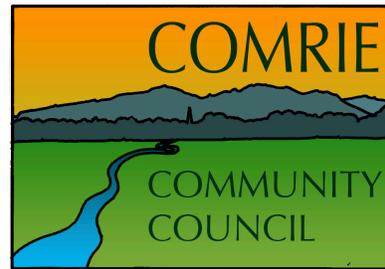


Comrie Community Council
Meeting @ Community Centre
18th July 2013- 7.30 pm
Agenda – The Future of ‘Bumblebee Square’



Attendance-

Community Councillors -Andrew Finlayson (chair) Gill Brock, Judy McDowall, Sandra McRitchie, Gordon McCartney and Davie Robertson (Minutes – Gillian McCartney)
PKC Councillor Rhona Brock, – Kirsteen Currie PA to Rosanna Cunningham, Strathearn Herald's Jonathan Menzies and over 100 Comrie residents.

Cllr Finlayson opened the meeting at 7.30 pm and welcomed everyone.

He went on to say that the Community Council does not normally meet during this their summer recess but recently unveiled development proposals for the Square have raised such concerns locally that we felt it appropriate to host this public meeting to openly discuss matters.

The chair thinks it might help if he first summarises a;

1. BREIF HISTORY OF ‘BUMBLEBEE SQUARE’

2006- Comrie Garage closes & the following year site purchased by Braemore Estates for the purpose of development for housing.

Planning Permission thereafter granted for 10 quality flats.

In a time of severe economic downturn Braemore decide to put development ‘on ice’ awaiting an upturn in market conditions.

2010- local resident Kathy Collins concerned, not least, by the long term presence of unattractive hoarding in the heart of the village, approached William Frame of Braemore with the suggestion that the area could be transformed into a temporary Community Garden. Mr Frame had no immediate intention of selling the site but was supportive of Kathy's idea and agreed to lease the site to the Community Council for a few years. Volunteers spearheaded by Kathy quickly raised £11000 from kind local donations and within an extremely short time, but with exceptionally hard work from a legion of volunteers, Bumblebee Square was born.

2011- it became clear to the many of us that Bumblebee Square represented something of inestimable value to the village and it was decided to see what prospects we had to raise the money to try to purchase the Square outright.

‘Friends of the Square’ - A steering group was formed that set out to achieve a number of things;

1. to ensure that the Square was kept beautiful for as long as we might have it...the grass cut, the planting beds maintained and developed, the place kept tidy, the notice board kept interesting etc. That has been achieved.

2. to try to get as many activities as we could in the square and to broaden its appeal and use within the village. Butlers in the Square, Halloween, The School Summer Fayre and countless other uses helped the square gain the support and affection of the broad community

3. It was thought unrealistic to expect to raise the full amount to purchase the square by local donations alone so it was hoped to secure a meaningful chunk of lottery funding that would make our task more achievable. We ran events, car boot sales, charity shop, badge sales and we received numerous kind donations. By the end of our first year of events we had produced plenty of evidence (brochures, social media, reports) to illustrate the community benefits, raised a further £12000 towards our fighting fund, demonstrated that Bumblebee Square was a sound, financially sustainable proposition and successfully applied for Charity Status.

We were encouraged by the fact that every agency we went to for help eg PKVS, The Lottery Fund, the Land Reform Fund all saw that Bumblebee Square had the makings of a model Community Project. We seemed to tick all their boxes and we were in what could have been the final run in to a Lottery Application.

By 2012 -

The owners had spent some £600,000 on purchasing the site, decontamination works, legal fees etc.

The owners offered the site to the village for £475,000.

We got the site independently valued at £225,000. It could be argued that this was a valuation at very lowest ebb of the market but none the less we hoped that if we could secure even this amount from grant funds we could then top it up with our own fund raising to come up with an amount that might have allowed us to negotiate a sale with the owners.

2. NO GRANT FUNDING AVAILABLE

We were landed with an unexpected bombshell. Funding Agencies confirmed that they would offer us **no funding if we intended to spend more than the lowest valuation** in purchasing the site. The owner had no intension of selling the site at what he considered a rock bottom price (the lowest valuation) preferring to wait for some more reasonable return by development.

The Friends of the Square has to date maintained the square, created many a successful events, raised around £30k in hard cash (we spent just under £10k in creating the Squire) and secured over £50k in pledges. This group of some 20 hardcore volunteers (swelling to more than double that for events) showed itself as more than capable of delivering everything that was required to secure the site but only provided we could secure some grant funding. By 2012 it became clear that this was not now possible and we publicised through the press, notice boards etc that we had now hit a brick wall and, to us, the only possible hope might lie in some other group, perhaps a syndicate of local businesses or such, that might come forward to face the challenge of raising the purchase price from scratch. Since last year no meaningful initiative to raise this money has come forward and so it is not unexpected or surprising that the Developer, having given us 3 years grace to come up with some reasonable purchase proposition, has elected to take some initiative of his own to make something of his investment.

3. PROPOSALS FOR SHOP & FLATS

It is in that context that we now come to most recent proposals for the Square. A co-op and seven flats aimed at the social sector.

The proposals do not fall within the definition of a major development in relation to any Planning Application so the Developer does not need to consult with the Community prior to any application. He has none the less decided to be as open and transparent as he can be and advised the Community Council of his intentions a month ago and followed this up with a public presentation of his scheme a couple of weeks ago.

We invited the developer and his team along tonight but they declined the invitation stating in his letter;

“Thank you for letting me know about your proposed Community Council meeting..and for your invitation to attend. As you know we held a public meeting on the 3rd July at an early point in the design process to allow the village to be informed, and we are happy to share the comments received on our questionnaire. We will be prepared to attend a public meeting in due course when we have carried out more work on the project and trust you will appreciate that your meeting is just too soon after ours to be meaningful.”

For some this will be disappointing but it might allow the Community tonight to approach matters with clearer heads unclouded by the finger pointing rancour that might otherwise have been the essence of this meeting.

Following the public presentation of these most recent proposals the developer left under no illusion about the feelings of those who attended and Mr Frame has now presented us with the results of the questionnaires submitted at that presentation and we have published this on our web site. You can note for example that of the 165 respondents to the question “Do you agree with the proposals for the Co-op shop?” 5 said “yes” 8 said “don’t know” and 152 said “no”.

Despite The Friends of the Square saying for over a year now that there was needed some last ditch attempt to raise funds to secure the site for the village the now ever so clear and present danger of the site being built on may allow us all to focus in some concerted effort to give this particular cloud a silver lining. Tonight’s agenda therefore can focus on two distinct matters;

- 1) What the Community think about...and intend to do about the prospect of a Planning Application being submitted broadly in line with the proposals recently seen and
- 2) What prospects do we see for actually raising funds in a last gasp effort to purchase the site for the Community forever.

Andrew then opened the meeting to the floor.

(There were many comments, often lengthy, ranging over a number of subjects and so there follows only a précis of some of the points raised. These are generally the personal views or comments from individuals and not the expressed view of this Community Council. These comments have been arranged under two topic headings for coherence.)

COMMENTS RE PROPOSALS FOR SHOP & FLATS

- It was noted that the comments raised at the recent public presentation are not part of the Planning process.
- The questionnaire at the recent presentation might best be seen as simply a worthwhile marketing operation for the Co op, ie to see who shops in the village.
- Once any Planning Application is lodged with PKC 21 days are given for the public to respond.
- There was a suggestion that the Co op proposal is just a gimmick to perhaps encourage the Community to raise money quickly. The chair replied that the Co-op would not be engaged in this process as they have been if it were only some sort of gimmick.
- Someone asked if the Planning Consent for the original building had not lapsed. The chair noted that the developer may have 'started' the works by decontaminating the site and in any case this new proposal would be judged by PKC on its own merits.
- It was said that the Co op is a real threat to the nature of the village as we know it.. We should see off the Co op in Comrie because there is a good enough one in Crieff. It was stated that in some parts of England where Tesco stores had been proposed, locals had managed to keep them out.
- Surely the Planners would take into consideration the views of the locals? The chair noted that yes they will but only to the extent that they are pertinent. The area is clearly zoned for retail and housing and we have no 'right' to keep the square.
- It was asked if the Community Council is prepared to block the planning application, but the Chair replied that CCC don't have any authority to do that. Rather CCC will continue to act as a forum to air these matters and, when a Planning Application is lodged, discuss the matter armed with the broadest of views gleaned by then and pass comment to PKC accordingly.
- Someone questioned the suitability of the site to take the intended development what with all the loose fill at removed tanks and high water level.
- It was said that the level of interest/concern has increased due to the mention of a retail unit and it was questioned whether the 'shop unit' would be acceptable if was a drop in centre for the elderly, a nursery, art gallery or such..
- Murray Lochlan came with ideas and thoughts of the effects of such a retailer in the village and so far no-one has said they want the Co op. He went on to say that in Killin, 20 miles away, Comrie Butchers had a retail butcher outlet there. There were 2 butchers, a baker, fruit and veg shop, general grocer, chemist and Costcutter. The Co op came to Killin and now the other small independent outlets have closed and there is only a small number of locals work in the Co op. There are many more locals employed in the Comrie shops than the 15 proposed in the Co op. The

management of the proposed store will be brought in from outside the village and full time jobs will likely be in single figures.

- It was suggested that once the buildings are up the Developer may sell the lease to an outside investor.
- It is suggested that a Retail Impact Study will be required for PKC in assessment of the Application and this will likely be prepared by the Applicant. The Planning Department should be asked to carry out an independent study to show the impact on the village.
- Due to the geographic nature and surroundings of Comrie, the village attracts people of retirement age. On the pavements are young mums and prams and elderly in motorised scooters. The shops are accessible at the moment. On the presented plans the Co op is right up to the edge of the footway and lorries stopping on the roadside is detrimental to amenity value of the main street.
- The meeting was told that the man representing the Co op at the drop in presentation advised that lorries will load/unload during the night and it would be done from the roadside as the parking designated to the rear was for flat residents only.
- The 10 shops in the village that would be likely to be affected by the Co op have been measured and total some 510 sq m. Costcutter, for example, is 66 ½ sq m. The proposed Co op is 280 sq m.
- It was asked if the flats will be exclusively for Comrie people, but the Chairman said this is unlikely to be the case and that they would presumably be allocated based on the Council's policy to meet the social housing criteria.
- Someone saw a lorry unloading at Costcutters, a lorry unloading at the Butchers, the bin lorry loading and Comrie in Colour trying to get through the main street, all at the same time, causing a traffic jam. She suggested everyone take their cameras and photograph situations like this and send the evidence along with an objection letter to the Planning Department.
- There were hopes expressed for some 'executive action' – not from the Community Council, but someone or a group to run and coordinate any response to a Planning Application. Some folks agreed to meet after this meeting to discuss this further.
- Someone suggested a petition saying 'We will boycott your shop' if you come to Comrie. On a show of hands over 50 people in the audience indicated they were Co-op loyalty card holders and, with a further question, all confirmed that they would 'tear up' their cards in protest if the Co-op came to Comrie. It is noted that a petition is likely to 'count' as only one objection within the Planning process.
- It was suggested speaking to the Co op – they are democratic and surely wouldn't come to a village where they are not wanted.
- Kirsteen, from Roseanna Cunningham's office informed the meeting of 'Planning Aid' a voluntary advisor body which is free to individuals and she is happy to set up a meeting with them. Their input may be valuable in assessing and responding to the Planning Application.
- Someone noted going on to the Co-op's website to pass comments and these have been sent to the Acquisitions Manager who will get back to her. It was suggested that others use the same method to leave the Co-op in no doubt about the strength of feeling.

COMMENTS RE SECURING BUMBLEBEE SQUARE FOR THE VILLAGE

- It was asked what happened to the proposal for a land swap at Cultybraggan Camp. The Chair noted that, for a variety of reasons, it had come to nothing the fundamental reason being that at the outset of the CDT buying the camp planning permission was requested and granted for a form of industrial use which precluded residential use. The Planners advised that they would as a consequence not be in a position to support residential proposals for the camp.
- Ted Henderson went on to outline the current strategy of Friends of the Square and noted that after a frustrating couple of years where no major fundraising seemed likely a strong surge in interest suggests that some last ditch fundraising initiative might prove possible. He noted that Shirley Conner, who has a strong interest and connection to the village, has volunteered to employ her fund raising skills to help. The group are embarking on a 6 week summer campaign to raise the overall funds (including pledges) to 100k. If this is achieved it can be used as a springboard to raise the next 100k etc.
- The Friends of the Square intend calling an AGM within the next few weeks with the hope that more people will come forward to help create a workable strategy to achieve our ultimate aim.
- It was noted that with a number of previous major fundraising initiatives in the village (eg The Community Centre and the Parish Church) funds remained well short of target until the last minute when, encouraged by all the efforts, a few generous donations brought matters to a successful completion.
- The gap between the independent valuation and the developer's valuation was highlighted but it was also noted that house prices are rising. Friends of the Square will be seeking an updated valuation in due course but this is not expected to be of an amount to interest the developer.
- Ted informed the meeting that by asking for pledges it should be noted that these are not legally binding. He also noted that donations or pledges can be made in such a way that they can be refunded if the purchase of the land is not made.
- A number of people were unaware of the pledge forms and it was agreed that effort is needed to broaden this option. Pledge forms will appear in the next Quair. To spurn on the fundraising initiative a leaflet/pledge form drop round all the houses was suggested.
- It was suggested that carrying out a questionnaire at the same time as doing the door to door leaflets might be a useful exercise.
- Murray Lachlan thanked the Community Council for arranging the meeting. He was representing himself and wanted to talk about Bumble Bee Square and future fundraising. A real head of steam has got up in the past few weeks with the mention of a retail development in the square.
- It was noted that it would require many volunteers to coordinate door to door pledges, donations, questionnaires, etc and that folks should get together after the meeting to consolidate such matters.
- It was said that we need to go out to the bigger community ie make sure our campaign to save the Square is national.

- The only long term solution, as we know, is to buy the square outright. The chair reminded the meeting that the square would only be available to purchase with the agreement and support of the current owner and matters may have proceeded to an extent that, should Planning Permission be granted to build the current proposals, the owner may be contractually bound to deliver the intended buildings no matter the views or the capacity of the Community to purchase it. Urgency and close co-operation with the land owner are therefore critical to any success.

Chairman brought the meeting to a close at 8.40, but reminded everyone of the Community Council bottle stall at the Street Market on Saturday – bottle donations to Gordon McCartney please. He thanked Gillian McCartney for taking the minutes. Andrew asked for any helpers for Butlers in the Square on Float Day.

Vicky Cottrell said Bumble Bee Square is having a table at the street market on Saturday. Chairman thanked everyone for attending.

Gordon McCartney proposed a vote of thanks to the Chair.