

WHITCHURCH ON THAMES PARISH COUNCIL

Minutes of the meeting of Whitchurch on Thames Parish Council on Monday 8th December 2008 in the village hall

Present:

Cllr Matilda Oppenheimer (chairman), Cllr Vincent Aldridge (vice chairman), Cllr Nigel Grove, Cllr Nigel Cabeldu, Cllr Harry Butterworth, Cllr Keith Brooks, Cllr Liz Robinson, Jo Wheeler (parish clerk), County Cllr John Farrow, District Cllr Pearl Slatter

12 members of the public
Geoff Weir (Whitchurch Bridge Company)
Peter Ronald (Oxfordshire County Council)

86. Apologies for absence

None

87. Declarations of interest

Cllr Butterworth declared an interest in the Vines planning application because he lives in close proximity of the property.

88. Traffic survey

Peter Ronalds, area engineer at Oxfordshire County Council (OCC), summarised the survey results and informed the council that the speeding problem is only perceived and based on OCCs criteria the survey results show that the village does not have a serious speeding problem. The council maintained that although the mean average speed (during the survey period) was 29mph some drivers are breaking the speed limit. This is dangerous for pedestrians using narrow pavements, especially children walking to and from school. Because OCC have a threshold of 35mph before they will consider it to be a problem there are limited solutions. Several options to reduce speeding were discussed with Peter:

20 mph speeding limit – some pilot schemes are being carried out in Oxford city and if successful may be introduced in other areas of Oxfordshire. At the moment a 20mph limit wouldn't be permitted by OCC. Peter also advised the council that 20mph limits aren't always effective, especially as it isn't a statutory limit.

Removal of white lines – OCC are running six pilot schemes in villages in Oxfordshire where the white lines in the middle of the road are removed. The aim is to slow traffic as there is the perception that the road is narrower than it actually is. All Cllrs agreed that this would be an effective way of slowing traffic.

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Vehicle activated signs (VAS) – this is no longer an option (even if the parish council were to fund the project) as OCC have changed their policy and because the survey didn't show enough people are speeding the signs cannot be justified.

Peter Ronalds suggested asking the local school to become involved. OCC has a budget for implementing school travel plans. If the children find the speeding a threat (and this is identified in a travel plan) OCC can make more options available.

The parish council agreed to the removal of white lines and the parish clerk will send a confirmation letter to OCC.

Peter Ronalds mentioned the parking problem at the Hardwick Road junction. Peter said that the police may decide to put double yellow lines on the road to stop the illegal parking. The parish council agreed to distribute informal letters to residents living in that area, suggesting that they park elsewhere if possible, before OCC takes any further action.

It was mentioned that the parking does provide the benefit of reducing speeding.

89. Minutes of previous meeting

Minutes of the 3rd November 2008 agreed as a true record.

90. Toll bridge

Cllr Oppenheimer welcomed the members of public to the meeting who were attending to discuss their objections to the proposed toll increase. Cllr Oppenheimer read through the points in the draft letter from the parish council to the Department for Transport objecting to the increase (see appendix one).

Geoff Weir spoke on behalf of the Whitchurch Bridge Company and said he understands it is a motive issue for the village. He suggested that people read the Whitchurch Bridge Company FAQ page of the website and this should help to answer most questions.

91. Public forum

Cllr Oppenheimer asked members of the public to speak in turn and the following questions were asked (replies were made by Geoff Weir and the district councilor)

The plans are for the bridge to be reconstructed to one similar in design. Has any consideration been given to building a cheaper bridge?

Geoff Weir replied that the bridge is a Grade 2 listed structure. It would be a decision for the planners at South Oxfordshire District Council to de-list the bridge to enable the company to build a less expensive structure. District Cllr Slatter suggested that the parish council contact the planning department at SODC to discuss this option.

Why object to reducing the weight limit to 3 tonnes? Geoff Weir replied advice from the OCC Highways Department is that they can't have a three tonne limit. Cllr Oppenheimer suggested reducing the weight limit to three tones until 2013 to allow more time to raise funds. Geoff Weir replied that the weight isn't the only reason for applying to increase the toll fee.

Could OCC or West Berkshire Council take over ownership of the bridge?

Geof Weir replied that wasn't a feasible option and if they were to take over the bridge the weight limit may increase to 33 tonnes.

What about the reduced fee for disabled users?

The parish council replied that this was removed following the last application, in which parishioners or parish council didn't have a chance to respond.

All parishioners agreed that the council's letter summarises the feelings and opinions of everyone present. Parish council agreed to send the letter to the Department for Transport, with a copy to John Howell, Martin Salter, other local parish councils, county councillors, SODC, West Berkshire Council and OCC. Also agreed to publish the letter in the village website.

92. Matters arising

No matters arising

93. Traffic

Cllr Oppenheimer briefed everyone about the earlier meeting with Peter Reynolds and that the decision to remove white lines has been made.

The parish council discussed the fact that the parking on Hardwick Road encourages drivers to slow down and that the residents don't really have anywhere else to park.

County Cllr John Farrow sits on the Speed Reference Group. In this group they reviewed the speed limits of A and B roads. He commented that Whitchurch on Thames may be reviewed in the January meeting. Cllr Farrow to provide an update at the next meeting.

94. Village plan report

The group aim to have a draft report ready by Christmas. Cllr Oppenheimer will continue to sit on the village hall committee group. Other councillors were encouraged to become involved with the various committees.

95. St Johns carol service

Cllr Brooks offered to carry out a reading at the carol service at St Johns on 21st December.

96. HGVs

The council discussed the problem with HGVs not complying with weight limit signs. The problem had been reported to OCC. The parish clerk read out the response from OCC:

“There are more than sufficient signs in advance of the approaches to Whitchurch village. All are clearly visible and contain the approved legends. The 7.5 tonnes weight limit sign is similar to those used in other countries. Regulations allow us only to use approved signs and all those on the approaches and at a distance comply. We are not permitted to put up signs with other pictorial legends.”

All agreed there is nothing more the parish council does not have the power to do anything else.

County Cllr John Farrow stated that Trading Standards have been following illegal drivers and have spent some time on Whitchurch Bridge. A lorry driver has been photographed and may be prosecuted.

97. Planning

New applications:

4 Whitchurch House, High Street P08/E1243/LB – closure of internal doorway between hallway and lounge - **no strong views**

31 Swanston Field P08/E1307/RET – new dwelling on land to the rear of Swanston Field (An amendment of previous Planning Permission P06/E0555 to retain basement/games room)(as amended by drawing no.493/04F accompanying letter from Agent dated 15 December 2008) - **Cllr Robinson to look into**

The Vines – P08/E1244 -Two storey side extension with attached single garage - **no objections as there aren't any objections from the neighbours and it will help to improve the appearance**

98. Declaration of acceptance

Cllr Brooks and parish clerk signed the declaration of acceptance. Cllr Brooks was welcomed to the council.

99. Playground maintenance

All agreed that it would be more beneficial to paint all the fence panels rather than just the two panels covered with graffiti.

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100. District Councillor Report

Already covered

101. County Councillor Report

Already covered

102. Finance

Payments at meeting:

Payee	Description	Amount £
RM Weaver	Grass cutting VAT element	351.78
J Wheeler	November salary	377.23
NSALG	Annual fee	64.63
NSALG	Allotment rent	353.90
Village hall committee	Annual contribution	2000.00

Payments in between meetings:

None

Payments received:

None

103. Other reports

a) Allotments

Nothing to report

b) Transport

Nothing to report

c) Cricket Field

Nothing to report

d) Village Maintenance

Already discussed

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e) Toll Bridge

Already discussed

104. Correspondence received and distributed

105. Any other business

Meeting closed at 9.45pm

106. Next meeting

5th January 2009

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Appendix one – parish council letter to Department for Transport objecting to the proposed increase in toll fee

Dear Julian

The Company of Proprietors of Whitchurch Bridge (the Company) has applied to increase the toll charges over Whitchurch Bridge in South Oxfordshire in 2009. The Whitchurch-on-Thames Parish Council wishes to object to this proposed increase on the following grounds:

1. The proposed increase in the toll is excessive.

The cash toll was increased from 10p to 20p in 2005 and it is proposed that it will double again four years later. This represents a considerable amount of money when taken over the whole year for local people and means that the present bridge users would in effect be paying to fund a project with a lifetime of many decades. Many in the local villages have to use the bridge several times a day to go to the shops, banks, medical centre and other essential services in Pangbourne over the Thames.

2. Contrary to its statutory obligations (as acknowledged in paragraph 3.1 of its Application), the Company has failed to build up sufficient funds in the Bridge replacement fund to pay for the reconstruction of the bridge.

This failure is not explained in the Company's Application. It seems to the Parish Council extraordinary that, 106 years after the present bridge was built and only 7 years before it is claimed that the bridge must be reconstructed, there is such a large shortfall in the reserve fund which the Company is obliged to build up in order to fund the replacement of the bridge.

3. The proposed toll increase is an inappropriate method of financing a long-term capital infrastructure project such as the reconstruction of a bridge.

The Company is planning to take out a loan for only 25% of the cost of rebuilding the bridge to supplement (a) the income from the proposed increased tolls in the next 5 years, and (b) the existing Bridge fund which currently stands at £1.4 million. The Company's Application does not explain the basis for its assumption (see paragraphs 4.8.1 and 5.6 of its Application) that only 25% of the cost of reconstructing the bridge will be met by a loan. It seems to the Parish Council that it would be more appropriate, given the 100-year life of the new bridge, that a significantly greater proportion of the cost should be financed by a loan, which should be paid back over a longer time period. This would reduce the immediate burden on those living in the village now and other users of the bridge.

4. If the toll were to be increased to 40p the Company would still have a very high income from the tolls after the bridge was re-built.

There is no suggestion in the Application that the toll will reduce once the bridge has been reconstructed and the loan repaid. The next bridge re-build will be in many years' time as the new bridge should last 100 years. This would mean that the Company is likely to receive excessive profits for many decades. This would be contrary to the requirements set out in section 6(3) of the Transport Charges &c (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1988. If permission is granted to increase the toll at all, we believe that this should be a temporary measure and reduced immediately the bridge reconstruction is complete.

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5. The Company has declined to negotiate with the Parish Council about giving a binding commitment to charge reduced tolls for frequent users of the bridge who purchase Bridge Cards.

When the Parish Council was advised by the Company that it was applying to increase the toll, we requested that the Company grant the local Parish Councils (Whitchurch, Goring Heath, Woodcote and Pangbourne) a legally binding guarantee that they would limit the bridge card discretionary rate to a fixed maximum amount if the cash toll were to be increased to 40p. The Company has claimed in its application that it intends to increase the card toll annually from 12.5p at present to 18p by 2011- 2012 and to 20p by 2012-2013 when the bridge is to be rebuilt.

The estimates of the likely cost of reconstructing the bridge have varied widely in the past. The Parish Council is concerned that the cost could well increase beyond the current estimate of £3.22 million, and that if the cash toll were set at 40p the discretionary card toll would increase to a much higher proportion of this and card holders could be paying an amount approaching 40p per crossing. The Company would only have to maintain a very narrow margin below the 40p on the bridge cards to encourage users to keep using the bridge cards which enable the Company to reduce their administration costs.

The Company has declined to agree a fixed upper limit on the card toll on the grounds that they face uncertainties in the calculation of their funding requirements. It is these uncertainties and the manner in which they will be dealt with that is giving the Parish Council greatest concern.

6. The Company stopped the local resident's discretionary toll in 2005 in favour of a card toll for all frequent users as this was considered by the Company to be easier to operate.

The Company has refused to re-introduce a local resident reduced toll despite requests from all the Parish Councils to do so since the concession ceased in 2005.

We would like the Company to re-introduce a discount for local people who use the bridge to reduce the impact on them of the increasing tolls. This has been declined on the basis that it is potentially open to abuse and thus a loss of revenue for the Company. We think that this could be administered without significant risk to the Company as the system is now fully automated and the issuing of this concession to card holders could be based on their post code.

7. Is the Company using the correct priorities for the income from the tolls and could a higher proportion be used for investment and the bridge replacement fund and less used for dividends?

The relevant Acts of parliament governing the management of the Bridge namely the Whitchurch Bridge Acts 1792 and 1988 are unambiguous about the priorities which should apply for the utilization of income from the tolls. We think that a closer inspection of the Company's accounts is warranted to make sure that the appropriate amount of the toll income is utilized for investing in the Bridge rebuilding fund up to 2013 as is clearly stated in the 1988 Act.

The Parish Council has not had access to all the Company's accounts as they are only filed with Companies House until 2005. The accounts for 2008 are attached to the application. Despite having inadequate funds in the Bridge rebuilding fund it would appear from the accounts that we

have seen that there have been increasing dividend payments to shareholders and that these are planned to go on increasing until 2013.

8. We would like to question why the current Shareholders of the Company are not making a contribution themselves towards financing the re-building of the bridge as they will remain the owners of the bridge once it has been reconstructed.

9. The Application does not explain why it is necessary to construct the new bridge so that it can carry 40/44t vehicles.

These vehicles will not be able to use the bridge in any event, due to the existing 7.5t environmental weight limit through the village. It may be possible to reduce the cost of reconstructing the bridge if it is designed to carry vehicles of only up to 7.5t.

10. It appears from the application that it would be possible to prolong the life of the existing bridge by reducing the weight limit to 3 tonnes (Application para 3.7.1).

Whilst the Application claims that this would not be acceptable under its Acts or to the local community, the Parish Council is not convinced that this is so. If a reduced weight limit would enable the reserve fund for bridge reconstruction to be built up over a longer period without the excessive increase in tolls that is being proposed, this could provide a satisfactory shorter-term solution.

11. The Parish Council is concerned that there is no mechanism by which the Company would be obliged, if its application to increase the tolls were allowed, to reconstruct the bridge in 2013, which is the basis on which the application is made.

This letter represents the views of the Parish Council of Whitchurch-on-Thames, following consultation with the residents of the village. We believe that many residents of the village will be writing on their own behalf. We are of the opinion that there are many issues that require further consideration before they can be resolved in the interest of all parties concerned.

Chairman _____

Date _____