

Question time reveals some new truths

AS CHAIR of Urban Eden, I recently had the pleasure to appear as a guest of the Citizens Advisory Group on Transport on a Question Time-style panel at the Open University. The event, chaired by OU director of communications Derek Prior, was a debate on transport in Milton Keynes and my fellow panellists were sustainable transport expert Professor Stephen Potter; James Wheway, a director of transport consultancy Integrated Transport Planning; and - most interestingly for me, - Cllr Isobel McCall, Leader of Milton Keynes Council.

I was astonished to hear Cllr McCall describing that it was her council which gave all the original outline planning permissions in the expansion areas and elsewhere. Despite these all being overtly anti-car and anti-freedom-of-choice-over-transport, in what she described as a 'carrot and stick' policy (at least two members of the audience insisted it was more 'stick without a carrot') she revealed that she was against one of the key outcomes; so-called 'courtyard parking' at the rear of properties because, she opined, people hate not being able to see their car from their house.

Yet many of the new developments such as at Broughton Manor on the East flank over which her council has presided has houses designed to have rear parking lots. Indeed, she also confided that she and her husband, fellow councillor Douglas McCall have considerable parking problems in the new street in which they live. I'm reliably told that people do not use the rear parking lots in her street because people hate not being able to see their car from their house.

She also declared that she personally "likes the grid system" despite being responsible for its piecemeal destruction.

Chasm

Frankly, I was astonished at her bare-faced nerve and suggested as politely as possible that, given the yawning chasm between her own beliefs and the policies she pushes through as council leader, she ought in fairness to resign. Milton Keynes Partnership chief executive John Lewis and chair Ann Limb were in the audience: both said nothing.

The audience raised many interesting points, which elicited thoughtful and constructive comments by the other two panellists. I was happy to elaborate on how, for instance, MKP was building instant slums with very limited parking in the new estates which was causing huge problems for residents and for access by fire engines and refuse collection trucks.

Cllr John Bint confirmed that kerb rage regularly broke out in the new estates in his Middleton ward and told the audience that

the resulting narrowing of already narrow roads by 'imaginative' parking had now been partially solved by the introduction of especially slim garbage trucks.

Makes you wonder when the fire trucks will go on a diet, doesn't it?

There was much discussion over the new 'City Streets'. I described the original outline planning permission as a sort of trick where all the good things disappear once permission is given and it goes for full planning. The Western Expansion Area development framework states that, in upgrading to mass transit characteristics, the route must be designed to accommodate a form of vehicle guidance in the future. What is now on the table is not a segregated mass transit way, which could be adapted to guided buses, trams or even unmanned vehicles a la Docklands Light Railway but simply a road with painted bus lanes, speed humps and other obstacles making adaptation to mass transit virtually impossible.

Pedestrians will have to cross 13.5-metre wide roads in one fast dash past parked vehicles, a bus lane, and a lorry/car lane with, in many cases, no central refuge. If that's not a recipe for multiple death and injury, I don't know what is.

Couple that with shops, offices and homes opening directly on to narrow combined redway/pavements where excited children leaving shops are likely to be mown down by a bicycle. If its rider is unable to swerve into a dog walker or passing wheelchair in time, he or she may well find themselves on top of an Arriva bus...

What is even more egregious is that the plans are based on flawed traffic analysis as demonstrated by research undertaken by Milton Keynes Forum. In short, the City Streets are a disaster waiting to happen.

However, something else has emerged in correspondence from MKP chair Ann Limb recently. Whether knowingly or totally unconsciously, she appears to have let the cat out of the bag revealing an ultra-secret agenda; the startling revelation that the City Streets are designed to be both inefficient and inappropriately placed in order to prevent further expansion of the city.

She said: "Planning has now been granted for 'City Street' development in the east and west flanks of Milton Keynes in order to ensure that the city boundaries are terminated appropriately." She added: "The creation of 'city streets' at the edges of the new city will facilitate and encourage the greater integration of communities and provide a suitable 'ending' to the city boundaries."

This despite the government's stated intent to create additional housing east of Milton Keynes as per the South East Plan and the fact that the traffic capacity studies into the ability of the V11 to cope with the

Theo Chalmers



Theo Chalmers is managing director of Verve Public Relations and chair of Urban Eden.

www.vervepr.co.uk

e-mail: t.chalmers@vervepr.co.uk

Tel: 01908 275271

www.urbaneden.org

additional traffic from a downgraded A5130 (which should have been the V12) did not take into account the South East Expansion with its 10,400 homes and additional employment land.

The panel also discussed the ICM survey commissioned by CAGoT, and about which I wrote extensively and joyfully in last month's column.

Desperate

I have learned that Milton Keynes Council is clearly not happy with its findings, which must have come as a huge blow to their 'story' of doing the public's will. In an attempt to damn the survey's results, the council has launched a desperate and feeble alternative: a residents' forum to discuss the future of the grid roads. The so-called 'citizen's group' is to weigh up the pros and cons of grid roads, city streets or a combination of the two. After hearing evidence it will present its conclusions to the environment policy development committee.

So desperate is the council to arrive at a view completely opposite to that derived by ICM from interviewing a representative robust sample of 1,000 adults aged 18-plus across the Milton Keynes council area, with interviews spread across local wards in proportion to population incidence, that the council is seeking seven to ten volunteers - a paltry number - preferably with no pre-defined view on the subject.

How they hope to reach any meaningful conclusion by appointing members with the extremely unlikely combination of the get-up-and-go to apply to join such a group, while simultaneously having 'no pre-defined view' beats me. Do they want people merely looking to get out of the rain?

As I suspected that the 'no pre-defined view' requirement is a rather obvious and deliberate attempt to exclude me and fellow Urban Edenites, I phoned Fran Bower at the council and asked to join. She confirmed that as I am chair of Urban Eden, I couldn't.

So much for democracy and fairness... what a shambles. Cheerio.

Jobs growth lifts economic gloom

JUST as the world didn't end when scientists switched on the Large Hadron Collider, media reports of 'Meltdown Monday' and tumbling global markets have not currently affected economic prosperity in Milton Keynes writes Grant Seeley, director of inward investment at Milton Keynes Partnership.

The Employment Survey, published by Milton Keynes Economy and Learning Partnership last month, shows that, compared to 2005, total employment within the Milton Keynes Council area has increased by 4,575 from 126,195 to 130,770 - an increase of 3.6 per cent and equating to an annual increase of circa 2,300 or 1.8pc.

This employment has been created among a total 7,834 employing establishments - this compares to 7,516 in 2005, a rise of 318 (4.2pc) which equates to an annual increase of around 160 (2.1pc).

Eight investment successes are detailed in Invest Milton Keynes' latest monthly report. These include the arrival of a Canadian-owned water treatment company, creating 20 new jobs. Local businesses working in the cosmetics, pharmaceutical and software sectors have also expanded in Milton Keynes.

Last month Invest Milton Keynes published its Annual Review for 2007/08 which highlighted that a record number of companies relocated and expanded in the city during the year and that more than 3,000 Milton Keynes jobs were created or safeguarded.

A total 76 businesses invested in Milton Keynes this year - a three-year high - and 61pc of the investment successes are from Invest Milton Keynes' target sector of high-value, high-growth, knowledge-based businesses. The newcomers to the city include 11 businesses from ten overseas locations in Europe, North America, Asia and Australasia.

Invest Milton Keynes continues to work closely with our colleagues at Milton Keynes & North Bucks Chamber of Commerce, Milton Keynes Council and South East England Development Agency to strengthen trade links between Milton Keynes, Europe and the Far East. We also continue to build strong relationships with property agents across the city.

For example, we welcomed



● Grant Seeley

the Japanese Federation of Small Business Associations - which came to discuss inward investment and regeneration strategies. Also, with Milton Keynes and North Bucks Chamber, we welcomed the Danish ambassador who met notable Danish businesses based in Milton Keynes, such as Kompan Ltd and Actona Company Ltd on his visit to strengthen trade links between Denmark and Milton Keynes.

The Annual Review also highlights how Milton Keynes has been making waves as a sporting destination. Supporting Milton Keynes Council, Invest Milton Keynes helped to bring national sporting events to the city including Sport Relief 2008, the Dodge Urban Beach Tour and the Tour of Britain second leg and race headquarters.

Milton Keynes' importance as a centre of innovation was underlined when the Minister for Science and Innovation, Ian Pearson, came to the city. His visit to offsite construction company Terrapin's head office in Bletchley formed part of the minister's on-going strategy to develop relationships with innovative small and medium-sized enterprises and to share views on the role of government in supporting and stimulating innovation in business.

Last month the Centre for Cities published a research report entitled UK Cities In The Global Economy. It acknowledged that globalisation is changing the economic environment in which cities exist and in which businesses and individuals operate. The report concluded that globalisation benefits the UK economy while producing some cities that are winners and others that are losers.

This research reinforces what our statistics already show - Milton Keynes is clearly a winner.