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Mr Tim Horsman,
Assistant Director, Planning & Building Control Housing
Planning and Regeneration
London Borough of Bromley
Civic Centre
Stockwell Close
Bromley BR1 3UH

Dear Mr Horsman

**Ref: 21/05907/OUT “The Walnuts Shopping Quarter”
Liberal Democrats – Response to Areli’s Walnuts Planning Application**

We agree that the centre of Orpington could benefit from further regeneration and renewal. The aim should be to improve the attractiveness of the town as a retail and leisure destination as well as to provide additional affordable and social housing.

However, we do not support the proposal by Areli to replace the current Walnuts centre with a disproportionately large housing development completely out of keeping with neighbouring areas.

Our survey of residents showed 76% were strongly opposed to Areli’s plans, and 12% were “somewhat opposed”. Only 12% of completed surveys expressed some support for the plans.

The leading concern was the future of the leisure centre (77% mentioned), but the effect on the local infrastructure (in terms of health/education services) was not far behind (72% mentioned). Concerns about the retail offering in the town was mentioned by 65% of respondents – both in terms of the disruption caused during building work, and the perception that the town will lose larger retail outlets. There was also criticism that the additional housing would not be “affordable” (63%) or contain sufficient social housing (41%).

The height of the proposed tower blocks is a major concern – only 6% expressed support for building up to 20 storeys. Sixty four per cent of respondents would not support going higher than just 5 storeys. This reflects residents’ wish that Orpington’s character as a suburban town in Kent should be protected and that too many flats are approved for construction but not enough low-rise family housing.

Areli claims that their plans had the overwhelming support of the local community – but these claims must reflect a flawed pre-planning consultation process which has resulted in a plan driven by the developer’s desire to achieve a considerable profit rather than meeting the needs of the community.

Following our discussions with local residents, **we oppose** the application on the following bases:

1. Closure of the Leisure Centre.

The Leisure Centre is a well-used facility, providing social and health benefits particularly to older and younger people. The Ojay’s Swimming Club develops sportsmen and women of the future who go on to compete

regionally and nationally. Learning to swim builds confidence and opens opportunities to participate in other sports. The Leisure Centre is a social destination for young families at all stages of a child's life.

One should also note the health benefits provided to the community – referrals to the Leisure Centre are made by local GPs and from the hospitals. It is particularly popular way for older residents to stay healthy.

Under Policy 20, community facilities should be replaced on a like for like basis and no closure should be allowed unless there are adequate alternatives available. The closure of the facility for even a short time would be a devastating blow to the local community. We do not believe adequate arrangements have been made for a temporary closure.

Furthermore, under these proposals, it is unclear what facilities the new leisure centre will include, in particular whether the soft play centre will be included, and the swimming pool will be smaller with smaller changing facilities.

There are similar concerns about the future of the Saxon Day Centre – although we believe that these seem to have been better addressed by the developers.

2. Respecting the nature of Orpington's environment and its history

Orpington is a major town centre in close proximity to semi-rural parts of Kent on the outskirts of London.

The proposal for high rise development is out of keeping with a suburban town where most of the housing is lower than five storeys. Given the proximity of the Broomhill Conservation area and the ancient Priory Gardens, the proposal for buildings of up to 20 storeys is not acceptable. Our survey and the public responses to the Areli proposals indicate considerable opposition amongst the public to the height and design of the development.

The skyline should be protected, and due regard given for the two protected views (from Chelsfield and Crofton Lane).

The current proposals are not in keeping with Policy 4, Policy 37, Policy 45 or Policies 47 and 48 of the Bromley Local Plan and should be rejected.

We do not wish to see a precedent set for high rise building in Orpington (or for that matter, Bromley).

Subject to the design of the blocks, we would be open to building up to the height of Bromley College – being the highest building in the vicinity.

3. Congestion and parking

The scheme does not include sufficient provision for parking for an additional 2,000 + residents. The level of parking envisaged in the development does not come near the level envisaged in the Local Plan (Policy 30), which will mean that residents parking will spill into neighbouring streets, exacerbating current parking problems in the town which already exist. This will undermine the town as a destination for retail, work and leisure purposes.

The building works and the eventual increase in population will result in more congestion.

We do not believe that the plans for the transport infrastructure are sufficient, to support this development.

4. Housing provision

We support the aim of building new housing, but we need to ensure in such a major scheme, Bromley's requirements for affordable and social housing are met. This scheme does not appear to do this. We would support inclusion of some key worker housing within this development.

We would also point out that a considerable number of building schemes are already being undertaken in Orpington, although none are on the scale of this proposal. We fear this proposal is a missed opportunity to make a difference with the social / intermediate/ affordable housing which is really needed. We do not need more investment properties or expensive private sector housing.

5. Overstrained public infrastructure

The influx of population will put additional pressure on the local health, schooling and policing services as well as the transport infrastructure. These costs and widely held concerns have not been addressed in the proposals.

6. Major Town Centre

We believe that the scheme does not meet the objectives of Policy 92 as the retail offering will be smaller. Allied with the concerns about parking and congestion, we do not believe that the scheme will enhance Orpington's future as a Major Centre.

One of Orpington's problems in attracting anchor name retailers is the lack of large units, and competition from the Nugent Centre. The scheme will result in the loss of further larger scale units (such as those, like Peacocks, in the Walnuts) which will increase this challenge. There is already a smaller boutique unit which is part of Sapphire House, on Brunswick Square which has not been let since it was built. We therefore question whether these smaller boutique units will add much to what is already available on the High St.

Consultation

We believe that there has not been adequate engagement with the users of the public facilities in connection with the development. Some of the developers claims have been shown to be palpably incorrect – such as that the scheme has overwhelming public support. We also note the claim that 41,000 leaflets were distributed to residents – very few people recall receiving these.

Alternative vision

We believe that a smaller scale development, more aligned to the provisions of affordable housing for the area, and in keeping with the neighbourhood would represent a better future for Orpington. With reference to the housing element, we would like to see more reserved for social housing, or for key workers or under the Rent to Own scheme that is Liberal Democrat policy.

Yours sincerely



Nironkush Das
Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for Orpington