstanding natural beauty.

The Essex Chambers of Commerce has backed the £25 million scheme, which could attract 485,000 visitors a year.

However, Essex Chambers of Commerce chief executive John

Clayton declined to comment on Mr Clifton-Brown's U-turn.

The bid for a heritage centre includes the creation of 101 acres of country park on land off London Road, Great Horkesley.

The project also includes new buildings on the site of redundant greenhouses, an art gallery, show gardens and nurseries.

More than 31,000 representations have been submitted to

Colchester Council regarding the application.

These include a petition of 22,839 signatures collected by the applicants Bunting and Sons before the application was lodged, but which the firm said was relevant to the latest planning submission.

Colchester Council has requested more information on the traffic implications to the scheme before it is discussed by councillors.



■ Comments withdrawn – Geoffrey Clifton-Brown.