

Campaign Members Attend Consultation

Report by Susan Marsh MBE

Susan Marsh and Dave Collard attended the VIP Consultation session on Tuesday 6th February 2007 to represent the Campaign. Other invitees included local councillors, council officers, business people and associates of Waterbridge.

Toby Hunter opened the gathering with information about his company, Waterbridge, and the company he had set up to acquire the Dreamland site, Margate Town Centre Regeneration Company. He also discussed his other holdings in the area. He emphasised that Waterbridge were there as investors not developers. His presentation covered a number of other Waterbridge holdings and we saw details of work undertaken in Reading, Walsall, St Austell, Inverness and Hemel Hempstead. We also saw the outcome of the consultation exercise undertaken as TextMargate and Campaign representatives were pleased to see that the retention of Dreamland figured highly in the responses, especially as Dreamland was not mentioned in any of the consultation documentation. This demonstrates what an important issue Dreamland is to the people of Margate.

He told us that a public consultation was necessary for a planning application and gave information about his timescale; the intention was to collate all the responses to the sessions, this would result in two plans being drawn up both of which would be plans he would be able to go ahead with. These would then go on public display on the Dreamland site for further consultation in early April with a planning application being submitted towards the end of the month.

Toby Hunter then passed over to Dan Anderson from Tribal Consulting who told us that his brief had been to consider best practice in regeneration in towns similar to Margate.

He took us through some of his methodology and the various drivers to regeneration. He suggested that the key question is: what would drive the regeneration of Margate?

He made a number of suggestions

- Improved transport links
- Self employment
- New businesses
- New residents being as important as new visitors

He talked of the seaside setting – a city by the sea – a sense of place with amenities and events. Examples of towns that prospered in the commuter belt were given: St Albans, Maidstone, Chelmsford, Tunbridge Wells, Haywards Heath and Basingstoke. He went on to look in more depth at St Albans.

He then addressed seaside towns telling us the holiday market has changed because of high car ownership, rising cost of rail travel and low cost overseas travel.

He then turned to resort towns, telling us they needed to adapt and cited Whitley Bay, Southport, Clacton, Bridlington and Porthcawl as examples.

A graph demonstrated that Southport and Whitley Bay outperformed other seaside towns for low unemployment. Whitley Bay being very close to Newcastle upon Tyne and Southport he suggested had commuters to and from Manchester (though Susan later told him that the higher percentage was probably from Liverpool).

We then went through a series of ways in which towns had regenerated with:-

- A strong independent retail sector – this was said to need 2,500 residents to every tourist.
- Catering
- Animation
- Culture and heritage – it was suggested Margate had heritage with the old town and Dreamland.
- Health and sport – spa towns

The presentation then looked at commuters; the incentives to move to a town and the reasons they had for it for, eg quality of life or retirement.

He suggested that a strong sense of place led to belonging to a town rather than it being what is often called a dormitory town. That having a highly skilled workforce in a place led to companies establishing businesses and that workforce starting to work locally. Attracting commuters would bring that skilled workforce and they would be an incentive to investors.

He suggested that

Stage one was importing skilled labour

Stage two was giving them a reason to stay

Stage three was to attract investment

and made a number of suggestions as to what was needed – to target commuters, know what was needed to attract people, prevent it becoming a dormitory town, to attract, know the key strengths.

He concluded by looking at what was next for Margate and looked at the responses to their consultation in pie chart form. They broadly fell into four categories: the physical infrastructure, social matters, amenities and an attraction. The attraction was the largest category and a high percentage of that was for Dreamland to remain. The Dreamland section was broken down into three with people wanting it to be redeveloped on the lines of Alton Towers, Thorpe Park, Blackpool Pleasure Beach, etc, restored to how it was in say the 30s, 40s or 50s or as a fairground / amusement park heritage site. It was noted the latter two were much the same

This was followed by a question and answer session when a number of things were raised, with Susan and Dave both speaking. Toby Hunter did ask Susan, from the stage, whether the Campaign would accept a heritage type site.

Following refreshments everyone was invited to visit the specific groups around the room and give their views.

The day was marked by Dave Collard's numerous TV interviews and saw him starring on both the lunchtime and evening news bulletins. Susan was interviewed by BBC Radio Kent and Dave also gave an interview to Invicta Radio.

The public sessions day and evening on Wednesday and daytime Thursday followed the same format. Susan with her Husband Eric attended the Wednesday evening session and met up with Campaign members. Dave D and Vince both raised questions from the floor and we were pleased to see Martin, Alan, Jackie and Ian. Susan and Dave Collard again attended on Thursday morning.

Toby Hunter did indicate a number of times during the sessions that he would like to have the Scenic running this year and in response to a question did say he was committed to preserving the Scenic.