

Councillor Peter Bulman – Royal Tunbridge Wells – Parks ward

1. The business case to support this purchase is flawed and is predicated on the supposition that we will be able to arrive at a commercially sound situation where we can relinquish the Town Hall site to fund the purchase of the Hawkenbury site. This in my view is imprudent. We should not be considering such a move until and unless the future of the Town Hall site is determined.
2. Whilst there may be some arguments for considering a move from the Town hall site and seeking redevelopment opportunities, there has been no proper consultation with the electorate to ascertain their views. It is after all their money and by the time this proposal officially moves into the public domain, the key decision may have been taken irrevocably. Indeed, the level of opposition expressed already through bodies like the Town Forum shows a level of hostility rarely seen. And this is before any proper communication has taken place. It has been said that there is nothing formal to consult the public on yet, but by the time we have engaged properly with the electorate, key decisions may well have already been taken and it will be too late.
3. There is a strong body of public opinion that the Town should have a civic centre and that should be in the heart of the town and not in some relatively remote location. Clearly, this is an argument based on emotion, but whatever the merits of the case, this has been completely ignored and to move ahead without careful analysis of the argument is at odds with the concept of a democracy
4. There is a clear and present danger of replicating the disaster of the ABC Cinema site, as we may actually have the embarrassment of having two sites on our hands and the funds and need for one only.
5. There is perceived to be strong public support for the Council to mount a bid for the purchase of the former ABC Cinema site, which remains an eyesore right at the very heart of the Town. Even if the funds or interest is not yet there for the proper redevelopment of the site, there is a very strong case for the purchase of the site and the demolition of the building, providing for an open space. This would at least offer an interim solution, pending proper redevelopment.

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Councillor Mrs Tracy Moore – Royal Tunbridge Wells – St John's ward

It is now public knowledge that TWBC has purchased the Land Registry building. This in no way predetermines the future of the Town Hall. The LR is an investment for the council based on the concept of Total Place, with space rented to various partners from the public sector. The business case stacks up with or without TWBC in the LR.

There will be a public exhibition and extensive public consultation by the TW Regeneration Company in the autumn (likely October). It is important for members of the Town Forum to make representations into the consultation for the TCAAP, Allocations DPD and Transport Strategy document now and to wait patiently for the consultation on the town hall site in the autumn.

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Councillor Brian Ransley – Capel Ward

I can give the Town Forum a brief update on the Council proposals to purchase property, as seen through the eyes of a member of the ruling Conservative Group who has a considerable property and business background. I will link this to references from my report to the Audit Commission on the set-up costs of the TW Regeneration Company which some of you have read.

My report shows that in October 2007, as part of the tender process for the TW Regeneration Company, the Town Hall site was added to the 37 other sites owned by the Council and earmarked for redevelopment. Let me state at the outset then that it is the clear intention for the Council to vacate this building and the site will then be passed to the TW Regeneration Company.

Many of you will have seen the press releases recently stating that the purchase of the Land Registry building to be part of a Kent-wide initiative to "join up public services and make savings on buildings and running costs", under the banner of the previous government's "Total Place" idea. This may be true; there are functions that could be carried out by the same staff; like telephone operator or photocopying department. But in the main public sector organisations have their own entirely independent working practices and systems for which their employees are trained. Even if it were possible to incorporate several different public sector organisations under one roof there is no obligation on any to come along; indeed with the likely shrinking of the public sector, including abolition of PCTs, the likelihood of this actually happening at any time in the next five years must be extremely slim. And unless the vacant space is filled, (the Council will require less than half of it), the risk to the Council is huge. I have seen no evidence that any other organisation is going to contribute to the purchase or alteration and refurbishment costs of the Land Registry building – the risk will be all ours.

Much has been made of the supposedly outdated working conditions at the Town Hall; this building is what it is – a pre-war purpose-built and designed Civic Centre. It is true that there are staff working in the basement – but this is as much the result of our staff numbers burgeoning out-of-control during the past two years. Yes the heating system is inefficient and more expensive to run than a comparable modern building. I submit that none of this is any justification at all for borrowing the vast sums of money proposed. If it is necessary then we can adapt the Town Hall and bring it up to modern standards; outline plans were prepared 20 years ago and although the costs would be considerable this would be small compared to the purchase of the Land Registry building. Another important point should be borne in mind; this building cannot be converted to another function; i.e. retail. The whole lot will be raised to the ground just as soon as listed building demolition approval has been granted.

Moving on briefly to the Cinema site, and the disclosure in an interview with Cllr Bullock in the Courier of July 9th of the possibility of a bid to purchase this derelict site before the closing date; yes indeed the public would like to see action here. Some of you may have been present here two years ago when I condemned the planning application derived from what in effect was a lottery. This was for a 5-storey hotel, with offices and shops. I said at the time that the plans were entirely spurious and impractical, especially in view of the railway tunnel immediately below and the difficulties with construction of foundations likely to be encountered. Thus it is difficult to quantify just what could be realistically done with the site and what any future sale of the resultant buildings would achieve financially. It is a colossal risk for any prospective purchaser at even half of what the bank, which effectively owns the site, has its book value down as. If the plan to purchase this site goes through, then the site moves from being a public eyesore to a public eyesore owned by the Council with a big red entry on the balance sheet. I have seen no indication that our “Development Partner” is to contribute to the purchase – once again the risk would be all ours.

Most of you will have seen the press report in the Courier of July 23rd of the speech made by a member of the public made prior to the Exempt part of Full Council meeting of July 14th. Here the figure of £20M was referred to and that the interest costs alone would exceed £500,000 per annum. This figure is close to 10% of what we collect in Council Tax; each and every member of the public in this borough had better be aware of that fact.

Can anything be done to stop this regeneration juggernaut? It is most unlikely from within the Conservative Group. Those members like me, with a semblance of business sense, are against the proposal but are few in number. For the rest, many of whom do not have the background or experience to challenge the apology for a business case presented, simply side with the leader and his cabinet out of trust and loyalty. I’m viewed as a natural rebel and therefore routinely ignored; more worrying is the creation by Cllr Bullock of a “property acquisition advisory group” of three members, two of whom are well-respected and whose opposition to the plan was clear. When the purchase plans come back to Full Council for final approval later this

year the chances of a majority of members, faced in effect with a *fait accompli*, voting against, will be low.

The public must make their views known. It's no good waiting for May 2011; of the 16 wards up for re-election only 3 are Conservative seats in the town centre and only one of these likely to be at risk from anything but a massive swing away. Cllr Bullock may dismiss this Forum and others such as the Civic Society, as "self-interest groups" or "unrepresentative", but the onus falls squarely on your shoulders as there is little more me and my colleagues of a like mind can do. Yes my report was well-received by the Audit Commission but their powers are limited and do not extend to the prevention of what, on the face of it, appears to be an entirely lawful action. I agree it is preposterous that the Council has tried to hide the figures from public view under the banner of "commercial confidentiality" but that's the way we seem to do things round here.

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