

16th February 2016

Dear Friend,

Update on Blackhorse Road Cemetery and Chapel

I am writing with an update relating to the planning application received by South Gloucestershire Council to renovate and convert the former chapel into 15 flats.

As you will know, the proposal also involves the creation of a car parking and bin storage area over what is currently a part of the burial ground – that between the chapel and Blackhorse Road. [The vast majority of the burial ground and the small section next to the vets are unaffected by this proposal as they are owned by an absentee landlord].

Many people have sent comments into the council regarding the proposals. Whilst most people are happy with the proposals around the chapel conversion, the proposals with regards to the car-park / burial ground have, understandably, met with a number of objections.

To try and understand more about the developer's proposals with regards to the burial ground I met up with them shortly before Christmas and then posed some questions asking them the sorts of things I was being asked and which people were asking the Council. I thought it would be helpful to share what I learnt with everyone.

Before I detail the responses given to me by the developers, I thought I would explain briefly what the council's role is in assessing the application. Unfortunately, and I realise this will not go down well, the council's role extends only to assessing whether the proposal fits in with the location and doesn't cause 'harm'. The use of the word 'harm' in planning can be interpreted in many ways but usually extends to asking, for example, 'Will this development look out of place?' or 'Would it cause an increase in traffic or prejudice road safety' and questions like this. Alas, the council's role does not extend to making a moral judgement as to whether it is acceptable or not to create a car parking area over the top of graves. In that respect, all that the council's role would consider is whether the physical design of the car park would fit in with the area. I really do understand that this will not be good news, but I am afraid it is the reality of how all councils would judge such an application.

Now, the obvious question to ask, if the council has no role in the moral matter of creating a car park over graves, is who does? My knowledge of this area is rather scant, but from what I can gather there are various Burial Acts (of Parliament) – i.e. laws - which the developer has to adhere to. As part of those Acts, I believe they do have to go through a process (entirely separate from the council) of informing the owners of graves as to their intentions. Given the age of many of the grave plots I believe that the law in this respect can be satisfied by the developers putting adverts in the local newspapers. What this involves for people who wish to respond to the adverts, I do not know. There is more on this in one of the answers the developers gave to me below (Question 6).

Now, as to the questions I posed the developer. I asked them six questions and I have set these out below with THEIR answers. These are not my answers, but the developer's.

Question 1: What type of surface do you propose for the car park / bin area which is currently a graveyard ? [I asked this question because when I met up with them they said it wouldn't be tarmac, nor concrete, nor gravel like the small car parking area for the flats in the former Sunday School building next door]

Answer: The surface for the car park will not be tarmac but a more 'green' and pervious alternative that satisfies the tree consultant, the conservation requirements and the planner.

Question 2: .What do you intend to do with any memorial stones which cannot be relocated to the memorial garden ?

Answer: Our aim is for all memorial stones to be used in some format on site. This would include using those that are broken in some decorative format either in the memorial garden or on pathways.

Question 3: What arrangements do you intend to make with regards to recording the information on memorial stones which are not being retained ?

Answer: A permanent display of the original layout of the graveyard is to be mounted in an appropriate location to ensure that a record is retained for future reference. In addition, a plaque is to be placed in the memorial garden listing the people whose headstones are in too poor a condition to retain.

[I did suggest to them that a local family history society might be interested in recording memorial inscriptions prior to their relocation/removal so if anyone is a member of a local FHS then perhaps raise this as an opportunity for the FHS at some point in the near future and something they might want to contact the developer about.]

Question 4: Can you confirm that interred remains are to be left in situ ?

Answer: We can confirm that interred remains will remain in situ.

Question 5: What assistance (including financial, logistical, legal) would you give to any family who wished their relatives' remains to be re-interred ?

Answer: We would give any administrative assistance we can to any family member who wished to remove their ancestor's remains. We are not in a position to offer any financial, legal or logistical assistance.

The final question I asked was on the assumption that they got planning permission. They told me when I met them that they have yet to undertake a full structural survey of the chapel so were not certain that what they wanted to do was financially viable and would only commission a full survey as and when they got planning permission.

Question 6: Assuming you get planning permission and the viability still stacks-up for you after a full structural survey, what is the process that you have to follow for notifying (or attempting to notify) plot owners of your intentions with regards to the graveyard (i.e. relocation/removal of memorial stones) ?

Answer: If we finally get a positive response to our application, we will seek advice as to how we should proceed with regard to informing relatives of those buried on the site. From what we understand to date, this will probably be through newspaper notices.

With regards to this last question, I will do my best to keep my ears to the ground and, to be fair to the developers, they did say they would keep me abreast of developments. That said, if/when they get planning permission and assuming their plans still stack-up financially, as and when anyone sees a notice in the papers or pinned to the site, please do let me know so that I can let the local media know and do a round-robin email to everyone again.

I know that there is a handful of very concerned people who have come forward as they have relatives buried in the area which is proposed to be a car park so I did also ask the developers whether I could give out contact details if anyone wanted to make direct contact with them. The company (called InSpace) are more than happy to speak to people. Indeed when I met up with them on site they were in the process of trying to locate a grave in the undergrowth because someone had contacted them. The person who is best to contact is Judith Cameron, InSpace Design Limited, Saint Elmo, College Road, Bath, BA1 5RS. Tel: 01225 336225. Email: judith@inspacedesignltd.co.uk

I hope this is a helpful update. Please feel free to pass on this letter to anyone whom you think might be interested in the site. If anyone has any questions please get back to me. Depending on the volume of correspondence this generates, please do give me a while to respond as the list of people that I contact has well over 60 people on it now.

Finally, if you are on email please let me know as I can then save a few pence on postage !

With best wishes,

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