

6 August 2009

Dear Members of the Gunnersbury Park Development and Regeneration Board and Councillors

I am an Ealing resident interested in the future of Gunnersbury Park. Over the last few months, I have attended the meetings organized by the Gunnersbury Park Development and Regeneration Manager, Richard Gill, on the future of the park.

Discussions during these meetings, my reading of the Options Appraisal compiled by Jura Consultants and, finally, the Future of Gunnersbury Park Consultation public opinion survey I received by post made me aware of the pitfalls of the Options Appraisal and the highly disagreeable consequences if the “preferred option” is carried out. In brief, below you will find my criticism and concerns regarding the above:

### General

In the list of stakeholders that Jura Consultants contacted before laying out their options, there is no mention of the actual users of the park. We, the “*leisure visitors*”, were not properly and formally consulted before the “preferred option” was put forward even though we are, in fact, those that will be most heavily impacted by the “preferred option”. Our access to the park will be restricted and we will have to accept a housing development that will destroy an ecological niche (a source of biodiversity including numerous old, well-established trees – some of the oldest trees in West London), the removal of a widely used and enjoyed pitch and putt; the development of an unnecessary Sports Hub (with further elimination of trees) and the construction of on-site parking and roads to allow access to the Sports Hub, the Large Mansion and the Orangery.

An evident unwillingness to fully and transparently disclose the whole appraisal process has been obvious over the last year. Examples are the absence of informative posters and leaflets in the park and the museum and the complete disregard for this topic in the *Around Ealing* magazine. (See, for example, the August 2009 edition that does not even spare one sentence on either Gunnersbury Park Development and Regeneration or the Consultation.) The arranged meetings with the residents and Richard Gill have been a mere attempt to disguise an already decided future of the park as a faux “democratic process” in which the residents had influence. In reality, with the excuse of having informal meetings with Mr Gill, our comments, suggestions and criticism have almost never been recorded and the Regeneration Board has never made an appearance during these meetings (a presence that would have been very much appreciated as they would have directly experienced the general public dissatisfaction).

### The Options Appraisal

Astounded, I now realize that Ealing Council has actually saved £7M in the financial year 2008/2009 and wants to pay back £50 to (selected) Ealing residents, to spend that money. After being brainwashed on the absence of money for Park development bundled with the apparent inability to cover a gap of £14M (the excuse for the sale of 5.6 acres of the Park for housing), it is unthinkable that the opportunity to reduce this gap from £14M to £7M has not been considered by the Council. Again, here is evidence of unwillingness of the Board and Jura to seek out and find acceptable and reasonable solutions for The Park. (And suggestion of a political manoeuvre to gain the public favour with a gift of £50 in hopes of future election success.)

The “holistic” approach of this appraisal has not considered ecological consequences if the “preferred option” is implemented. The proposal of a housing development is against the very same principles of the Cleaner and Greener Community theme expressed by the Hounslow Community plan: the local residents would have to

accept a reduced green space, an increased amount of cemented/asphalted areas and the elimination of part of the Ealing and Hounslow “lung” with an inevitable decrease of quality of life.

In the preferred option it is clear that the function room option for the Mansions is the one that will be pursued, implying creation of roads inside the park and on-site parking spaces. Moreover, the assumption of a marquee behind the Mansions for functions will effectively eliminate another big area of green space from public access. (Space often used in sporting and family activities.)

It seems that in the preferred option, art, temporary exhibitions and performances will not be considered for the future use and sustainability of the stables. In an area such as Ealing, already sterile from the cultural point of view, this option might have offered a valuable alternative solution to the proposed one (which is using the stables for storing museum collections after spending £4M on restoration).

The construction of a Sports Hub is nonsense. There is already available a few leisure centres at short distance from the Park. (Brentford Fountain Leisure Centre is a few minutes from the park.) It would be acceptable to refurbish what is already in place (as per option B) and make the sports complex sustainable with vastly improved management than what is currently being delivered by John Laing Integrated Services. The construction of a Sports Hub (a £15M Sports Hub! -- the same amount requested to restore the precious historical sites!) and the related parking site and road connecting the Hub to the main road clearly demonstrates favouritism of the strong financial interests of a few people with utter disregard for the green spaces and trees that would be destroyed.

The appraisal does not mention any alternative option to restore the Potomac Tower and revitalise the Lake, but links these to the development of the Sports Hub. Is there any chance that private enterprises with direct access to the park near the Tower would support its renovation and perhaps the creation of a café, attractive for their employees and for those users accessing the park from the south corner of the park? Why not consider involving the “Hooked on Fishing Charitable Trust” for the revival of the lake?

### Survey

Questions 1 to 9 and 14 to 18 of the Survey make no sense in light of the already made Options Appraisal. If the intention to understand the needs of the park users was genuine, these questions would have been put forward and widely distributed before starting any appraisal. Evidently there was no real intention to listen to the views of the population accessing the park.

The Survey does not provide enough information for those that are not aware of the details of the Appraisal and clearly leads the reader to the “preferred option” that has been decided already by Jura Consultants. All questions are formulated as closed questions with the preferred option as the only one listed (see questions 10-11), without any mention to costs and alternatives evaluated with options 1, 2 and 3.

Question 12 is unacceptable: the choices proposed to the reader are either the decline of the park or its renovation according to the option preferred by Jura Consultants. This is forcing the unaware reader to accept the proposed option, whereas other alternatives could be sought. Moreover both Councils have the obligation to restore the historical sites and would not be allowed to leave the park to complete degradation, therefore the phrase “*there will be further decline*” is not the most appropriate to define the real circumstances. To the question of the consequences of an absence of any tick to the statements in question 12, Mr Gill answered that in that case the appraisal would proceed with the “preferred option”. This is not acceptable considering how wrongly both statements are formulated.

It is clear that this Consultation has not been piloted, as the correct elaboration of a survey would require, and it is blatantly biased: in brief all the principles of social research underpinning the creation of a public opinion survey are bypassed.

The Survey has question 13 that allows the reader to add comments on the proposal. How will these comments be evaluated? What does "*we will note your comments*" really mean? Is there any plan for a proper qualitative analysis of major comments to be taken on by the Regeneration Board?

The Consultation will be sent to Jura Consultants and then be analyzed by them. Considering the formulation of this Survey there is no trust that the assessment will be impartial and comments adequately taken into consideration by the evaluators. This is thus yet another reason to invalidate the Survey.

It is with distress and frustration that I write this letter: frustration caused by the blatant evidence that the local residents have apparently no power to prevent the implementation of an unacceptable plan and distress caused by the bad management of the whole appraisal process and public consultation. Both feelings have been accompanied by the sad conclusion that a hidden agenda is what is actually moving the process forward, despite the complete disagreement of mainstream park users.

I want to believe that there is still some room for revising the plans for the Park, restoring the valuable historical sites and abandoning completely the proposal of a housing development and an unnecessary Sports Hub. My request is (A) to be able to pose to the Regeneration Board questions that have not been answered, (B) to propose and evaluate other alternatives than those (or complementary to those) that have been already explored by Jura Consultants and, finally, (C) to reformulate an impartial Survey with appropriate questions. If a new questionnaire is not feasible, my request is that representatives of local residents should be involved in the scrutiny and evaluation of the results, along with some independent party that does not have any financial benefit from the development of the park. Will we get this chance? This is my first question to you and I would very much appreciate your answer.

Sincerely yours

Giuseppina Ortu