

HAMPSHIRE – THE COUNTY MAGAZINE

Winchester – England’s Ancient Capital in danger from Urban Sprawl

Last year there was a feature article in the Sunday Telegraph in the “Sunday Walk” series that opened:

“Winchester is a rarity among the cities of southern England. Set among the water meadows of the River Itchen, it has countryside lapping right up to its ancient core, without any ugly collar of urban sprawl in between”

The article concluded:

“Winchester’s modern history seems to be a battle against invading developers. How sad if Winchester should lose the very thing that makes it so special – if it is allowed to become just another southern city ringed about with urban sprawl.”

The author of the article was alluding to the following facts:

- Winchester College, one of the most prosperous public schools in the country, with charitable status, had sold land north of Winchester to the property developer, Cala Homes. The College “needed the money”(!?)
- Hampshire County Council had prepared its County Structure Plan, which included a Major Development Area (MDA), including a **minimum** of 2,000 houses, north of Winchester
- Winchester City Council (WCC) merely followed and have included in its draft Local Plan , a site for the MDA at Barton Farm (publication date October 2001).

It seemed incredible to the people of Winchester that such an idea could be contemplated. Numerous **independent** publications cogently argue that any such development would be an anathema to Winchester, examples include:

- *“Winchester is characterised by long wedges and fingers of countryside running into the City. These create the green setting for which the City is famous”*
(1997 Local Government Inspector’s Report)
- *“The combined weight of the City’s visible history, whether of townscape or landscape, is what gives Winchester its exceptional character.”*
(“Winchester and its Setting” – WCC Report)

Ignored by their elected representatives, the people of Winchester formed the “Save Barton Farm Group” which has rapidly grown into the largest community group in Winchester with 6,000 supporters and growing.

Quite apart from the dire repercussions on local infrastructure, hospital beds, traffic congestion, noise and air pollution, the following are also compelling reasons why the development should not go ahead:

- There are innumerable brownfield sites that should be utilised before any greenfield sites are considered
- Urban capacity studies show that other urban centres could absorb additional housing. For example, Southampton could take an additional 20,000 new homes
- There will be scant provision of the affordable housing Winchester needs to help with the chronic shortage of public sector workers in Winchester. Developers will want to build executive homes which will merely suck people into Winchester who will commute up to London
- The wedge of land north of Winchester is all greenfield now owned by developers. When the MDA is approved, the whole wedge will be blighted. Developers will rush to submit their planning applications – Winchester will be changed forever
- Village communities around Winchester are dying – post offices, pubs, schools are closing. Their populations are declining. They want and desperately need investment. An alternative would be to disperse some development in and around the villages, rather than in one unimaginative mass north of Winchester
- Remember the conclusion of the “Winchester and Its Setting” Report:

“The study emphasises the interrelationship between the historic City and its sublime setting. Damage to one part will echo throughout the entire structure to the detriment of the whole.”

Surely the unique essence of Winchester is its sublime setting? What other place moves people to write such eulogies? Imagine plans to develop any of the Great Parks in London. I am sure the people of Hampshire would be among the first to object. Although they could be considered great locations, close to transport, jobs, hospitals, schools etc – and prime sites for development, they too are an integral part of London, in exactly the same way as Winchester’s landscape is to Winchester.

Unfortunately, Winchester City Council covers an administrative area of 250 square miles with a population of 110,000 people. Only 30,000 of these live in Winchester City itself and therefore the ancient capital of England is under-represented – it needs its own Council to ensure local democracy is at work. It is a national treasure and a unique City. We all need to join together to protect and preserve the City and its setting.

We believe that the City of Winchester should be protected with “World Heritage” status, or a permanent “Greenbelt” so that Winchester is protected forever. Otherwise it will become “...just another southern city surrounded by urban sprawl.”

Please help us to save Winchester by writing to the local M.P. (Mark Oaten), the County and City Councils and more importantly, register your support with the Save Barton Farm Group
Address: 13 Trussell Close, Weeke, Winchester, SO22 6DZ

Tel: 01962 883932 / 0-1962 865088
Website: www.savebartonfarm.org

Gavin Blackman
Chairman, Save Barton Farm Group