

Nuralite

Since becoming the elected member for Higham on Gravesham Borough Council I have worked tirelessly in the interests of the residents and in protecting the Green Belt. However the recent decision I took relation to the Nuralite planning application has caused much anger so I wish to make the following statement explaining the reasons for the decision taken.

I will begin by showing below the speech I gave on the night and then go on to explain my role on the Planning Committee.

The Speech

We have here one of the most difficult decisions I have had to make in 14 years of membership of this committee and it is apparent that the officer who wrote the report had the same difficulty. I want to pay my thanks to officers for the painstaking diligence shown for what is effectively a mammoth report where no stone has been left unturned. I thank all those who have spoken and put their cases so effectively. My heart tells me one thing and my head another. I will make my decision as vice chairman of this committee based upon planning laws, which we all have to do, and upon the facts that we have before us. It is stated on page 10 that this is inappropriate development in the green belt and we have to agree with that. There have to be very special circumstances to override that. However we have land that was first developed many, many years ago, effectively a brown field site. I have no doubt that if this application came before us today as a virgin development it would not be approved and certainly any suggestion of an asbestos factory would be rejected. It would never under present planning laws have been allowed.

However, we have a site of extreme contamination which must be cleared up. There has been an attempt in the past to do this. This proved to be inadequate and we have seen just how the asbestos has come to the surface again. We have heard how the canal has been made a contaminated site. We have here a disaster which will only get worse. Quite clearly it is a health hazard and a risk to anybody who ventures on the site or indeed anyone who lives in the vicinity. But worse than this, it is a danger for many years to come. Particles are and will be blown around. By its nature its effects only begin to show 20,30,40 years later. This site must be cleared and the sooner the better. It is no good saying we will do it in time or don't disturb the site. The danger is there now. Any attempt to clear the site will have consequences as material has to be transported to and from the site whether it is done now or later. If something is not done now then it will be left to the local authority or government to do and we will be in the same position.

What are the consequences apart from the danger to health. Quite clearly traffic. With the traffic movements shown in the report we have a real problem. I don't

intend to go into the figures as they are shown in the report. There is an alternative in using the Hoo Junction rail site. But there are problems with that, so we come back to HGV movements and the thought of that leads me to shudder. Higham is already an area where lorries are a curse, Canal Road, very narrow in places, an area where accidents take place. A constant annoyance to residents alike.

This is where the head and heart come into play and my decision has to be made. Right up until now I have been in two minds, and constantly changing my mind. I can see both sides of the argument. If I say reject this application then we are left with the problem that we have now. A greatly contaminated site which is a health hazard now and will become worse as time goes on. It is said that it is only because the site has been disturbed that the asbestos has come to the surface and if left alone will not cause problems. There is some force in that argument, but we do not know what those consequences are. It could be years before they show themselves.

And so I come to my decision in this matter and I realise that it will please very few people. It is with a very heavy heart that I say that I have to agree with the officers recommendation to permit this application. I do so knowing the difficulties it will cause. The conditions on traffic movements must be robust, but not only robust but enforceable and be enforced. I will do all in my power to ensure that this is so. In saying that I would like to see a change in the recommendation that if the decision is delegated to the service manager that the consultation should be with not only the chair but also the vice chair so that I can keep myself full apprised as to what is going on and that conditions are properly enforced.

The role of the Planning Committee

The Committee holds an almost unique role on the Council in that decisions are made on behalf of the Council. Members sit independently and are not whipped to make decisions one way or the other. Members must make decisions purely on the evidence before them. They sit in what is known as a quasi judicial capacity. As Vice Chair I do not sit as a mandated member. I have to abide by the evidence that I have before me both written and oral. I am offered and take advice from officers and lawyers, but ultimately I have to base decisions on the evidence before me. This is what I did in this case. I had before me a report of around 100 pages, the oral evidence given on both sides of the argument and comments made by other members.

You will see from my speech the real difficulty I had in reaching my conclusion. It really was the most difficult I have ever had to make. But I had to make that decision in the long term interest of the Parish and the Borough as a whole. The most difficult, of course, related to lorry movements. The site must be cleared of asbestos as it is not only a health hazard now but a long term one. Whether the site is cleared now by the applicant or by the Borough or Government those lorry movements will take place. If we has done nothing we would have no powers to

control traffic whatsoever. It is essential, therefore, that the most stringent safeguards are put in place to protect residents, not only in Higham but beyond. The only

way that can be done is through the imposition of conditions on the applicant. If the case had gone the other way and the applicant appealed and won we would have no control. Evidence suggests that any conditions would be watered down. We must retain full control. That is why I moved my amendment, which was strengthened later by including Parish Councils. This way we can be sure that the conditions will be as strong as possible and we can be sure that the policing of those conditions will be fit for purpose. Work is starting on the conditions and once ready we will consult the parishes. I hope this will allay some of your fears.

I say again this is the most difficult decision ever. I made my decision in all good faith taking into account all the evidence before me. I appreciate that many will not agree with me. However I will continue to work for the remainder of my term of office in the best interest of residents and the Parish. The Parish is very close to my heart and I would never do anything that I considered against its interest. I will continue to oppose any inappropriate development in the Green Belt and support its many wonderful organisations.

Harold Craske