

BACKGROUND PAPER 2

REPORT FROM HISTON PARISH COUNCIL ON THE HIGH STREET CAR PARK

On 22nd May 2006 Councillor Max Parish, accompanied by District local member Councillor Mason, attended a meeting with Housing Portfolio Holder, Councillor Liz Heazell, at SCDC offices at Cambourne. The purpose of the meeting was to consider various options for the future operation and maintenance of the Car Park in Histon High Street.

Ownership

It was suggested by the District Council that, as the Parish Council were reluctant to purchase the Car Park, on the basis of the SCDC valuation, they should consider the option of a long term lease on a peppercorn rental and take on the cost of the maintenance of the Car Park. In order to defray these costs the Parish Council should consider charging local businesses to use part of the area on a regular basis. It was emphasised that the car park must remain free to ordinary members of the public.

Planning

The District Council were asked at the meeting to clarify the legal situation regarding the conditions attached to the recent granting of planning permission for a dwelling to the rear of 28 High Street, with vehicular access onto the car park access road, in the ownership of British Telecom. In particular there were queries as to potential re-siting of lighting columns, ownership issues and legal access to a widened verge on the west side of the road. It would appear from the email dated 22nd September 2006, received from Mrs. Clarke, that little progress has been made to resolve these legal issues.

History

A good number of years ago the County Council installed a finger post notice attached to a lamp standard in the High Street opposite, pointing to the Free Car Park and referring to time limits. This disappeared recently when the lampposts in the High Street were replaced.

A physical height limit barrier was installed a few years ago to prevent commercial vehicle parking but this has twice been vandalised. The Parish Council sees no easy answer to the problem of controlling the use of the Car Park with ever increasing demand coming from nearby settlements. Traffic and turning movements in the vicinity have increased dramatically in the past few years particularly after the arrival of Tesco.

Survey

In order to gauge the feasibility of this option on Monday 17th July 2006 three members of Histon Parish Council carried out a survey, to try and ascertain answers to the following questions:

- Who parks in the car park?
- How long they were likely to stay?
- Whether the purpose was for work or personal reasons?

- If for work, which firm they worked for?
- Whether they were residents of Histon; if not, where they lived?
- How regularly they parked there?

The Car Park currently has 32 marked parking spaces. On that morning 6 cars were already parked when the survey started at 7.40am. It has been established since that 4 of these belonged to employees of local firms (i.e. firms in or closely adjacent to the High Street).

During the survey period, up to 9.15a.m., a further 20 cars were parked. All 18 cars parked before 9.00a.m. belonged to employees of local firms. They were parked for the whole, or most of the day. 16 were parked on a daily basis and 2 for 2 or 3 days during a working week. The 4 cars we have traced which were parked earlier, were parked for the whole day on a daily basis, during the working week. The two cars parked after 9.00a.m. belonged to people making short visits. Both expected to leave within an hour.

On that day the breakdown of employees is as follows:

D. & T. Holmes – 6

Resolve – 4

Buckingham and Stanley – 2 (However, it has subsequently been established that the more usual number is 5)

Post Office -2 (3 who regularly park there were on holiday)

NatWest – 1

Barkers -1

Tucker and Gardner -1

Cambridge Building Society – 1

Thompson, Webb and Corfield – 1

Kitchen Smiths – 1

QMP – 1

Unknown employer – 1

Details unknown of two early parked cars. These are likely to be local employees as they were still in the car park at 3.00p.m. and gone by 5.15p.m.

All but one of the cars parked for the day came from outside the village. The Car Park is normally full during a working weekday and it was felt that the reason why the survey day was different was probably accounted for by being carried out during the school holiday period.

Follow up

The Parish Council sent a letter to the businesses mentioned above, to ascertain their reaction to the SCDC suggestion of a payment contribution. Only four written replies were received, all implying that they would be unwilling to consider paying for designated parking for their employees. One firm pointed out that this would be regarded as a taxable benefit. If it was decided to charge everyone for parking then most would accede to this but it was pointed out that this could drive parking out onto already congested streets. Only one company indicated that they might be prepared, as a local company, to make a contribution to costs.

Conclusions

The car park is predominantly used during the week by employees of local businesses and who live outside of the villages of Histon and Impington. This is in contrast to the original concept and provision by South Cambs. DC. as a “shoppers car park” in an expanding Rural Growth Village.

The businesses are unwilling to pay towards the suggested cost of enabling their employees to park safely close to the centre of the village and their businesses. In fact, such a payment would be considered as a taxable benefit and attract a tax charge as a benefit in kind. If a charge were levied on parking in this manner, drivers would park their vehicles on the road instead. Most likely on Station Road, which is already congested and the subject of concerns as a link road to the three local junior schools. Alternatively, vehicles are likely to park on the Green, next to the Junior School or utilise the Private Shoppers car park at the rear and side of Tesco’s store. At both locations parked vehicles are already a problem. Safety of children travelling to and from the Schools is a major concern in the village.

The businesses contribute towards a thriving local community and anything done to force them to consider relocating is considered unhelpful to the future prosperity of the village. However it should also be borne in mind that if spaces are not available for their customers to park, some loss of trade might also be inevitable.

Taking in account all of the many factors outlined in the above paragraphs it appears that the Parish Council would be unable to recoup the annual cost of maintaining the car itself. Although the District Council has spent less than £50 on average over the years, apart from barrier maintenance, when the cost of the rates and running and maintenance of 6 lights are added we estimate that the Parish Council would have to set aside approximately £2,800 per year (Rates £2,400 lights £240 and weeding/tidying £160) and forfeit rate reduction of £600 on the Parish Office as currently sole property owned. We would also have to set aside a sum for barrier repairs, marking and replacement of tarmac, which the District Council has let get into very poor condition. The cost of these we estimate to be in the region of £10,000, which if done every ten years would add an extra £1,000. Unfortunately, in cash flow terms, it is likely to be required sooner rather later. This latter maintenance also highlights the need to increase the Council’s Public Liability Insurance and the cost of notices ensuring that users understand the risks they incur by parking there. There will also inevitably be legal costs once the access situation is resolved.

In short, the District Council so far has been unable to convince the Parish Council that the necessary increase in Council Tax funding for residents of Histon that will be required to fund the handover, of 5.2% increase on the 2006-7 precept, is in their interest. We appreciate that the District Council has tried to come up with innovative ways that might minimise the extra costs involved but so far all we see are substantial downsides in the future. The costs that the District Council is asking the Parish Council to find over the next twenty years are equivalent to the current value the District Valuer has put on the property, with its (necessary) restrictions on use.

Histon Parish Council
September 2006