

Hindu centre scheme rejected by planners

Riverside: Rowdy meeting sees controversial application turned down

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A PUBLIC meeting to decide on controversial plans for a Hindu community centre almost had to be held behind closed doors after speakers were heckled.

Members of the Maidenhead Development Management Panel spent about an hour-and-a-half debating the proposal for the Boulters Lock Car Park site, in Lower Cookham Road, before voting to reject it.

They were watched by more than 100 members of the public, who crammed into Maidenhead Town Hall's Desborough Suite to watch proceedings on Wednesday, July 5.

And at one point the committee's chairman, Cllr David Burbage (Con, Bray) threatened to hold the meeting in private after speakers in favour of the scheme were interrupted.

In February, the council agreed to give the Hindu Society of Maidenhead (HSM) a 125-year lease on the land for £73,000, on condition of planning permission being gained.

Cllr Adam Smith (Con,

⌚ SPEED READ: Controversial plans for a Hindu community centre have been rejected by the Royal Borough. More than 100 members of the public were at Maidenhead Town Hall's Desborough Theatre on Wednesday, July 5, to watch councillors debate the scheme.

Riverside) said he was concerned about 'a certain sense of pre-determination' over the centre, and a 'degree of bias' in its favour, as well as congestion.

Armed with the findings of his own parking survey he added: "Approval must take into account the right picture.

"It should not have an unacceptable effect on the road network and it should not have a detrimental effect on the safety of residents.

"This is too irresponsible a risk for a responsible authority to countenance."

Cllr Smith's fellow ward representative, Cllr Judith Di-

ment, also spoke in opposition, despite not being a member of the panel, claiming the plans were for a Hindu temple, not a community centre.

Following the debate, no panel members voted in favour of the scheme, with five opposed and three abstaining.

Other councillors gave their support to the plans at the meeting, despite not being able to vote, including Cllr Asghar Majeed (Con, Oldfield) and Cllr Hari Sharma (Con, Furze Platt).

Opponents: 'Fight not over yet'

RIVERSIDE: Campaigners against the Hindu centre on the site are 'delighted' the council rejected it but say the fight is not over yet.

On Wednesday, July 5, council planners threw out the proposal for a centre to be built at the Boulters Lock car park site, in Lower Cookham Road.

The decision came despite

a recommendation from planning officers the plans by the Hindu Society of Maidenhead be approved.

"Obviously we're delighted the panel rejected the application," said Jonathan Baker, a director of the Boulters Riverside Community Interest Company, set up to oppose the plans.

"It's not over yet because HSM has the option to appeal the decision.

"But we hope it was made clear the panel feels it's not a suitable site for a community centre and the council remains committed to help the society find alternative sites and that is the course they will follow."

He added the group was opposed to 'the idea of building a community centre of any sort' on the site.

Hindu Society president Chander Mohan Malhotra, said they had not decided whether to appeal the ruling, but would consider the matter at its next meeting in about two weeks.



Musings from the editor's chair

PROBABLY no one was more surprised than the Riverside residents at their victory last week in their year-long battle to stop plans to build a Hindu community centre on land next to Boulters Lock car park.

In the run-up to the meeting they clearly thought the result was a foregone conclusion.

After all, the meeting was just the latest chapter in a story of fait accompli piled upon secret agreements based on unfair expectations driven by an arrogant council.

And with the planning officers recommending approval it had 'final stitch-up' written all over it.

The saga began with the sudden announcement the Hindu Society of Maidenhead wanted to build a community centre on the site - wedged between homes and the car park - a plan championed by ward representative and leader of the council Simon Dudley.

It came as a complete surprise to residents, a surprise that was rapidly followed by shock when it emerged the council had already agreed a price for the lease.

Outraged neighbours quickly formed a community interest company (this is Maidenhead) and put in a better offer for the lease with the suggestion the land be used for allotments.

This in turn led to a council



Martin Trepte

Power to the people, or a ploy to stop the peasants revolting?

meeting to decide the future of the site which, complete with arguments for underground parking (next to the river - no, really) rejected the residents' position and came down firmly for the community centre.

It's worth noting no one can fault the two sides in their intentions. The Hindu Society just wants a permanent home of its own. The residents felt the site was the wrong place for a plethora of reasons, from its size and proximity to their homes, to the impact on parking.

Fast forward to last week's meeting (full report on p5). Not a single vote in favour and a motion to reject the centre passed with three abstentions.

So, just how was victory snatched from the jaws of defeat? Was it a miraculous case of the dictatorship actually stopping to listen? An all-too-rare example of democracy in action?

At one point during the rowdy meeting the chairman threatened to hold it in private.

And there lies the clue.

Over recent weeks, on issues from the Hindu centre to the Borough Local Plan, the public

have been almost mutinous.

When traditional Tory voters in areas like Riverside and Bray threaten to actively campaign against the Conservatives in 2019's local elections, even the most blinkered politician needs to sit up and take note.

This is code red. It's genteel Maidenhead's equivalent of a mob of pitchfork and torch-wielding peasants rolling tumbrils up to the town hall doors to demand the heads of their councillors.

But if the ruling group has really deferred to the power of the people, sadly it is because they have been forced to by fear of the consequences.

And there is that nagging suspicion it might just be a cynical concession in the hope it'll stop the peasants revolting, and all will be forgotten when next we go to the ballot box.

But will it?

Not in my nearly 28 years at Tiser Towers have I seen such discontent with a party in power at the town hall. Only time, and how the council continues to behave, will show us exactly how long a memory the public has.

Have a say on plan

BRAY: Consultation is now open on the parish's neighbourhood plan.

The plan, which will feed into the wider Borough Local Plan, can be viewed online or at the parish office in Moneyrow Green.

- It was submitted to the borough council back in November and Bray Parish Council previously expressed frustration about the delay in opening the document for public feedback.

See www3.rbwm.gov.uk/consultations. Responses may be sent to BrayParishNConsultation@rbwm.gov.uk or by post to the planning policy team at Maidenhead Town Hall. It is open until September 1.

13/7/17