



WELWYN GARDEN CITY SOCIETY

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www.wgcsoc.org.uk

1 Applecroft Road
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29 September 2008

The Managing Director
Finesse Leisure
4th Floor
Campus West
Welwyn Garden City AL8 6BX

Dear Sir

The Trees in Stanborough Lakes Car Parks

We are very concerned about the proposed course of action to remove/replace the Poplar trees at Stanborough, but also about the potential risk to the public brought about by the years of neglect of these trees.

We have been approached by many concerned residents, have listened to the very many views put forward and have read the various reports that have been published. In addition, we have had advice from our own qualified arboricultural consultant as to possible solutions.

We are perturbed at the choice of arboricultural consultant chosen by the Council. It seems clear that those who actually prepared the report did not ascertain how the car park on the south side was intended to look, how it should have been maintained or indeed much regard for the town. Further, the Principal behind the firm chosen has chaired the proposed BSI Standard Drafting Committee, which has met with widespread criticism, including from the Government's own Health and Safety Executive, the Forestry Commission, as well as the Risk and Regulatory Advisory Council.

What we are most concerned to discuss is the recommendation in the most recent report – that of Julian Forbes-Laird – that the vast majority of the trees in the south car park should be removed forthwith. We believe this action to be unwarranted and unwise, when alternative remedies exist that would be less drastic, and likely to be more cost effective.

The crux of the matter is that pollarding of the trees appears to have been rejected by Forbes-Laird purely on grounds of aesthetics, which is clearly a subjective opinion. In fact, these trees were planted with the express intention that they would be pollarded regularly (and there is evidence that this was done in the past), and that the function of the planting was to provide a screen. There does not appear to be any good reason, other than one consultant's personal opinion, why re-pollarding (and continued pollarding for the life of the trees) would not provide a very adequate medium term solution for the site. This would allow a more measured programme of phased replacement to proceed in a manner that would be far more likely to meet with residents' approval.

We would like to stress that we see the need to replace hazardous trees as soon as possible and that we also recognise the need over time to plan for a complete replacement of these trees. We would like to work together with Finesse and the Council to ensure that a sensible plan is drawn up that pays due regard to the costs and the practicalities, but also to the amenity of local residents.

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Our detailed comments follow:

It is clear that there has been no forward thinking by management about how the Poplar trees in the car parks should be replaced as they grow older. So the third and latest report about their future presents Finesse Leisure and the Borough Council with what appears to be an inevitable solution, basically, of cutting down as many as possible. From an amenity point of view, this is unsatisfactory, unacceptable to the Society and, we think, to most residents.

The latest report also highlights a new factor - the need to replace the car parks' surfaces with appropriate materials that allow rainwater to better permeate for future plantings. So the job in hand is not simply to cut the trees down for health and safety reasons but to re-work the entire car parks. For that reason alone, we do not consider that the estimates of cost for removal of the bulk of the trees, their replacement and the resurfacing of the car parks have been budgeted to any realistic degree. This is also unsatisfactory and must be unacceptable to all council tax payers.

We are concerned that the decisions about the way forward will be driven more by short term anxieties relating to claims for damage to cars and accidents to people or even, as has been stated, claims against councillors for manslaughter if anyone should be killed from falling branches. Making decisions about just one aspect of the current problem is no way to manage this environment, since we believe the current proposals will only make a bad situation far worse but, what is more, make it permanently worse for a very long time.

In the light of the above we therefore suggest that the best way forward will be as follows:

North car park:

We disagree with the proposal that trees should be removed in alternate rows. Rather, they should be removed, based on where they are of greatest risk to people – this is where people tend to park e.g., by the play area. This will eliminate the health and safety risks.

Thereafter, replanting should take place over time as and when trees and rows can be properly replaced on a planned basis.

South car park:

Any dangerous trees should be removed now. (We disagree by the way, with the practice of cutting them and using chemicals to kill the roots when the latter are relatively easy to remove mechanically). We suggest that the trees currently identified in this latest report for removal should not be felled but should be pollarded to give them another lease of life. We have professional advice that they will stand this treatment. This too will eliminate the health and safety risks now but it will buy us time and, whilst far from ideal as far as the amenity is concerned, is infinitely better than the destruction proposed.

Over the next twenty years, planting of new trees should take place as rows are periodically removed from year to year.

All this should be part of an agreed way forward for **both** car parks.

The advantages of this overall approach are that both the health and safety risks and the amenity value will be better safeguarded in the immediate short term whilst the cost will be spread over a much longer timeframe: above all, these costs will be manageable. Finally, it gives the Borough Council and Finesse Leisure time to see if replanting plans can be implemented over a longer period of time - something in which no one involved in this sad affair to date has sought to do and which we suggest is vital when dealing with issues of landscape.

It is all too easy to say what replanting will cost, and what is going to happen but, in the real world, trees have to be treated with care in their early life. They need maintenance and water, even in this park, and they have to be kept safe from vandalism. Above all, they all need to be planted with an eye as to how they will look in twenty or thirty years' time. A staggered approach to replanting will also tend to prevent a situation where the trees again hit end of life en masse. So far, no member of the public appears to

have been shown what is proposed. Items on the Council's website are accessible only to about 60% of the Borough's population and the Council has not sought to hold another public meeting.

This is really no way to communicate with residents, as it appears to take them for granted. It is THEIR town after all. This is particularly galling to Tree Wardens who the Borough Council recruited to act as the eyes and ears of residents in all matters relating to local trees.

Our elected councillors are now faced with choices that should long ago have been foreseen and brought to their attention. But we suggest that they should now take proper stock of what is being put to them, before simplistic proposals are adopted that will make us all the poorer.

We will be happy to meet with officers and members of the Borough Council and of Finesse Leisure in order to discuss, in a positive and constructive manner, the proposals cited above. It would be helpful if such a meeting might be held prior to the cabinet meeting so that our ideas may provide an input into members' thinking at that meeting.

Yours faithfully
for Welwyn Garden City Society

John Marks
Chairman

cc C Conway with covering note
All WGC councillors by email
Welwyn & Hatfield Times
Welwyn & Hatfield Review
Look East
BBC Three Counties Radio