

**CHURCHGATE DEVELOPMENT PROJECT**

**MEETING OF CHURCHGATE LIAISON FORUM**

**Wednesday 23<sup>rd</sup> March 2011 6.30pm  
Church House, Churchyard, Hitchin**

**Notes (DRAFT)**

**Present:**

Martin Stears-Handscomb (MSH) Independent Chairperson	John Urwin (JU) – Hitchin Forum
Charles Vyvyan (CV)- Simons Developments Ltd	Keith Montague (KM)– Hitchin Society
Mark Newton (MN) – Simons Developments Ltd	David Howlett (DH)– Hitchin Historical Society
Cllr Deepak Sangha (Cllr DS) - Local Hitchin Councillor	Brent Smith (BS)– Hitchin Initiative/Bid
Cllr Alison Ashley (Cllr AA) - Local Hitchin Councillor	John Haykin (JH) – Hitchin Markets
Cllr Paul Clark (Cllr PC) – Local Hitchin Councillor	Alan Doggett (AD) – Hitchin Chamber of Commerce
Cllr Tricia Cowley (Cllr TC) – Southern Rural Councillor	

**NHDC Officers in attendance and not part of the CLF:**

Norma Atlay (NA) NHDC	Simon Ellis (SE) – NHDC
Louise Symes (LS) - NHDC	
Christine Phillipps (CP) – NHDC	

Ref:	Item	Action
	<b>FORMAL PART OF CLF MEETING</b>	
1.	The Chairperson, Martin Stears-Handscomb (MSH), welcomed everyone to the meeting and advised that the purpose of the CLF meeting was provide effective communication between residents, businesses and community groups and the Council's development partner, Simons. The format of this meeting would be a formal meeting followed by public discussion and then finally a formal meeting to respond to matters arising from the public discussion.	
1.1	<b>Notes of CLF Meeting of 24<sup>th</sup> November 2010</b> Suggested amendments to notes from John Urwin (Hitchin Forum), MSH suggested that rather than go through amendments in detail that these be added as an addendum to notes of 24 November meeting. MSH advised that notes are a record of the meeting and are not minutes of the meeting. Amendments are to clarify some points and we do not want to get into the practice of re-writing notes every time.	<b>Agreed</b>
2.		<b>Noted</b>

<p>2.1</p>	<p><b>Presentation by Simons Developments Ltd</b></p> <p>Mark Newton (MN) gave the verbal presentation that was given by Paul Hodgkinson to the Council Cabinet meeting on 22 March. The purpose of the presentation was to mark the anniversary of Simons signing the Development Agreement with the Council and to update Simons progress in the last 12months.</p> <p>MN gave a brief overview of the economy, state of the market and a brief update on where Simons are and the process that Simons as a business have been through in last 12months.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Economy – tough 12months, confidence in market is lower at present, with international turbulence and budgets cuts in public sector will impact the private sector etc.</li> <li>• Banking restriction on borrowing has resulted in a tough trading environment.</li> <li>• Simons have completed 2 major projects in the last year, an achievement considering trading conditions.</li> <li>• Retailers are struggling on the High Street, with increase in internet trading although retail letting prospects are still good.</li> <li>• Retailers are committed to quality locations, Hitchin is regarded as a quality location. Simons has good relationships with retailers.</li> <li>• Simons are not immune to the recession and have re-shaped their business. They have merged the three companies into one covered by one operating board.</li> <li>• Various roles and people have changed and indeed Charles Vyvyan (CV) is now a development consultant with a full remit for the Churchgate project reporting to MN who in turn reports to the Simons board. Thereby ensuring consistency and the same faces are on the project.</li> <li>• Simons business is financially strong. They are a solid private company and capable of making own decisions.</li> <li>• Simons completed Ely and Lincoln in last recession and are 100% committed to the Hitchin project.</li> </ul>	
<p>2.2</p>	<p>CV then gave an overview on what Simons have achieved over last 12 months;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial consultation on Simons' vision for the Churchgate development project at St Mary's Church in May 2010</li> <li>• Simons are taking on board the major issues that came out of that consultation.</li> <li>• Confirmed that the scheme is not a done deal.</li> <li>• Simons had hoped to bring revised plans to this meeting, but not quite there yet. Location of the market is still ongoing with productive meetings with the market representatives and Simons are looking at other options. They may be able to bring some revised plans to the CLF in the summer.</li> <li>• Views of St Mary's – Simons are looking at increasing the gap significantly to frame the church by improving the overall design of the scheme – CV urged for patience.</li> <li>• Retail and scale of retail – Simons are revisiting their plans – and are looking to reduce the heights of certain buildings, and will have a smaller scheme than initial vision.</li> </ul>	<p><b>Noted</b></p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Simons have had productive conversations with Hitchin Town Centre Initiative (HTCI) and explained how their scheme could benefit the existing retailers in town.</li> </ul>	
<b>3.</b>	<b>Update on Simons Meetings with Key Stakeholders</b>	
3.1	Alan Doggett (AD) raised issues about uncertainty for Churchgate retailers, and CV advised that assuming Simons had a viable scheme and submitted a planning application, this would be the time when they would start to address the relocation of the Churchgate tenants.	<b>Noted</b>
3.2	Brent Smith (BS) advised that the HTCI had a good meeting with Simons and they were impressed with the team that Simons brought to the meeting, but are still to be convinced on the amount of retail offer.	<b>Noted</b>
3.3	John Haykin (JH) for the Hitchin Market Ltd (HMLtd) – advised that the market is in best location at present and is the best department store for Hitchin at the moment. Whilst HMLtd has rejected revised plans, Simons have always come back with ideas for the location of the market. The HMLtd will continue with productive meetings in finding a solution for market.	<b>Noted</b>
3.4	The question was asked if Hammersmatch refurbished the Churchgate centre where would this leave Simons. CV is of the view that a refurbished centre given the size of the current units would not attract the type of retailers that Simons could put forward as part of a redevelopment.	<b>Noted</b>
3.5	CV advised that Simons are taking public consultation very seriously and that there are a number of other consultations that need to take place with stakeholders, such as Highways, English Heritage etc.. Simons received criticism of their vision at the St Mary's exhibition and they hope to demonstrate that they have listened to the public when they come back with their revised scheme.	<b>Simons</b>
	Session ended at 7.20pm	
<b>4.</b>	<b>DISCUSSION WITH WIDER PUBLIC</b>	
4.1	<p>The following points were raised: (These are the views of those people present at the meeting)</p> <p><u>Development Agreement</u> It was questioned how the Council could agree a scheme when the DA refers to the Churchgate Planning Brief which is a legal document.</p> <p><i>Project team response:</i> There is no specific requirement for Simons scheme to comply with the provisions of the Churchgate Planning Brief within the Development Agreement. The reason being that the Council acting as landowner and development partner cannot fetter the discretion of the Local Planning Authority in the determination of any planning application. On this basis the Development Agreement contains very little specific detail as to the nature, design and extent of any scheme that may result through the process of scheme evolution. The Development</p>	

	<p>Agreement does however contain provisions that require Simons to seek formal approval of the detailed scheme from the Council acting as landlord before submitting a planning application to the Local Planning Authority.</p> <p>4.2 <u>Consultation</u> It was asked why have Simons not taken up opportunity of consulting with the 3 secondary schools in Hitchin. Young people's views are important.</p> <p>CV advised that part of the process is to consult with the schools. As part of their consultation plan Simons propose to make presentations to the schools and possibly leave a video diary/box for students to leave messages regarding the Churchgate proposals. As part of the initial consultation at St Mary's, CV advised that they did allocate a morning for schools, which one school attended and came up with some good ideas. CV is conscious that a large segment of people living in Hitchin have not been reached yet.</p> <p>4.3 <u>Proposed Street and Servicing</u> It was questioned if the Nationwide building, which is listed, and the Rose &amp; Crown pub would remain with the proposed new street? CV confirmed that there is no intention to touch either of these buildings and indeed want to preserve these buildings.</p> <p>Concern was raised regarding vehicular servicing in this area, which needed to be avoided given the number of pedestrians. CV advised that servicing will not be through that access point.</p> <p>4.4 <u>Market</u> It was questioned if the market is located to Portmill Lane, what about access to Church House? CV advised that St. Mary's Church have been asked to provide a list of events and requirements so Simons can assess the needs of the Church and rear servicing requirements for Church House. MN reiterated that they will arrive at a sensible solution for Church House.</p> <p>4.5 <u>Open Spaces</u> It was stated that people like the openness of the town and the open spaces. CV advised that by creating a new square in front of church with a gap being widened to be approx 60 car parking spaces with quality public realm would create an attractive open space.</p> <p>4.6 <u>3D model</u> It was requested if a 3D model of the Witney scheme could be provided to demonstrate how the scheme was taken forward from consultation to planning. MN agreed that this could be provided, possibly via the Simons website.</p> <p>4.7 <u>Anchor Store</u> It was assumed that an anchor store will want some incentive up front to come into a scheme. CV advised that they were unlikely to proceed with a planning application until they had a clear scheme with retailers signed up. CV advised that it is not uncommon for a contribution to be made to encourage such stores to come into town, this is the developers responsibility.</p>	<p><b>Simons</b></p>
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4.8	<p><u>Expenses</u> Concern was raised at the amount NHDC have spent on legal and consultancy fees approx £1m? Norma Atlay (NA) responded that the Council has spent around £900k over the last 10years looking at Churchgate of which a large proportion was on the community planning event in preparing the Churchgate Planning Brief. NA advised that if the local people want something to happen in Hitchin then you have to spend money, and it is the Councillors that approve the spending.</p>	
4.9	<p><u>Inscription on steps</u> It was questioned if the inscription on the steps at the river in front of St Mary's car park are to remain? CV – advised that the parapets and steps together with inscription are to remain in situ and improved. He also advised that there will be a bridge in front of steps across river to improve access for wheelchairs or prams/buggies. Any planning permission has to be DDA compliant. There will also be lifts, ramps within the scheme to improve access.</p>	
4.10	<p><u>Apparent Lack of Public Support for certain elements were mentioned</u> It was stated that Church Close/Cathedral Close in the John Thompson report was not popular at time.</p> <p>It was noted that the community groups at the last CLF presented a statement that no building should take place on St Mary's Square, and do not want a framed view of the church. They want a scheme that keeps St Mary's as open public space.</p> <p>It was questioned if the Simons board were aware that there was little or no support for their proposals – people go outside Hitchin to shop, people go out of Hitchin to work. No cinema or civic theatre. People are not interested in losing historic character to retail. Hitchin dominated by small retailers – when planning application comes in there will be substantial objection to it. Hammersmatch are not interested in selling, want to refurbish. If go for CPO, then there will be a public enquiry. Refurbishment is more respectful than redevelopment.</p> <p>3 letters were read out from people who could not attend regarding St Mary's Square and views of church and that car park has 17 trees, just add some bushes.</p> <p>Views from Saxon Court, Queen Street – enjoy views of the church and how it is lit up at night.</p> <p>CV advised that he could not give guarantee that Simons would not build on St. Mary's car park.</p>	
4.11	<p><u>Post Office site</u> It was questioned if something could be done with the Post Office site. CV advised that this was something they could look at as there are opportunities to use the post office site to open up links to Hermitage Road.</p>	

4.12	<p><u>Lack of Plans and CLF Meetings</u>  People expressed their disappointment that the last CLF meeting was abandoned to allow Simons time to bring plans to this meeting. The last time plans were presented was back in May 2010. There have been no plans at any of these meetings.</p> <p>The public consultation for the CLF over the last 6 months is close to the end. It was questioned how much longer these meetings will continue?</p> <p>CV advised that he was also disappointed that plans could not be presented at this meeting, but negotiations are on going and positive meetings are still taking place. He advised that the CLF meetings will continue as it is an important part of the consultation process and Simons will continue working with Councillors and the people of Hitchin.</p>	
4.13	<p><u>Refurbishment of Hammersmatch</u>  A member of the public at the meeting stated that they have it on good authority that Hammersmatch will refurbish the existing Churchgate centre after Christmas.</p> <p>CV – Advised that any meetings he has had with Hammersmatch are private and confidential and could not comment without getting Hammersmatch authority to make public.</p>	
4.14	<p><u>Planning Brief</u>  It was stated that the Planning Brief was put together in 2004 and the Simons Scheme is against public opinion.</p> <p>CV advised that the Planning Brief has already been discussed in great detail at an earlier CLF meeting and all documentation regarding this issue is available on the Council's website under the FAQs on the Churchgate Project.</p>	
4.15	<p><u>250 year Lease</u>  It was questioned how many other Councils give 250 year leases and is it the Council's intention to hand over the and after 250 year lease and are there strict covenants, maintenance etc?</p> <p>NA responded that the Development Agreement does allow for a 250yr lease with protection built in to protect public interest. She also explained that the Council sought expert advice on the 250yr lease and that the current commercial reality had to be taken on board.</p>	
4.16	<p><u>Other Schemes</u>  It was questioned if Simons did the Weymouth scheme development – MN advised that this was not a Simons scheme.</p>	
4.17	<p>The meeting was attended by approx 85 people. Members of the public were invited to stay for the formal meeting. It was noted that approx 40 people stayed.</p>	
5	<p><b>MATTERS ARISING FROM PUBLIC DISCUSSION (Final Session)</b></p>	
5.1	<p>John Urwin (JU) – raised the issue about giving away quite a lot of valuable public land on a 250yr lease. This is privatising our land. What do the public get in return?</p>	

	He suggested that an independent appraisal should be done and continually done every year. The Council should employ an independent consultant to undertake this and Section 106 etc need to be factored into viability of the scheme.	<b>Noted</b>
5.2	In terms of retail need, he regarded the NLP Report as being full of assumptions and want to see the Simon's retail report in the public domain. People need evidence to go forward cautiously.	
5.3	CV – advised that they needed to make projections overtime and they will name some of the retailers and make their retail report available in due course to prove their case.	<b>Simons</b>
5.4	JU advised that they want to be reassured that the proposals does not harm the rest of Hitchin, as Hitchin has got something.	
5.5	JH made the point that an anchor store may attract other stores from the High Street, which is not necessarily a bad thing as this will release some units previously occupied by larger retailers for independent retailers that previously not had access to. The High Street will change.	<b>Noted</b>
5.6	Cllr Deepak Sangha (DS) – mentioned four key elements that the scheme should address: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Historic Fabric of the town</li> <li>• Sustaining and improving the local economy and employment</li> <li>• Catering for all sectors of society both current and in the future</li> <li>• This should be a quality development that must stand the test of time.</li> </ul>	<b>Noted</b>
5.7	Cllr Alison Ashley (AA) – Advised that the consultation and the process for the planning application must be accessible and easier for people to look at. CV advised that they would use every avenue possible for public consultation. E.g. website, schools, rail station, empty shop unit, public manned exhibition, possibly on a Saturday as the St Mary's consultation showed that reached wider section of public. He advised that they would follow a full and comprehensive consultation process.	<b>Noted</b> <b>Simons</b>
5.8	Cllr Tricia Cowley (TC) – noted the significance in consulting with young people and wanted to know how Simons will consult with Schools. Also how Simons will target the 40-45 years age group and those who are working. CV – advised that Simons will undertake presentations in schools, use feedback, twitter and other social media to engage debate. They will use newspapers and other forms of media to gain the wider views of young families, young people, as well as the 40-45 year age group.	<b>Noted</b> <b>Simons</b>
5.9	MSH – Format of this meeting, do we follow again? Agreed to do for next meeting.	<b>Agreed</b>
<b>6.</b>	<b>Date of next meeting</b> To be confirmed. Venue - Hitchin	

The meeting ended at 9.15pm.