

Letter to Richmond & Twickenham Times

9th June 2009

Dear Editor,

Twickenham Riverside proposals

The officers of four long-established local societies are currently aware that the issue of MPs' expenses is not the only case where actions can be technically legal while being ethically reprehensible. The River Thames Society, the Twickenham Society, the York House Society and the Environment Trust for Richmond upon Thames are all targets of a noisy 'carpetbagging' campaign by a group of new members whose earnest concern for the River Thames, York House, the character of Twickenham and the environment of the borough has, until recently, been modestly concealed.

What these new members have in common is not only their total opposition to the current Twickenham Riverside scheme, but the intention to force our societies to express opposition. The three societies who are not partners in the scheme - the River Thames Society, Twickenham Society and York House Society - have already consulted with their members and acted accordingly. There will be further consultation when the planning application is made and we know what is actually being proposed. This is not good enough for recent arrivals, who are now pushing for Extraordinary General Meetings, presumably on the EU principle that a ballot should be held as often as is required to get the "right" result.

They are also putting themselves up for election as trustees of the Environment Trust. The Trust, which is a partner in the scheme, has offered its long-standing members many opportunities over the past two years - in meetings or through newsletters - to discuss the River Centre's role in the scheme with trustees; so far very few have expressed concerns, and many are extremely enthusiastic. Residents are now being encouraged to join the Environment Trust simply to stop the Riverside scheme - this is clearly stated on the Save Our Riverside website. All four societies deeply resent the intrusion of aggressive and disruptive mob tactics in our meetings and at Council proceedings. People who find this behaviour acceptable and enjoyable are not welcome in our societies. We also find the frequent mis-representation of facts about the scheme, in order to gain support from residents, to be extremely unethical.

This is an issue that will influence the nature of community groups in Twickenham and the borough as a whole for many years to come. Single-issue groups are generally extremely critical of whoever is seeking to bring about change and prefer to approach the Council in a confrontational mode.

Community groups have a wider perspective. They seek to support change where it is deemed to be good, and to offer constructive criticism of poor proposals through established procedures. Over the years, many Council proposals have been improved, or binned, as a result of the expertise that has been made available to the Council by community groups. Community groups and single-issue groups both have important roles to play, but the community is best served if they co-exist.

We fully recognise that there are valid differences of opinion on the scheme. But we accept - as have two public inquiry inspectors - that development in accordance with planning policies for the Twickenham swimming pool site is necessary to fund high-quality public benefits, and that the 'alternatives' proposed by objectors will not provide a balance of year-round benefits for the whole population, and will lead to an uncertain future dominated by continuing dereliction.

There is immense potential for damage to existing partnerships and groups as a result of the entryist tactics of people with a fixed and negative agenda, and little likelihood of future co-operative ventures with the Council going forward if this scheme fails. It is unlikely that these objectors have thought this through, and even less likely that they care. We do care, and in so doing we are taking to heart the interests of the whole community and of future generations.

Yours sincerely

Jack Betteridge *Chair, River Thames Society (Upper Tideway branch)*

Joy Lee *Chair, York House Society*

Douglas Orchard *Chair, Twickenham Society*

Jenny Pearce *Chair, Environment Trust for Richmond upon Thames.*