

Friends Of Riverside Gardens Erith

“FORGE”

Mr. Mayor, Chairman and Councillors we thank you for giving us the opportunity to put our case to the Council.

Friends Of Riverside Gardens Erith is a non party-political, non sectarian group of people brought together by their heartfelt desire to retain the Erith Riverside Gardens in their entirety and not to have a multi-storey block of flats built on this unique site. FORGE membership is over 600 and also supporting our society are our MP, our ward Councillors, the Bishop of Tonbridge, Erith Rotary Club, Erith Town Forum, the Open Spaces Society, Friends of the Earth Bexley, Bexley Civic Society, the Erith and Belvedere Local History Society and various members of Erith Rowing Club, Erith Yacht Club, Erith Theatre and Erith Women’s Institute.

The Gardens form a rectangle bounded by the inlet, the River Thames the ramp to the jetty and Erith High Street North. They are on the London Loop and the Thames Path for walkers and cyclists. They are visited by people from all over Bexley Borough, from Greater London, the rest of Great Britain and from many other parts of the world.

We are told this building is required in order for a developer to fund the up-grade of the flood defences and the re-landscaping of the remaining area but we believe a block of flats on our Gardens is too high a price to pay. We believe funding could have been obtained from other sources. Bexley Council applied for and was granted funds for four projects in Bexley from the Mayor of London’s more than One hundred and eighty million pound fund for such schemes as outlined in his “Better Green and Water Spaces” document. We suggest that funding could have been sought for regeneration of the Gardens from this source. We understand it is not too late to apply now. Any shortfall could be acquired from seeking out other funding sources and appealing to local businesses, etc.

It has been said that this building is required to kick-start the new development. May we suggest that the appropriate place to put such a landmark building would be the old swimming pool site on the corner directly opposite the Flagpole site. There is no need to spoil our open space!

The area it is proposed to sell off was land transferred by way of gift by Wm. Cory & Son in 1967 under the Public Health Act 1875 Section 164 (which relates to Pleasure Grounds) in order that the Council could add it to the Gardens in due course. The Transfer states that the Council were acquiring this land “for permanent objects not involving a resale or other disposition”. There is no doubt what the long term objective was because it was not until 1983 when the flood defences were raised that the Council were able to add this site to the Gardens. In the Council’s own minutes at the time of the Transfer they refer to Cory’s name being linked to this site in perpetuity.

To sell off open space is contrary to the Government’s “Planning Policy Guidance 17”; counter to aspects of Bexley’s own “Core Strategy”; and not in accord with the Mayor of London’s strategy outlined in his publications “London’s Great Outdoors” and “Better Green and Water Spaces”.

The Gardens are designated by the Council as being a “Pleasure Ground” and a “Conservation Area”. We ask Bexley Council to treat our Gardens in the same way that other areas in the Borough so designated are treated. In the last 20 years the only disposal of part of a pleasure ground was in 1997 to enable the widening of an access way and in the last 20 years no building has been built on a previously open space in a Conservation Area.

Over the last 10 to 15 years Central Erith has had block after block of flats built totalling at least 1051 new build units. These are in addition to the two existing high rise tower blocks directly opposite the Gardens. The occupants of all these flats have no garden of their own. They use the Riverside Gardens as others would use their back gardens. The children have somewhere to run about and play and the Flagpole site is a quiet sanctuary for older and handicapped people.

In the Erith Western Gateway Development Framework it is proposed to add to the number of flats in the area immediately opposite the Gardens by approx. 300 units.

Also, Bexley College - to be amalgamated with the Adult Education Service - will be moving to the Tramshed Site – a two-minute walk to the Gardens. These combined institutions will provide day, evening and weekend courses for thousands of students. We envisage that many will

want to relax in the Gardens during their breaks and come into the town to shop.

With the addition of a further 300 housing units and the influx of students and teachers into this small cramped town, it follows that the entire Gardens will be even more required in the future than at present.

Mr. Mayor, Chairman and Councillors, we believe it to be amoral to sell off our valued gift of land and illegal when the Transfer states “for permanent objects not involving a resale or other disposition” and the Council Minutes state “in perpetuity”.

On behalf of the members of FORGE and others, I ask you to give your support to retaining the entire Riverside Gardens.