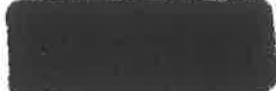


Christine Barkshire-Jones, Chief Legal Officer,
Hastings Borough Council, Aquila House,
Breeds Place, Hastings,
E. Sussex TN34 3UY
Your Ref: HM/PR/0436/1

Mrs Heather Grief,


3rd November 2015

Land at Summerfields Business Centre, Bohemia Rd, Hastings

Dear Ms Barkshire-Jones,

I am writing to object to the proposed disposal of Open Space Land, approx area 3516.6 square metres, next to and including some of the Summerfields Woods Local Nature Reserve. Although there has been a pre-planning application consultation re. plans by Amicus Horizon for 2 blocks of flats and semi-detached houses on this land and on the land occupied by the current buildings marked 'council offices' on the plan you have supplied, this land was not included in the Development Management Plan.

To the best of my knowledge, there has never been any consultation with local residents re. how it should be used, other than the uses for which the Summerfields School and grounds were bought in 1966: to provide council /civic / amenity buildings, and to provide public open space for the local residents, who were deprived of several other pieces of public open space in the area, which were sold to help pay for it.

I would guess the proposed area for 'disposal' has been designed to allow continued use of the Registrar's and 1066 Business Centre buildings whilst the planning process is gone through. In other words, it is a 'done deal' between HBC and AmicusH, and in other circumstances it might be referred to as a 'ransom strip' – it will be the excuse for allowing the development to go ahead, because AmicusH already own this peculiarly shaped piece of land, and their ownership will effectively blight the use of the land enclosed within its 'arms'.

I have the following specific objections to the sale (you will know the policy numbers, or be able to look them up):

1. You have a policy of public consultation regarding your decisions, and this piece of land has been deliberately excluded from any such discussion; local councillors and officials should realise that the local electorate have a firm grasp of the meaning of the word 'democracy'.
2. You have a policy that states that where a site already provides jobs (which the Registrar's and 1066 Business Centre clearly do), then any replacement should also provide jobs, and this was included in the Stiles Harrold Williams 'For Sale' blurb; Cllr Cartwright prevaricated over whether there would be any jobs attached to the proposed social housing, firstly writing that there would be, then that it depended on the actual planning application. In other words, I rather doubt if there will be more than one job, if that.
3. Before receiving an email from Cllr Cartwright, as a resident of Gensing ward, I had thought that HBC owned Aquila House, and that this piece of land was genuinely 'spare'; in 2012 I had suggested it as a possible site for my proposed '1066 Centre', which I would not have done if I had known that HBC is paying rent to the offshore company which owns Aquila House (it's outrageous that council taxpayers' money is being paid to a company that is blatantly avoiding paying UK tax on its profits therefrom).

The current buildings on the site are perfectly useable, and should therefore be used for council offices. In due course, the money saved by not paying rent would enable better / more council buildings to be put up there. I was even more concerned to discover that the lease on Aquila House only has 11 years to run, and that HBC are paying the owner £250,000 for a council chamber to be formed within the building, to replace the one in the Town Hall. This amount of money could pay for a new council chamber building on some of the 'spare land' in question. Again, no rent to pay.

I did email Cllr Cartwright about all this, and asked him to provide facts and figures; of course, he didn't, and pooh-poohed my suggestion that council meetings could take place in what used to be the Information Centre, downstairs at the Town Hall, on the grounds that this space is now used by the contact centre – not in the evenings, I think. In these straightened times, councillors can't expect exclusive use of a large room for just a few hours each week, leaving it unused most of the time. There are also other rooms downstairs in the Town Hall that appear to have a low use rate.

I am going to guess that HBC pays something in the order of £50,000 pa for its offices in Aquila House, and no doubt the rent will rise when a new lease is negotiated. Saving 10 years' rent would give HBC circa £500,000. There is also the question of security of tenure, and it is unbelievably profligate for HBC to spend £250,000 on providing a new council chamber in a rented property on a relatively short lease, when it is already capable of using property that it owns for the purpose.

This land is not 'spare'; it will be needed in the future for council offices, and the price that AmicusH will pay to HBC is a mere £395,000, just once, for the whole original site put up for sale a couple of years ago (minus the fee charged by the estate agent). The cost-benefit analysis is massively in favour of keeping the land and buildings affected. I don't know anything about the local government ombudsman, but I will be finding out if this person can investigate on behalf of Hastings' residents. Again, there was nothing in any political manifesto last Spring about spending all this money on a new council chamber in a rented building, nor in the local press.

Yours sincerely,

Heather Grief