

Mole Valley ‘won’t bend’ to petitioners

17 October 2024



The fight to protect the green gateway into a Leatherhead goes on after campaigners seeking to stop a popular park from being turned into high rises were told the council would not “bend the knee” to their petition.

Mole Valley District Council heard from residents representing the 1,500 people who joined the call to stop the “unnecessary” development at Leatherhead’s Red House Park by Bull Hill.

They argued the open space could be saved if the council instead redeveloped the raft of empty offices or unused industrial estates in the town.

The petition, discussed at the Tuesday, October 15 full meeting of Mole Valley District Council read: “This park is used by many people and also home to lots of wildlife and historical trees.

“The plans are to build high rise flats and apartments which would look unsightly. The town has barely enough space in schools, and doctors and dentists have waiting lists so understandably very concerning for local residents.”

The plan, part of Transform Leatherhead, seeks to redevelop the land within the existing one-way system known as Bull Hill, including the Red House Gardens.

The council and its development partner Kier say this is to complement the retail and leisure quarters of the town.

Bull Hill is currently made up of office space, public car parks and open space.

It was originally earmarked for retail but after work to the Swan Centre and transport studies, as well as the trend away from high street shopping, the decision was made to go for a mixed development.

In October 2023 the council and Kier Property signed the legal agreements and the joint venture is now working to develop the project.

Presenting the petition, the speaker said: “If we destroy everything that makes Leatherhead a destination in favour of becoming a carbon copy of London then people will leave.”

Campaigners pressed for the use of alternative sites and said there was 140,000 square metres of empty office space in Leatherhead – enough for 190 two-bed family homes.

However this was quickly shot down as they were told the council was powerless to force private landowners to hand over vacant properties – and were restricted to sites identified in its local plan.

Instead they want the campaigners to work with the council to make the site the best it can be for the town – while understanding the council needs to build on the land to hit its housing targets.

Cabinet member Councillor Keira Vyvyan-Robinson (Liberal Democrat; Leatherhead North) praised the strength of feeling but said the council can only put forward sites their owners put forward for development.

She said the new local plan has put in restrictions and that developments with high rise buildings have to prove their worth, and that play and open spaces must be provided.

The council also expected the redevelopment to increase biodiversity in the town by at least 20 per cent.

Cllr Vyvyan-Robinson told the meeting she hoped residents would continue to be involved in the process as the plans continued to be revised.

Cllr Ben Wall (Liberal Democrat; Leatherhead North) dismissed fears the project would turn the town into the next Woking or Croydon. He said: “The tallest building in Croydon is 150metres tall, you can see that for miles, we’re suggesting a building that’s maximum 20m, you are not going to see it from Leatherhead North.

He added: “We’ve been talking about this for the best part of a decade, we’ve had countless opportunities for residents to talk to us. We are listening. Listening is not the same things as bending the knee entirely to a petition. We will listen to a petition, it doesn’t mean we have to come to the same conclusion as a petition.

“Leatherhead has suffered from a chronic lack of investment for decades it’s not the time to start throwing out multimillion investment and investment opportunities without fully assessing their potential benefits.

“I’m cautiously optimistic that these proposals incorporating public feedback can be successful.

“I’m not saying that we will come to a perfect solution but we can not let perfect be the enemy of good.”

Cabinet member Cllr Claire Malcolmson (Liberal Democrat; Holmwoods and Beare Green) added: “ We are listening these are not the final designs.”