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The Chairman
Northern Area Committee
Salisbury District

Cc Councillors

Ref: S/2003/2489

References A. Case Officer's Report.
 B. Environmental Services Department Report.
 C. RFS report.

Dear Sir,

REDEVELOPMENT OF GREGORY TRANSPORT SITE

The report of the Case Officer (reference A) into the above application has just been received, and in view of its content presents some opinions that need to be challenged. This document appears not to be impartial, it presents matters of opinion and estimates as facts, and the logic used is neither precise nor complete. Local residents' concerns and objections are summarised without comment, while the applicant's responses to relevant points, using arcane assessments and models and selective use of criteria, are apparently accepted at face value. Examples will be given later.

The conclusion states that "the development of this store at this location will help maintain an employment use within the body of Amesbury town". The recommendation states that the proposal is in compliance with adopted local plan policy. The remainder of these two paragraphs are concerned with generalisations regarding landscaping and cosmetic improvements.

The main point of the conclusion concerns employment. Consultation with the Planning Department reveals that it appears to depend on whether there is a change of use or it is the subject of a development plan, and there is no clear and simple answer. This information is not easily available in the public domain. However, in April 2003 it was stated that "the First Secretary of State does not regard regeneration or employment creation as aspects of retail need for the purposes of tests in PPG6 and the Caborn statement". In any case, the jobs previously at Gregory's Transport have been moved further up London Road, so none have been lost, and there are many more jobs being created at Solstice Park and elsewhere. Thus, the main argument of the conclusion is probably incorrect, invalidating the recommendation.

The RPS submission has a number of selective statements favouring its case (as is only natural to present the best case for its client). However, one would expect the

planning department to examine the arguments rigorously, as was done in Ref B. For example:

1. The catchment area used is unrealistic: Ref B, para 7 gives examples: why would residents of Urchfont drive over 15 miles to Amesbury, when they can visit a similar store at Devizes 5 miles away? The conclusion: "Clearly, the catchment area is a nonsense". Similarly, the population data is suspect (para 8).
2. Ref B, para 18, regarding retail impact, "means that the resulting figure tells us little, if anything, of the actual effect of the proposal."
3. Paras 19-21 go on to further discussion, and conclude that it is not realistically possible to determine the extent of the effect on competing outlets.
4. The caveats expressed make it clear that Ref B only concerns strategic retail considerations, and lack of reference to local matters, and any other matters in the RPS report do not necessarily imply acceptance. Ref B is not a blank cheque.
5. Ref c, para 3.14 states there are no DIY retail warehouses within the natural catchment area: see above. This may be strictly true, but ignores Logan's Store. Para 3.20 says, "Focus is genuinely a bulky goods retailer, and it is widely accepted that goods sold from DIY stores are not suitable for sale within town centres, and DIY retailing almost exclusively takes place in out-of-centre locations". So the sequential test was just for cosmetic purposes. However, the arguments used in the sequential test are illuminating: most of the sites examined are assessed as unsuitable because of lack of car parking, the nature of the goods, and that they are within the Housing Plan Boundary (as is this site).
6. It states that existing traffic use from the site can be deducted from the Traffic Assessment. Gregory's transport still generates traffic; this is ignored.
7. "The town environment is generally of a high quality". True 40 years ago, but what are they using as a yardstick? Amesbury had character, sadly no more.
8. The original proposal had provision for 97 car parking spaces at the front, with 20 at the rear for overflow at peak periods. The justification was that "car parking is essential in the sale of DIY goods". The amended plan of 18 May shows that the number has been reduced to 60 at the front and 16 at the rear. If 117 were required, where are the overflow cars going to park now?
9. There are several other areas of contention, such as traffic assessment models, claw-back from other retail stores, hours of delivery etc, that appeared to be accepted without any rigorous scrutiny.

The use of cars now needs to be addressed. PPG 6.2 requires retail development in locations which maximise the opportunity to use means of transport other than the car. However, as described above, cars are essential for bulky goods. Try getting on a bus or bicycle, or walking, carrying a bag of compost or several cans of paint, let alone even bulkier goods. Ref C states that "location of on-site parking is fundamental to DIY bulky goods retail warehousing". Common sense and experience show that cars will be used in these instances. PPG 6.3.3 recognises that retail warehouses have particular requirements to be taken into account.

Many objectors have suggested that a more suitable site would be Solstice Business Park, out of centre, and with ample space. This has been brushed aside with the argument that retail development is not permitted. There are reportedly some retail

sites proposed (a petrol station and fast food outlets). There is an onus on planners to be flexible in their approach; is it not possible to use some flexibility here? (The Focus store at Devizes is out-of-town).

There are many other issues raised in the letters from objectors, with no comment from the Case Officer, yet the review of the applicant's case seems to be cursory. For example, the sequential test examines 13 sites within the housing boundary and finds them unsuitable (unsurprisingly, see above), and then a figure of 350 metres, within which no suitable site exists, is produced to preclude any other sites. Advice from SDC Forward Planning confirms that no such statutory limit exists: where does this figure come from? The issue of speeding is dismissed with the statement that "realignment may possibly reduce the figure of 7% exceeding the enforcement limit". The actual rate is 40% above the legal speed limit. Regarding parking, "it is considered that with these conditions the proposal is unlikely to have a significant effect on existing traffic flow..."; what about the reduced number of parking spaces? There are other anomalies. The original application was for a non-food retail development: the documents from the SDC Planning Department refer to the erection of a "non-food warehouse", disguising the change of use- why? Comments were restricted to land use only: again, why?

The SDC Adopted Local Plan (6/2000), G 1(iv) requires that "effective use is made of land in urban areas, particularly on previously developed sites". This agrees with Government policy, as stated by the Deputy Prime Minister, to redevelop brown-field sites for housing (in preference to developing new sites; this site should have been developed before approval was given to the Persimmon development of 550 houses)

PPG6 lays down a requirement to "sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres". The applicant's analysis of alternative sites includes that of Christ the King recreational ground; this is rejected (Ref C) because "in any event it is questionable whether it is genuinely edge of centre given the length of walk to the retail centre". (Carrying the bag of compost?). Compare that distance to that of the proposed site. Other sites are rejected because they are within the Housing Policy Boundary: so is the London Road site.

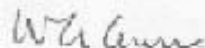
Recent changes in use have been from commercial/industrial (Oak Cafe and Cooper's Coal Merchants), to residential making the area more pleasant, in accordance with the SDC local plan. This proposed change of use goes against these precedents.

Any traffic management surveys carried out recently are not relevant because of the disturbance caused by the A303 road improvement at Folly Bottom.

There is a feeling locally that the planning process is skewed in favour of the applicant, because the objectors have no right of appeal, whereas the applicant has, and there is apprehension that the Alice in Wonderland scenario of "Verdict first, trial afterward" is about to happen. I am sure that this does not reflect the attitude and professional ethos of the planning staff, but you will appreciate that the concerns raised by the Case Officer's report do not fully allay such fears. I trust that the Planning Committee meeting on 24th June will take cognisance of these points.

Finally, this week's Amesbury Journal gives notice of the examination in public of proposed alterations to the Wiltshire structure plan, starting on 22nd June for about two weeks. The document will set out strategic policies to guide development and ensure that homes, shops, offices and employment areas are built in the most suitable locations in the period up to 2016. The revised plan is to be adopted in early 2005. If for no other reason this application should therefore be rejected until the publication of the new strategic plan.

Yours sincerely,



W.G. Gevaux

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