

DEBATE ABOUT PROPOSED ALLOTMENTS ON WEAVERS FIELD

Thank you, Mr Mayor.

(Preface) *First of all thank Mr Rastelli for clearly articulating the concerns of the petitioners (ad-lib wording), and thank officers for very substantial work to date, including the helpful briefing report for this meeting.*

- The question of putting allotments on Weavers Field has been a very difficult one, and has involved not only listening to the demands of people on the waiting lists for allotments in an area where suitable land is scarce, but also listening to the needs of neighbours, and the concerns of the general public who have issues about possible loss of amenity in an area where public open space is limited, and hills are rare. Moreover CBC has a moral and political commitment dating from when the council acquired the Weavers Field land in the 1990's, not to build houses on Warden Hill.
- In addition the Council has a statutory duty to satisfy demands for allotments, albeit the details of this duty are not well defined in statute law.
- Although many issues have been rightly raised, and not only by the petitioners, I believe the three which carry most weight are these: 1) the need to provide allotments in the south of Cheltenham within a reasonable distance of the applicants' homes 2) the amenity value of being able to walk on the hill, and to enjoy the view from the top; 3) the need to maintain sufficient off-street areas for dog walking.
- Land in the south of Cheltenham, which is where most allotments are needed, is very scarce, and the Council is also trying to negotiate sites in the Leckhampton area, and potentially will look at areas further to the west of Warden Hill. There is very little council owned land, so other options are also being explored. Nobody should pretend this is easy, and people who own land in the area are tending to hold it – or offer it on very short leases of in some cases only months – in the hope that it will become valuable for housing. In order to complete its allotment strategy, the Council may well be faced with trying to buy or rent land outside the borough, or in the last resort to

compulsorily purchase land within it. No options are particularly attractive or cost-effective for the taxpayers of Cheltenham. My view, and advice from officers, is that we will need a number of sites to satisfy demand, and there are very limited choices, particularly within reasonable travelling distance of the Hatherley/Warden Hill area.

- It would be very easy to simply turn round and withdraw the proposals. However this would be unfair to the several hundred people who have been waiting for some years for allotments, and in the limit could provoke a legal challenge that the Council was not serious about its responsibilities. We cannot simply take the easy options; however I note the petitioners' words "the **preliminary** proposal is not acceptable" and in the way that the petition is worded I could accept that, and so I would propose to sit down with Mr Rastelli and a couple of his colleagues, plus the ward councillors, to discuss compromise scheme(s), which would address the amenity concerns whilst still providing a substantial number of allotment plots.
- Whilst it's both right and helpful that full council debate this, as we are about to do, under the council's constitution, the decision on how to assess objections to date rests with cabinet. In addition there is a requirement to bring any proposal before the planning committee. It will be part of that committee's job to look at all aspects of the application, including matters which have concerned residents, such as whether they would be overlooked any more than they are already, and/or concerns about drainage, car parking and the like. Preliminary indications to date from planning officers are there are no reasons in principle why a planning application should not be made and considered.

So I propose we resolve the following at the conclusion of the debate:

- 1) That the cabinet member and officers seek a discussion with representatives of the petitioners and with ward councillors with a view to improving amenity value of the scheme and that 2) revised proposals are brought to cabinet which take this into account.