



Dear Councillor

Thank you for this opportunity for us to address the council on the planned disposal of River Lawn and 1 – 4 River Walk.

In late 2016 Barden Residents' Association became aware that the Teen and Twenty Club was closing and that residential development was planned on River Lawn. We wrote to the council asking for confirmation and that a full consultation be undertaken following the publication of the review of the council's property assets so that a long-term strategy for the provision of health, sports and community amenities could be formulated. We were losing a community centre and we didn't think that the news that we were going to see River Lawn disappear as we know it could be credible.

We eventually learnt that our worst fears were true and in addition the characterful building at 1-4 River Walk which was formerly home to the Citizens Advice Bureau was also to be disposed of.

We set up the Keep River Lawn Green group to raise awareness and amassed a facebook group of 1,867 members and we have submitted a combined petition of 3,218 signatures. Our campaign is supported by people of all political persuasions and none. Tonbridge Civic Society and Tonbridge and Malling Friends of the Earth also oppose development on River Lawn. The area is used by the 1<sup>st</sup> Tonbridge Scouts and 14<sup>th</sup> Tonbridge Sea Scouts, its cool shade and bounty of conkers have been enjoyed by generations of local people the grove of trees and grass here is valued by our community.

Some councillors here today may not have seen the areas under consideration in person and may not see the relevance to their communities. Put simply these sites are being sold under the misrepresentation that they are underused and beyond being put to a beneficial purpose like sites across the borough. Many of these are spaces between houses where it is possible to cram in developments which will rob our urban spaces of their green lungs. Once the cabinet gives the green light to the disposal of these plots more may follow.

Historically TMBC has won awards for its performance, circumstances change and now neighbouring authorities are setting the benchmarks. With the altering financial realities presented by cuts in central funding imaginative solutions are required. We urge the council to consider allocating some of its reserves to developing its own properties and leasing them to ensure future revenue. The returns from this will far outweigh those of selling now and investing in another property fund. If the council doesn't have the expertise to follow this path then maybe that is something it could consider acquiring.

The new Medical Centre could have been provided by TMBC and leased to the TMG at a reasonable rate, instead the council is selling to a private company at a cut price at the expense of council tax payers and to the benefit of Assura's shareholders.

The Residents Association welcomes a new medical centre closer to our community although we cannot see how the parking demand can be absorbed by an already oversubscribed parking scheme. Both of our councillors Peter Bolt and David Cure have grave misgivings about the parking situation and it is worth considering whether the medical centre would be better placed at the rear of the Angel Centre. That said we were hoping that some concession to improving the lighting and installing seating at River Lawn could be achieved as part of the planning process so you can imagine our dismay to hear the whole area is threatened by housing. We think that patients travelling in from Higham Wood for appointments would be delighted to avail themselves of improved facilities at River Lawn which we now know works well as performance and community space which we hope to continue using.

Councillor David Cure has identified the area as a green 'break-out area' where shoppers using the High Street can go to eat their lunch and maybe purchases from Nancy's Tearooms who have been stalwarts of our campaign.

There is even scope here for the introduction of a hardstanding area for a catering unit which the council could lease to different vendors and create income.

The nine mature trees provide habitat for a multitude of insects, squirrels and a recent survey recorded 15 different species of birds.

In its own Open Spaces document TMBC states, "Enjoyment of open spaces by the public will be balanced with the need to encourage sustainability by promoting biodiversity, conservation and, where appropriate, enhancement of green spaces so that they attract wildlife and provide natural habitats." Removal of any of the trees here or concreting on any part of this open space is contrary to the council's own policy.

The entire area in question sits within the Tonbridge Conservation Area and we defy anyone to convince us that the council's recommendations will deliver us with a better scenario than that which we currently enjoy. Any development here will fail to conserve or enhance either site. River Lawn is identified as being part of the Tonbridge Town Centre Area and was supposed to be enhanced yet the opposite is true. The entire area was submerged by floodwater in 2013 and the sewage and drainage infrastructure for this whole area is inadequate to support further development.

Following the reconstruction of the weir the council failed to ensure that the lawn was adequately levelled and restored and maintenance has been sporadic. Following its use as a construction enclosure the area has been allowed to decline with a total absence of lighting until a few weeks ago.

We believe that in normal circumstances any planning application on River Walk would be unsuccessful which is why the council isn't attempting to sell the land with the outline planning permission which would raise a far higher price.

Two footpaths (including FP30) and a cycle path run across River Lawn not one mention of them is made in the agenda, covenants exist which protect the right of way along the riverside and across the nearby carpark yet we have been told they do not exist.

The attractive building at River Walk could be repurposed as a bar/restaurant or small hotel and leased in the same way that the Black Boy is leased to Shepherd Neame by SDC.

Imagine the newly transformed River Walk alive with diners taking in the views of the Castle and the River while enjoying teas coffees and cocktails. With a little imagination this area would be brought to life, the alternative is a monolithic block of flats which will add to the Croydonification of our Kentish market town. We believe that 1 - 4 River Walk complements the equally attractive Beyond the Grounds café at the other end of River Walk and is a potential gem. Tonbridge is undergoing a renaissance in its fortunes of late and we are at a cross roads where we could be destroying some of the very parts of our town that make it so attractive to the thousands of visitors and new residents that are drawn to it.

Please consider our points and secure a brighter future for our town centre.

Many thanks

Mark Hood, co-organiser Keep River Lawn Green