

3, Common Side
Epsom
Surrey
KT18 7HT

17th July 2005

John Robinson
Planning Department
Town Hall
The Parade
Epsom
KT18 5BY

Dear Mr. Robinson,

On Thursday, 30th June, I chaired a public meeting at the Town Hall attended by over 100 local residents to discuss the application to demolish existing buildings at 40-58 Upper High Street and redevelop the site to provide a retail unit within use Class A1.

It is regrettable that the meeting was attended by neither the applicants nor by a Town Hall planning department representative, and by only 4 (out of 38) borough councillors. The councillors present did not express any interests or make any comments on the application. In the absence of so many interested parties, I promised that I would write to the planning officer to relay the many important objections that were raised at the meeting.

Principle

The principle of a supermarket on the site was questioned by a number of those present. Some were particularly concerned about the opening hours, that the site would become an area where young people congregate and hang about, and about the loss of value of residential property.

However, a straw poll during the meeting showed that a majority would accept a smaller supermarket. The principal objection to this application was on the grounds of scale.

Size

The proposed building is felt to be far too large in comparison with the street scene and neighbouring conservation area. It will be twice the height of the neighbouring houses in Upper High Street and of those opposite. It will block out light as well as signals from satellite Sky TV. The building would be incongruous with its immediate neighbours which are largely two storey terraced homes. Its height will be further exaggerated by the fact that the site is at the top of a hill.

Concerns were expressed that the photo-montages provided by the applicants had been distorted to show a lesser impact than would be the case in real life. A plan showing the viewpoints of these should be available for the Planning Committee, as well as an explanation of the technology used to generate them.

Residents opposite the site feel that they will be overlooked by users of the car-park, despite the proposed installation of opaque glass. They are also upset that their outlook in future will be a multi-storey car-park.

Those living nearby are also concerned about the implications of noise, from the generators on the roof of the new building, from other plant, from the service yard and particularly from additional traffic.

Design

The design of the proposed building is felt to be ugly, described by some as resembling gas cylinders and leading to comparisons with Canary Wharf and Milton Keynes. This is especially irksome when the site is on the edge of a conservation area where several planning restrictions apply.

There was general incomprehension as to why planning officers preferred the proposed design when, of the three options presented by the applicants, the one that more closely resembles the Ashley Centre would be far preferable. Many residents feel that they have been excluded from this decision and that consultation would have been appropriate.

Car-park

The current UHS car-park is claimed to be 'not much used'. To the extent that this is the case, it is largely a consequence of inadequate enforcement of on-street parking restrictions.

Concern was expressed about the loss of municipal car-parking to a commercial interest. There was uncertainty at the meeting as to whether the council would retain control of the proposed multi-storey car-park, including charges and opening times.

It was also questioned whether the size of the car-park constituted over-provision of parking spaces, especially when compared with the net sales area and parking provision at Sainsbury's in Kiln Lane.

The multi-storey car-park is not within planning guidance; the developer should be asked to provide a green travel plan and a park and ride scheme instead.

Traffic

The impact of the increased traffic, both shoppers and delivery lorries, gives local residents great cause for concern. The public meeting was held before the recommendations of the County Council Highways Officer were available. A number of issues may therefore be resolved by his report. However, that should not detract from the seriousness of the potential problems.

The additional 6,000 shopping trips (developer's estimate) will add to already existing traffic dangers and is unacceptable in an area already suffering from congestion and rat-running in local roads. The approaches to Epsom are already overloaded.

The nearby five-way junction at Church Road, UHS, Alexandra Road and Mill Road is already very dangerous and sometimes causes gridlock. Residents need to be assured that the traffic implications in Pikes Hill, Church Road and other nearby residential roads have been fully taken into account.

A public transport initiative, paid for by the developer, needs to be undertaken to ameliorate these problems.

The extra shopping trips are, of course, in addition to the deliveries to the new supermarket. Lorries now cause houses in Upper High Street to shake and this would impose an additional, unacceptable problem.

A delivery route has been devised whereby lorries would arrive from the town centre and leave via Alexandra Road. If the local roads are deemed to be so narrow that delivery lorries must go one way, then the development is clearly not appropriate in this location.

If the application is approved, then there should be a condition on the size of the delivery lorries, night-time deliveries must not be allowed and on-site venting must not affect Homewater House.

Commercial Impact

The existing traffic congestion in Epsom is already a major factor in discouraging shoppers. The additional traffic associated with this scheme would only exacerbate this trend.

The meeting was concerned that the supermarket development will directly force the closure of some of the small, valued, privately-owned shops in UHS and possibly further afield. If that were to happen, it would be difficult to convert the old shops to other uses (e.g., residential).

An ODPM study by a retail consultant about 'edge of town' development found that between 14% and 75% of existing local retailers close down as a result. One resident spoke of his personal experience in Purley where the arrival of a Tesco supermarket decimated the thriving smaller shops.

Procedure

Several questions relating to government guidance, council policy and the quality of the application were raised:

- The site is outside the defined shopping area shown on the Local Plan.
- How does this scheme fit in with the council's strategy for the town centre?
- Have council planners accepted the applicant's sequential approach to site selection?
- How are the council's requirements for affordable housing consistent with this scheme?
- The application is contrary to the Surrey Structure Plan by undermining the viability of the central shopping area and because the site is poorly served by public transport.
- Is there a conflict of interest for Councillors who sit on both the Planning and the Strategy & Resources committees (the latter deciding whether to sell the car-park land to the developer)?
- Has a "Saturn" model been used to predict traffic flows, including at the 'dairy junction'?
- Has there been a particulates survey?

Conclusion

I am sure that you will receive many individual letters that expand on the above comments. I would be grateful if you would ensure that this letter is circulated to all members of the planning committee.

The opinion of local residents is very strongly opposed to this application. There are a large number of planning reasons to oppose it and, on behalf of the residents present at the public meeting, I call on members of the planning committee to refuse the application.

Yours sincerely,

Paul Linscott