

EAST OF SOLSTICE PARK

DISCUSSION PAPER

1. PROSPECTIVE PLANNING APPLICATION

Amesbury Property Company Ltd. have published interim plans for the development of a regional distribution centre on the east side of Solstice Park. Their proposal includes two exceptionally large buildings with a combined footprint of around one million square feet - plus three assembly/loading areas for the parallel parking of more than 250 heavy-goods vehicles, increasing the development area by a further 25%. APC have declared an aspiration to submit a detailed planning application to Salisbury District Council in December 2007.

This proposed development would generate a heavy concentration of HGV traffic converging on the site - every day of the week, including Saturdays and Sundays, and throughout the night. A recent public consultation exercise has revealed several important factors which have not been adequately considered; and the developers appear reluctant to adjust their published designs before seeking planning consent. Whilst SDC planning officers have been advising APC on various considerations, some matters have not yet been adequately addressed.

The development site lies just south of the A303 trunk road, the major high-speed highway between London and the Southwest - on the extreme eastern margin of Amesbury's major expansion programme, immediately adjacent to the dividing line between 'town' and 'country'. East of this line, the arable land is part of a large farm which is centred on the north side of the dual-carriageway; and the farm traffic needs continuity of access through the development site so as to cross the A303 via the bridge at Folly Bottom.

There is a right-of-way bridleway (Amesbury 29) which allows recreational access to the Folly Bottom bridge for equestrians, cyclists and ramblers; but APC now wish to construct one of their buildings across its definitive line. To divert the bridleway to an alternative route, APC originally submitted an application to Wiltshire County Council some three years ago; but a satisfactory solution is not yet agreed.

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There are five Bronze Age round barrows just east of the development site; and English Heritage are currently considering how best to protect them from the natural processes of progressive erosion. To improve their visual aspects and general public enjoyment, EH have persuaded APC to 'release' five acres of land around the westmost barrow.

In addition, the developers own some forty acres of arable land on the east side of the town/country dividing line - bordered by Amesbury's byway 1, the A303, Allington Track, and Whitley Lane. Some of this land is surplus to the needs of town development and rural agriculture, and could readily be made available as a designated heritage area and nature reserve.

This discussion paper suggests how, in the context of the planning application and the bridleway diversion, it is perfectly feasible, subject to general goodwill and cooperation, to satisfy the needs and aspirations of all sensible parties with business, recreational, environmental and administrative interests in the encompassed area. An accompanying proposal map marks the principal features across the town/country divide, including ten particular items labelled P-Y.

2. DIVERSION OF BRIDLEWAY 29

After two unsuccessful attempts to divert the bridleway under section 116 of the Highways Act 1980, APC have recently supplied WCC with an alternative proposal under section 119. Their application specifies that "The bridleway would be 2m wide and grassed ... to create a 'country' route similar to that which once existed ... the route would meander through strategic landscaping planted to screen buildings from Equinox Drive ... This diverted route would be a cross-country style bridleway ... as existed prior to its obstruction by the previous owner ... The proposed route would provide sensible and safe separation of bridleway users and motor traffic".

Whilst these aspirations are highly commendable, the section-119 application was accompanied by a map which is incompatible with the declared intentions; and APC appear reluctant to modify their designs prior to submitting their imminent application for detailed planning consent. Where the bridleway would run in parallel with Equinox Drive, it virtually 'touches' the metalled corridor; and, where it crosses the road, the highway's curvature would inhibit essential sight-lines.

APC plan to extend the existing Equinox Drive so that, from the Dragonfly roundabout, it would provide a travel distance in excess of 500 metres without any calming measures for moderating traffic speed. Most of the traffic would be large heavy-goods vehicles which, without any calming, would generally achieve a speed of around 45mph. For general safety reasons, and to provide a safe crossing point for the bridleway, traffic should be induced to proceed at a maximum of 30mph.

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To achieve this safety requirement, and to increase the distance between road and bridleway, the attached map proposes an alternative profile for the Equinox Drive extension, with a straight section on each side of the bridleway crossing at point Q. The bridleway diversion is marked as running between point P (southwest of the Dragonfly roundabout) and point R (on bridleway 1) - a distance of around 550 metres. Northwest of point P, the bridleway has already been diverted, constructed, and signed; but it will serve no useful purpose until the southeast linkage is eventually completed.

Between points P and Q, it is proposed that the bridleway should be separated from Equinox Drive by an environmental 'gap' which ranges between 15 metres and 40 metres. Without such separation, it would not be feasible to achieve the declared aspiration of "a country route ... as existed prior to its obstruction". If WCC were to sanction the diversion as mapped by APC, they would have no power to insist that the environmental intentions must be achieved.

In the circumstances, it is necessary for close liaison between the two authorities (WCC and SDC) so that the bridleway diversion and planning permission are sensibly integrated. If planning permission were granted in advance of the diversion, the consent would need to be subject to a 'Grampian' condition that no works could commence before the diversion was legally sanctioned and actually provided on the ground in conformity with declared intentions in the section-119 proposal.

If WCC were to make an order under section 119, the order could then be contested by any member of the public; and this would result in a public inquiry, with a final decision by the Secretary of State. If the new bridleway route had been constructed by the time of the inquiry, the presiding inspector would consider whether it satisfied the declared intentions.

At this current time, and for several months past, the erection of barriers has prevented any use of the bridleway by the current definitive route, and by the route proposed by APC, and by the alternative course which is indicated on the attached map. Currently, the only pragmatic option is to use the metalled pathway alongside Equinox Drive, up to its current termination point at the intersection with Solar Way. From here, it is possible to cross rough unpathed ground to point T, a distance of around 200 metres; or to make a longer detour via an informal trackway which eventually connects with byway 1 some 600 metres to the south. APC have posted misleading signs, pointing to dead-ends; and they have failed to sign the only options which are actually available.

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3. FARM TRAFFIC AND MOD POLICE THROUGH SOLSTICE PARK

East of byway 1, and south of Whitley Lane, the farmland is owned by Oxford's Lincoln College, and farmed by their tenant, Mike Rowland. Despite several pleas in recent years, APC have declined to permit farm traffic to cross through Solstice Park en route to Folly Bottom bridge. APC have offered several questionable explanations for refusing permission - including dubious allegations of farm traffic causing a nuisance, unrealistic assertions of incompatibility with development works, and a supposed embargo by SDC.

With the proposed extension of Equinox Drive, and its intended adoption as a public highway, the right-of-way 'gap' would be significantly reduced. To bridge this gap, it is proposed that the southeast section of the bridleway diversion (Q-R) should be constructed as an unmetalled trackway, 4 metres in width and around 90 metres in length, allowing farm vehicles to access their field, south of Whitley Lane, from an adopted public road, with a lockable gateway which excludes other motor traffic.

Subject to negotiation with the Ministry of Defence, their police may also be permitted to use the trackway for surveillance of the neighbouring high-security establishment. They currently access byway 1 via its hazardous connection to the A303.

So long as the farm traffic is prevented from crossing through Solstice Park, tractors and waggons will continue to make an extremely hazardous journey across the A303 dual-carriageway, in conflict with heavy traffic which regularly proceeds at speeds in excess of 80mph. There have been three 'near-misses' in recent weeks; and, in wet or misty weather conditions, there's a particular likelihood of serious collision, with an exceptionally high risk of a multiple pile-up with fatal consequences.

When crossing the A303 from north to south, the farm traffic enters the A303 highway near New Barn, proceeding eastwards up the steep hill at 20mph for over half-a-mile, then 'weaving' to the outside lane in preparation for turning right into Allington Track. Here, it crosses the downhill westbound lanes, less than a quarter-mile from the blind summit, with a visibility period of only 10 seconds. From south to north, the farm traffic enters the A303 via byway 1, proceeding westwards downhill for around 300 metres, then using the sliproad to access Folly Bottom bridge via Solstice Park Avenue.

The north-to-south journey is so exceptionally dangerous that all responsible agencies should urgently collaborate in promoting measures to eliminate this risk without further delay. Rather than waiting for a right-of-way solution, APC should be urged to grant immediate permission for farm traffic to cross its undeveloped land. The Q-R trackway could be constructed immediately; and, from point Q, there's already an informal track that connects to the current termination of Equinox Drive, at its intersection with Solar Way.

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It is recommended that, when considering the anticipated planning application for the regional distribution centre, SDC should impose a condition that works cannot commence until there's a means for farm traffic to cross through Solstice Park between byway 1 and Folly Bottom bridge.

4. RURAL DEVELOPMENT EAST OF BYWAY 1

Some four years ago, English Heritage and the Highways Agency apparently prevailed upon APC to apply for byway 1 to be closed to all traffic, including walkers, for a length of around 350 metres south of the A303; and for the byway to be diverted to point W on Allington Track.

To achieve this objective, APC purchased some 40 acres of arable land, south of the A303, between Allington Track and byway 1. They then constructed a straight 'stoneway' with an exceptional 9-metres width, some 700 metres in length, along the land's southern margin - identified herein as "Whitley Lane". Due to objections, this diversion plan was subsequently abandoned, and byway 1 has not been diverted. APC have taken no steps to close Whitley Lane; but they say that they are planning to do so in the near future.

During the early stages of the Solstice Park development, Whitley Lane was much used by heavy vehicles as a temporary access route to the development area; but this access has recently been blocked off. For a short period, APC allowed this same route to be used by Mr. Rowland's farm traffic; but the permission was then rescinded in August 2006.

Since Whitley Lane is wholly out of character within the pleasant surrounding countryside, and might soon attract the attention of "new-age travellers" who frequently converge on Stonehenge, it is recommended that the lane should be reduced to a width of 4 metres, and 'de-straightened' within the 9-metres corridor, as suggested on the attached map.

According to APC, the farmland north of Whitley Lane has always been surplus to their actual requirement; and they insist that they have no aspiration for seeking planning consent for developments thereon. It is understood that APC might soon sell the 40 acres of land, including the constructed lane, together with a small area, west of byway 1, excluded from the development site at the request of English Heritage.

It is proposed that Whitley Lane should be truncated, so that it cannot be used for motor traffic accessing byway 1. It would provide access to the arable fields on both sides (point V), and to a proposed heritage/nature reserve; and it would be linked to byway 1 by a permissive bridleway (U).

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5. BRONZE AGE ROUND BARROWS

English Heritage are keen to protect five local barrows, and to allow them to be seen by the general public in a suitable 'setting'. To this end, they have recently arranged for the four southerly barrows to become more 'visible' within the Lincoln College farmland; and for APC to reserve a small area on the west side of the westernmost barrow (T).

For several centuries, the western perimeter berms of two of the barrows (T and X) have been traversed by a long-distance highway; and this 'desecration' of a cultural burial site was initiated by the Romans during the 1st century AD. Byway 1 was originally part of a Roman military road, constructed in several straight sections between Cunetio (Mildenhall) and Sorviodunum (Old Sarum).

English Heritage had wanted the byway to be formally diverted around the west flank of barrow T; but this would not be appropriate, and the proposal is now abandoned. Instead, the byway could be widened at this point, and travellers could be 'induced' to avoid the actual barrow. APC have constructed a fence which anticipates this widening process, and there is no known obstacle for preventing its immediate execution.

It is proposed that byway 1 should be 'stopped' just south of the northernmost barrow (X); but not until farm traffic is able to travel through Solstice Park. This would allow the barrow's visual 'setting' to be greatly improved; and it would satisfy the request of the Highways Agency that all motor traffic should be prevented from using this byway for access to/from the A303.

6. FIVE BARROWS HERITAGE AREA AND NATURE RESERVE

The attached map marks the suggested boundary for a parcel of land which is surplus to the needs of business development and rural agriculture. This includes the small area which APC have 'set aside' west of byway 1 (T), together with part of APC's forty acres east of the byway (including barrow X), and that part of the Lincoln College land which is 'occupied' by the four barrows south of Whitley Lane.

It is hoped that these lands might be offered to a charitable trust or government agency, so that the integrated site could be developed and managed as a local heritage area and nature reserve, freely open to the general public, and with a small informal parking area for around ten cars.

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7. CLOSURE OF ALLINGTON TRACK AT THE A303

Even after obviating the current requirement for local farm tractors to turn right off the dual-carriageway into Allington Track (point Y), this intersection, on such a steep hill and so close to its brow, would remain exceptionally hazardous for general traffic.

It is suggested that, in due course, the Highways Agency should consult with the local highways authority (WCC) to examine what functional detriment might be caused if the whole junction were closed off. It would be far safer for motor traffic to access the parishes of Allington and Newton Tony via Cholderton or Porton.

8. ACCESS TO MOD DEVELOPMENT LAND

The Solstice Park development is required to provide an access road for prospective development of the MoD land further south; and it is recommended that such access should be routed via Meridian Way, rather than via Equinox Drive. This would permit the southern extension of Equinox Drive to be used exclusively for the regional distribution centre and for occasional 'controlled' access to byway 1; thus separating the HGV's from general 'through' traffic. It would also allow improved screening between building 2 and byway 1.

Alan Hill - 16 November 2007

AMESBURY - WILTSHIRE

EAST OF SOLSTICE PARK

REGIONAL DISTRIBUTION CENTRE

DIVERSION OF BRIDLEWAY 29

CONNECTING LANES TO ALLINGTON TRACK

HERITAGE AREA AND NATURE RESERVE



