

Don't force out professional firms

I AM aware that my column in this magazine has recently been a lot to do with trees, and saving them, and not a lot about business, the *raison d'être* of this organ. Not only that, but I understand that several people who really ought to know me better have started calling me a tree-hugger.

So, in an effort to get back on track and stop those ugly tree-hugging rumours, I'm turning my attention to issues facing businesses in Milton Keynes and its surrounding areas. There's possibly good news for Bedford, Luton and Northampton too.

Persuading businesses to relocate to Milton Keynes is one of the key tasks assigned to Grant Seeley, Milton Keynes Partnership's urbane director of inward investment. And, in attracting large companies like Suzuki and our first Chinese firm, he's done and is doing a great job.

However there are some issues, particularly in Central Milton Keynes which if left unremedied are liable to force small and medium-sized professional firms out of the city and into the arms and business accommodation of Bedford, Luton and Northampton.

The problem is this; lawyers, accountants, bankers and other professional services firms have always seen the need to have a 'street pres-

ence' in the business heart of their community. That has traditionally meant occupying a small to medium-sized stand-alone building in the heart of the business district with their company's name over the door. However, the current plans for Central Milton Keynes are for large multi-use buildings with ground-floor retail/food offers, some offices above and above them residential.

This is not what professional service companies want and, according to conversations I've been having, they will not accept it. For them, it is changing the face of the business district, an area they regarded as sacrosanct.

Look outside the centre of Milton Keynes and you see a problem here too. Large institutional pension funds and property developers are throwing up cheap-to-erect, low-quality standard business accommodation, mostly to rent, in unattractive business parks. This is not what the professional services companies want, some of whom have had to take floors in multi-occupancy buildings where they have no 'street presence'.

I had lunch recently with Sean Hickey, at the time the chief executive of Milton Keynes & North Bucks Chamber of Commerce. He told me that the target number of

jobs to be created per new household has been recently fudged downwards from 1.6 jobs per household to 1.0. And new jobs are urgently needed here because by the year 2011 Milton Keynes' population will have risen to 255,780 people - that's an average of almost 12 extra people every day moving to the city.

At a stroke then, by changing the numbers of jobs required to satisfy those incomers, Milton Keynes is meeting its infrastructure targets.

But how many households have just one breadwinner? This is 2007, not 1937; everybody works - or tries to - today! So is Milton Keynes laying the foundations for a crisis? Will those new residents have nowhere to work? Will new start-up or relocating companies have nowhere suitable to relocate? I feel that these are questions that must urgently be asked.

◆ *A statement from Milton Keynes Partnership said that current adopted policy for Milton Keynes came from the Milton Keynes and South Midlands Sub-Regional Strategy, finalised in March 2005. This established the overall anticipated net levels of employment growth up to 2021 as 'reference values' for monitoring purposes rather than a formal target. The figure for Milton Keynes is 44,900.*

The statement added: "This figure is the same as the number of homes to be built in the same period. It should be noted that these targets are not specifically related to individual areas or phases of housing development and are not intended to be a constraint to economic development."

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Bureaucrats haven't a clue

THERE were two articles in the May edition of Business MK which I think deserve a response.

MP Dr Phyllis Starkey believes that business should do more to champion the growth of Milton Keynes. I suspect I know why few businesses are coming forward to shout their enthusiasm for the expansion.

They see the failure of government to commit sufficient public funding to address the infrastructure issues - particularly that of transport - and they know there are proposals to abandon the grid system in the expansion areas while offering no viable alternative. With the battle for the perception of Milton Keynes almost won, they see those features of the city, which outsiders now appreciate, being dismantled. They see development proposals driven only by financial returns and housing numbers.

They fear the loss of those attributes which make Milton Keynes such a great place to work and do business.

Cllr Isobel McCall unwittingly hit the nail on the head with her response to Urban Eden. She said: "Anyone would believe from the current debate that change in Central Milton Keynes is new, imposed by some faceless bureaucrats who haven't a clue what they are doing."

That's exactly it. The imposition of the growth of Milton Keynes is being driven not by its citizens and businesses but by faceless forces who appear not to know the likely consequences while councillors 'nod through' their increasingly detrimental plans.

Urban Eden has within its membership people who really care about Milton Keynes. They don't object to development or expansion - in fact, they embrace it. They can read plans. They know exactly what will be the consequences of tinkering with the city's structure. In many cases, they spent years working to harmonise buildings, people and trees. The result: a green and pleasant city.

We have lived for 30 years with a young and maturing landscape. Now, just when it's coming to fruition and looking its best, it is being messed about and tinkered with. There's no grand plan, no overall vision, no conviction that only the best will do.

If Milton Keynes is not to be a city of trees, wide boulevards, redways and a grid system, what is it to be? The peer group review of expansion plans asked that question but no one has yet proffered a credible answer.

Cllr McCall says it is time to move on. The question is: move on to what?

If these faceless bureaucrats have their way, I think there's every likelihood that Milton Keynes will lose its unique character and appeal and become a rather unpleasant, mediocre new town about which people will say: "Concrete cows, concrete town - I told you so!"

SUE MALLESON
Taurus Public Relations, via e-mail

English Heritage can save our centre

I COULDN'T write this column about the changes to Central Milton Keynes without looking at the proposed developments at thecentre:mk. It is a unique building, not only architecturally but also because it's a privately owned shopping centre which also happens to form almost the entire retail centre of a city - it's basically an enclosed, wholly-owned high street.

As readers of this column may know, the organisation I founded, Urban Eden (www.urbaneden.org) has been campaigning to preserve and sustainably extend the principles of the original master plan for Milton Keynes. This has to include thecentre:mk, as its owners intend to build on the public realm, to narrow boulevards and to throw up ugly new buildings in front of the original glass and steel facades.

However, there is hope. Thanks to the efforts of our members and friends, I understand that English Heritage is once again considering listing thecentre:mk. In my opinion, it is a stunningly well-realised example of English Modernism as written up glowingly at

the time in *Architectural Design* (No.8/74); *RIBA Journal* (Vol. 86, No. 5, May 1979); *Architectural Review* (Sept. 1980); *Architects Journal* (Oct. 1980) among other publications.

The building was inspired by architect and furniture designer Ludwig Mies Van Der Rohe, who died in 1969 and was one of the founders of modern architecture and a proponent of simplicity of style. Interestingly, he is often credited with the phrase "less is more", which sums up thecentre:mk very well and may yet serve as a reminder to those who might seek to 'make more, less'.

In August 1998 English Heritage carefully considered listing the shopping building Milton Keynes, as they called it then, which they said deserved Grade 2 Star status but held off in return for an explicit signed undertaking from its owners and Milton Keynes Council not to do many of things which are now planned, such as: Clause 5.1 i) Any further extension or reduction to the volume of the building.

Now, despite this agreement, the

building, the surrounding parking areas, its two neighbouring boulevards and Secklow Gate are all seriously and urgently threatened:

- ◆ The building, by unwanted, ugly, linear extensions clad in toilet-like cream tiles blocking the light from its clerestory glazing and destroying forever its appearance;
- ◆ The parking, by overbuilding of its surrounding parking areas;
- ◆ The boulevards will be narrowed and parts of the public realm, including trees, will be subsumed;
- ◆ The raised crossroad Secklow Gate will be demolished;
- ◆ They are banishing the market to a site at the food hall and building a new House of Fraser on its footprint.

In addition, the owners will infill the two public spaces within thecentre:mk. Middleton Hall, the large public events space, will be significantly infilled with shops and Queen's Court, the enclosed open space with large granite fountains, which will be demolished and significantly infilled with restaurants. Thus, in a stroke, the owners are breaking both

terms of: 5.1 i) Any further extension or reduction to the volume of the building.

Urban Eden cannot understand how English Heritage would allow this undertaking signed by itself, the owners of thecentre:mk and Milton Keynes Council to be so blatantly and cynically ignored. Milton Keynes does not need this kind of unthinking development - thecentre:mk, with its neighbour Midsummer Place, is already one of the largest shopping centres in Europe.

I would like to stress that Urban Eden is not against expansion, development and change per se. We simply exist to see the developments follow the principles of the original Master Plan, a plan that has worked so well for us for 40 years. Perhaps Milton Keynes' councillors will examine their conscience on this issue in the light of the undertakings the council made and may I remind them that outline planning permission does not automatically guarantee full permission. In the meantime, let's hope English Heritage will make one final desperate stand against this wanton act of desecration. Cheerio.

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