

## **WEMBDON PARISH ANNUAL MEETING 2010**

The Annual Parish Meeting was held on Monday 8 March 2010, at Wembdon St. George's School, commencing at 7.00pm.

Present were County Cllr John Edney, Chairman of the Parish Council - B Webb, Parish Councillors - D Lumber, J Riddle, K Perry, M Solomon, R Western, C Brown, S Bagg & Cllr Ann Bown & 60 members of the public.

### **Chairman's Welcome**

The Chairman welcomed the large turnout & explained the purpose of the Annual Parish Meeting.

### **Apologies for Absence**

These were received in respect of Cllr R Harris.

### **Minutes**

The minutes of the Annual Parish Meeting held on Monday 9 March 2009 were read, agreed & signed.

### **Matters Arising**

There were none.

### **Chairman's Annual Report**

The Chairman read the following

Last year, I presented a picture of a village quietly chugging away, with no major issues & a Council devoting itself to ensuring that all the everyday matters such as litter, dog waste, potholes & the playing field maintenance were being dealt with smoothly & efficiently.

This year, the situation is completely different. Recent events now mean that Wembdon has to confront challenges on a number of fronts. Taken together, the scenario is that the face of Wembdon could be dramatically changed in the near future.

The main & most important issue of the moment is the future of Cokerhurst Farm. Since 2007 S.D.C. has been considering the replacement for the Sedgemoor District Local Plan. This is known as the Local Development Framework, which is basically their planning blueprint. Towards the end of 2009, it published & started consultation on its Preferred Options Report. This highlighted the major areas of future housing development. One of those sites is Cokerhurst Farm & in November, S.D.C. held an exhibition at the Parish Centre explaining the Preferred Option Report & also addressed the Parish Council meeting.

Unfortunately, this event & the consultation appear to have gone largely unnoticed. Events moved quickly in February when potential developers presented detailed plans of a proposed planning application at 2 public exhibitions held at St. George's School.

The Parish Council invited the developers to its February meeting, but they decided not to attend at the last moment. This was because they had received a large number of responses from the public, which they had not fully analysed. The developers have requested a meeting with the Council in private. The Council have agreed to this, but the public can be assured that we shall not be bound by the developers to any secrecy.

In 2002 when the Sedgemoor District Plan was determined by the Planning Inspectorate, the Parish Council objected to any development of Cokerhurst Farm, as did S.D.C. This objection was upheld by the Inspector.

To date, the Parish Council has not changed its view.

Cokerhurst Farm features as the next item on the Agenda.

Another major item coming forward is the Green Wedge – the land lying between the NDR & Wembdon Common. This land is largely in the ownership of a local developer, and the Council has recently been sounded-out by Wembdon Football Club about filling this area with football pitches. The incentive for the developer would be the placing of a number of houses in the Wedge. The reaction of the Parish Council was not particularly favourable & the Council has initiated the formation of a Group to consider the future of the Green Wedge & to come forward with some thoughts that the public can consider. This is not an easy exercise, bearing in mind that the owners of the Green Wedge would seek some sort of return on their investment. At this early stage, there is nothing definitive to report.

Yet another problem that has descended on the Council is the future of the allotments that have always been a popular feature of the parish. The owner of the land, leased by the Council, unfortunately died some months ago. She has left a fairly complex estate & the Council is having some difficulty in securing an ongoing future for the allotments. The Council is in discussions & will be attempting a successful resolution for Wembdon.

The current financial year has provided some bright patches. With the aid of grants, the new bridge on the footpath from the playing field to the NDR was installed, providing great help to disabled carriage & pram users. A further grant project about to be carried out is the drainage of the NDR end of the playing field. This should, hopefully, overcome some perennial flooding problems.

On the financial side, we have tried to contain our costs as well as possible. Our precept, which has been increased slightly this year, is still one of the lowest in Sedgemoor & forms a very small part of the Council Tax. It amounts to around £11 per household. Kevin Thorpe, our Clerk, has put in his usual sturdy performance in controlling finances and handling the administrative side of the Council's activities.

With a growing & changing population, Wembdon has, in common with most communities, its fair share of parking & minor highway problems. We have

purchased a speed gun during the year & continue to work closely with our local beat officers, PC Tony Freeman & PCSO Nick Mizon, who work diligently on crime & highway matters in Wembdon.

Finally, I must comment on the wider question of the dramatic growth planned for Bridgwater & its environs-including Wembdon in the near future. In particular, the impact of major developments at both ends of Bridgwater will have significant highway implications for the A39 road. At the Bath Road end, there is the development of the old Cellophane site & a new hospital. At the other side of the town we have a new Haygrove School site, possible development of Haygrove Farm & now Cokerhurst has been thrust in to the limelight. Overridingly, there is the huge amount of traffic, which will be generated by the construction at Hinkley Point.

The Council's strong views on the traffic movements to & from Hinkley Point have been transmitted to EDF. We can only hope that the cumulative effect on traffic flows of all the projected developments, is being masterminded by Somerset County & Sedgemoor District Councils to prevent Bridgwater & its surroundings from being completely grid locked in a few years time.

### **Cokerhurst Farm**

Nick Tait from S.D.C. addressed the meeting. He explained that he was not here to promote the proposed development of Cokerhurst Farm.

Mr Tait provided a brief overview of the Local Development Framework (LDF) & explained how it linked in to the Regional Spatial Strategy that proposed an additional 7700 houses for Bridgwater & the immediate surrounding area.

The LDF Preferred Option Report identified Cokerhurst Farm as being suitable for approximately 500+ of these houses. Following the initial consultation the District Council was now actively considering the responses received. Responses were still being submitted & these would also be taken in to account.

Mr Tait stated that a large number of the 7700 houses were already either under construction or likely to be approved shortly. He added that brown field sites were being prioritised. Despite that the Council still needed to identify green field sites for about a further 1500 houses & one of those was, currently, Cokerhurst Farm.

The meeting was told that the Draft Core Strategy (DCS) would be published around the end of July 2010 & whatever was published would be the District Council's plan. There would then follow a formal consultation period of 8 weeks. Following that the responses to the plan, along with the plan would be submitted to the Secretary of State. An independent Inspector would deal with the plan & all the responses received & his decision would be binding on the Council.

At this point he could not say whether or not the District Councillors would choose to include Cokerhurst Farm within the DCS.

Mr Tait expected the DCS to be challenged by the developers if Cokerhurst was not included & if it was included he expected challenges from elsewhere.

Mr Tait informed the meeting that the developers had informed S.D.C. that they intended to consult on their plans. In turn S.D.C. had stressed to the developers the importance of promoting the proposals via the Core Strategy within the LDF.

If the developers chose to submit a planning application in advance of the DCS the District Council would have to consider it. However, it was Mr Tait's view that such an application would be premature & it would have to be considered against the current Sedgemoor District Local Plan. To succeed, the developers would be required to prove why Cokerhurst was required as the current plan showed sufficient building land, excluding Cokerhurst, was already available for the next 5 years. Therefore the developers had been informed that an application in advance of the formal consultation period would not be welcomed.

Finally a General Election may also impact on the Regional Spatial Strategy proposal for 7700 houses.

The Chairman invited questions from the floor.

All the questions asked were in respect of Cokerhurst Farm & covered the following

- Transport problems – Mr Tait advised that S.D.C. was working with County Highways, problems had been recognised but the difficulty was coming up with a deliverable solution.
- Impact on Local Schools – S.D.C. is working with S.C.C.
- Impact on existing housing – This would be dealt with during the detailed planning stage.
- Where will the new jobs come from – Mr Tait provided an overview of what was already in the pipeline & the proposals within the LDF.
- Would Wembdon remain a village – Mr Tait stated that there was no proposal within the LDF to change the status of Wembdon.
- Consultation process – The meeting was informed how the consultation in November had been advertised & that the formal consultation would be widely publicised. Members of the public could also be added to the S.D.C. consultation database.
- S.D.C. is not listening to the public & the village as a whole – Mr Tait re-affirmed that all responses would be considered.

Mr Tait confirmed that S.D.C. would welcome responses supporting as well as objecting to the DCS.

The Chairman thanked Mr Tait for his contribution & was sure that he would be taking away with him the many comments that had been made during the meeting in respect of Cokerhurst Farm.

The Chairman formally closed the meeting at 9.10pm.