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Ali G statue petition rejected

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A proposed attraction celebrating Ali G in Staines has been rejected by councillors after a petition backing the move gained enough signatures to be put forward for debate.

The petition, which was signed by more than 300 residents, called for a temporary landmark to tie in with the Sacha Baron Cohen character's new film.

Staines famously changed its name to Staines-upon-Thames in 2012, which was widely believed to be linked to negative attention brought by the fictional resident's 2002 hit film.

But speaking before a Spelthorne Borough Council committee, petition organiser Alex Balkan said: "I'm not asking you tonight to approve an Ali G statue. I'm asking you to explore an opportunity for Staines."

He added: "Beneath the humour is a serious question about our town centre. Can an association Staines already has, be turned into more visitors, more footfall and more spending?"

Mr Balkan believes an Ali G attraction would bring an economic boost to the town, and cited Manchester's Bee in the City installation from 2018 as a possible model for inspiration.

However, several councillors on the corporate policy and resources committee were dismayed at the proposal, pointing to the character's divisive legacy in Staines.

Councillor Howard Williams (Independent Spelthorne Group: Staines) said: "Every resident I have spoken to has given me very clear guidance that they do not support anything that promotes Ali G in this borough."

He added: "Ali G has consistently belittled every location he's ever visited. My view on this is it's a strong – no, no, no."

The petition also calls on the council to approach actor Sacha Baron Cohen to ask for his support on the potential project – and makes clear that it does not want the statue to be funded by residents' council tax.

While others praised Mr Balkan for taking time to organise a petition and inspiring the debate, many councillors felt the negative impression of Staines left by the original film made it hard to support an attraction.

However, some members of the committee were a little more positive about the proposals, and took Mr Balkan's point that Ali G had helped put Staines on the map.

Councillor Darren Clarke (Conservative: Laleham and Shepperton Green) told the committee: "There's something about a confident person being able to laugh at themselves.

"And this is a really important thing. If you are confident, you can laugh at yourself."

He added: "We have a real lack of confidence within Spelthorne, and this young man [Mr Balkan] is looking at ways of how we can build confidence. How can we make the high street a better place to be?"

But ultimately, committee members overwhelmingly voted against pursuing a temporary Ali G attraction as suggested by the petition.

Following the decision, Mr Balkan told the Local Democracy Reporting Service (LDRS): "What's clear is that no matter how strong the economic case, no matter how many local businesses supported it, none of that mattered to the majority of councillors – Ali G hurt their feelings.

"Spelthorne Council could not, after over 20 years, take the joke and allow the high street to benefit."

He added: "I hope we can push something that helps the high street next time which does have the council's support, and is less controversial.

"But life is a choice of what is right and what is easy – sometimes doing the right thing will upset people."

A Spelthorne Borough Council spokesperson said: "The petition was formally received and debated by the committee in line with the established process.

"After considering the proposal, the committee decided not to support it at this time, recognising the need to focus on other priorities – particularly protecting and delivering essential local services and preparing for the ongoing local government reorganisation."

James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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