

5 April 2021

PPDRA comments for WEYBETTERWEYBRIDGE

We strongly support the goal of breathing life back into Weybridge town centre, with better coordinated community facilities which people of all ages want and use, enriched by our town's central green open spaces.

Our comments here – drawn from the PPDRA committee and other local residents – focus on the two areas of land under community ownership, either side of Church Street, and the once in a lifetime opportunity arising from the hospital fire and the need to refurbish the library.

North site: Weybridge Hospital (NHS Property Services) and Weybridge Youth Club field (SCC)

South site: Weybridge Library (SCC), Churchfields Car Park (EBC) and Centre for the Community (EBC)

The proximity to Churchfields Recreation Ground (often known locally as Churchfields park or simply the park) is a great asset for the south site.

We recognise the difficulty of circa 21,000 vehicles a day using the A317 dividing the two sites.

Imperatives

For the project to succeed, we see it as imperative that:

- Community use of both sites is retained and enhanced for people of all ages, with much increased youth provision addressing the current lack of facilities for young people.
- Better linkage is achieved between the sites, with pedestrians' needs put ahead of passing motorists.
- The massing of buildings is harmonious with the setting, and remains close to Church Street on the South site, allowing the open space behind to stay sheltered from road traffic noise and pollution.
- All the green space and tranquility of Churchfields is retained and safeguarded, with the view of St James' Church conserved, the togetherness of park, allotments and church respected.
- The green space between the North site and Portmore Park Road is safeguarded.
- Facilities are multi-functional and flexible to maximise use and accommodate changing needs across age groups, and available for extended hours.
- Car parking provision is sufficient, but not intrusive or dominant, e.g. with undercroft parking on the North site.

Buildings

To achieve the above:

- We believe it is essential to retain the natural open views from the park towards St James' Church and Churchfield allotments, and that building in the southern two thirds of the car park would have an unacceptably negative and overbearing impact on the park.
- Any new buildings on the South site should extend no further south than the office building adjacent to the entrance to Churchfields car park.
- The style of a new building on the Church Street library site should fit with our characteristic Weybridge town centre gabled street scene.
- Any new build on the North site could potentially cover much of the hospital site, and include extensive undercroft parking. There would be strong opposition to a tower block or excessive height.
- To its north edge, the North site would benefit greatly from opening onto the currently underutilised Weybridge Youth Centre field, to give a green and tranquil aspect.

Any suggestion of building on or paving over current green spaces, including the former bowling green which was an integral part of the park, would be very strongly opposed in the community.

The opportunity is to create much enhanced community facilities, of which residents can be proud, within the footprint of current civic developed land, to meet the needs of current and future generations.

Siting of facilities

We understand that the scope and specification of health facilities are the remit of the NHS via NW Surrey CCG (ICP?). We have taken part in consultations. Until they specify what Weybridge will receive, there are many unknowns around how much space the health facilities will require.

Siting of health facilities

- We understood that the siting of the temporary GP surgery portakabins on the former staff park was designed to allow a hospital rebuild without the GPs and treatment room having to move during build.
- Hence we are puzzled by a suggestion that relocating the medical facilities to the south site is necessary to avoid a double move.
- Likewise, wellbeing benefits are not clear of siting health services close to the park, compared with the more obvious benefits of other community facilities having direct connection with social outdoor space.
- We feel that health facilities fit well in the North site, especially with undercroft parking making vehicle access and dedicated parking easy, whereas it would be problematic on a Churchfields health facility.

Siting of other community facilities

Many community facilities can sit happily in South and North sites, especially if the North site has a green northern aspect. But there are clear benefits for some facilities being adjacent to the park.

- Youth facilities would be better placed on the south site closer to Churchfield park (see ideas below).
- Recreational facilities for parents and younger children obviously benefit from proximity to the park, where the playground is wonderful resource for so many young Weybridge children.

Linking the sites

We recognise the difficulty of influencing traffic volume along the A317, which we understand pre-covid was circa 21,000 vehicles a day through Weybridge. We also recognise budgetary constraints.

- It is essential that pedestrians have a way of crossing the A317 in which traffic is much less dominant than at present, even if its volume cannot be reduced.
- A minimal solution might be a 20mph Zone and table with coloured & textured road surface, with a pelican crossing favouring pedestrians – a step towards a pedestrian priority zone.
- A dream for making the two sites work as a whole might be an enclosed glass sided pedestrian bridge between the two main buildings, perhaps linking into atriums and reception areas in each, although there are concerns this might separate hub use from high street footfall.
- We are not persuaded by suggestions of a green corridor, with trees and seating either side of the A317 – who wants to sit in the noise and fumes of traffic, if there's a tranquil park a stone's throw away?
- The aspiration of linking via a green corridor is defeated by the traffic. Much better simply to enable safe transit across the road, towards the quiet green space beyond the community buildings.

Additional access to the north site

- Landscaped pedestrian access to the North site from the north (Portmore Way) would be welcome.
- Vehicle access via Portmore Park Road / Portmore Way would be strongly unacceptable to residents
 - Portmore Park Road is a residential road linking two schools and suffers excessive rat run traffic.
 - Portmore Way gets saturated with church and school vehicles, and relies on a one way system.
 - The green space between PPR and the hospital site is highly valued and would be diminished by traffic accessing the north site.

Parking

Innovative thinking is needed about parking requirements and how to reduce negative impact and inconvenience to those who live close to the town centre.

- We see a need for parking on both north and south sites.
- Multi-storey car parks in these settings would be eyesores and unacceptable.
- We strongly support undercroft parking in the North site.
- A sunken rebuild of Churchfields Car Park would be ideal, but expensive given the need for tankage.
- Ample drop off and collection points will be needed for the health facilities.

It has been suggested that the way forward needs more flexible thinking in the use of car parks and allocation of spaces with a few spaces dedicated to short stays of say 30 minutes or 1 hour for free, some for up to 3 hours and others long stay and season ticket holders.

The need for multiple electric charging points must be factored in.

There is support for a Park and Ride scheme from Brooklands for both commuters and visitors, which could also service an expanded off-street provision at the station car park(s).

Suggestions include using car parks as a community facility to generate extra revenue at weekends and evenings. For example, Farmers Markets, pop-up summer restaurants, souks & car boot sales, summertime drive-in cinema, Christmas market.

Community facility suggestions

Suggestions received include:

- Large Community Room with kitchen facilities that can be used as a community space and hired for events & meetings. Possibly hold cookery and computing classes.
- Community space inside/outside with a café and sofas and relaxing space. Perhaps in an Atrium in the centre of the building.
- Rooms for hire for fitness, stretch and social care & therapeutic activities such as painting, dancing, book clubs, knitting circles.
- Culture and museum space perhaps housed near the atrium.
- Centre for babies and toddlers.
- Small space for temporary business hot desking + some secure space. This has of be viewed in the light of other space potentially available in the town in underused commercial buildings and shops.

Youth & Child facilities

Young people (12-17) are under catered for in Weybridge and across Elmbridge, therefore it is really important to improve youth facilities.

- A multi-purpose youth centre would be the ideal that provided indoor and outdoor space for light weight sports such as table tennis, basketball, yoga, weight training and even ten-pin bowling.
- The site of the existing park keepers/toilet block in the corner of Churchfields Recreation Ground could be an excellent location, within sight of responsible adults, close to the basketball court, and already served by water, drainage and electricity.

Wider suggestions from local residents include:

- A café here could serve soft drinks and mocktails at evening events opening up to 9 or 10pm perhaps May – October
- Turn the empty Slug & Lettuce into a youth club for teens with ping pong and pool tables and fun stuff for teens to chill away from home.
- Introduce a limited community bus service to Excel to allow direct access to the swimming pool and sporting facilities there, perhaps just during holidays.

Enhancement in usage and revenue from outside space

Suggestions received for use include:

- Outdoor gyms.
- Therapeutic gardening as developed by Thrive.
- A sensory garden.
- Provision for small music events.

Nearby improvements to the town centre

We have received numerous suggestions concerning the surrounding town centre, including:

- Smarten up the look of high street shops, retaining a village feel with gabled roofs plus consider the need and possibility of some repurposing, accepting that many are owned by private landowners.

- Pedestrianise and add trees to the more southerly access to Baker Street, up to the car park entrance by Los Hermanos. This area could then house open cafes and occasional temporary market stalls. We note that the current (temporary?) stopping up of rat run traffic along Baker Street has already added significant improvement.
- Improve the back of the shops facing the current Community Centre possibly by adding affordable flats with parking spaces underneath.
- Explore potential for added health benefits from the Allotments, by closer collaboration with Weybridge Land Charity.

Concerns highlighted

Housing concerns

We recognise that funding of redevelopment is a key constraint, that there is pressure on EBC to find sites for housing, and the Local Plan identifies some sites which are currently in community use.

We would be very unhappy to lose community facilities on these unique town centre sites to housing developed for sale or for addition to the general social housing stock.

If some residential flats are proposed to be incorporated into the North site, we would support their affordable use for example by low income key workers who need to live locally.

Conserving the remaining Portmore fields

Local residents value the remaining green fields of the former open community land (SCC owned) on which stand Christ The Prince of Peace Church, St Charles Borromeo School and the Youth Centre. Many would like more community access to the underused youth centre field.

We have heard rumours of talks to swap the St Charles Borromeo Playing fields for other land, and to use them to provide vehicle access to a new car park on the North site. This would have a very negative impact on Portmore Park in terms of lost green space and increased traffic.

Residents would be extremely unhappy if these remaining Portmore Park green fields were lost to, or dominated by, access to a car park. Weybridge needs more open recreation space, not less.

It would be wholly unacceptable to route vehicle access to the north site through residential Portmore Park Road, which is already overburdened with traffic. It would create nuisance and safety issues for residents and for St Charles Borromeo School.

General traffic concerns

The high level of traffic is a safety concern, even since the pandemic. Traffic calming measures are needed on Church Street and the High Street, combined with measures to avoid increasing the volume of traffic which bypasses the High Street by using Portmore Park Road.

Heath Road has also seen a big increase in large trucks and white vans from the Amazon Distribution Centre at Brooklands, increasing risk to Heathside pupils and others.

We would strongly support a much extended 20 mph Zone across Weybridge town centre, and measures to give pedestrians priority.

Conclusion

We offer all the above comments in a positive spirit, and hope that they will be considered in line with the project's commitment to communicate constantly with residents to generate commitment and new ideas.

We appreciate that budget is limited, and trust that the project will focus on those things which will bring greatest benefit to our community, without damaging those things which residents cherish.