

Monmouthshire & Brecon Canals Regeneration Partnership

Living Links Project – Works within Caerphilly County Borough Council.

Notes of Community Consultation at the Risca Senior Citizens Hall, Park Road, Risca held on Thursday November 9th 2006

Chairman:- Mr Bernard Illman: Community Link Officer (Mon & Brecon Canals Trust)

Speakers:- Mr Dave Whetter: Caerphilly County Borough Council Engineering Division.
Mr Rob Frowen: Torfaen County Borough Council, Lead Partner.

MEETING OPENED AT 7.30PM APPROX 60 ATTENDEES.

Chairman introduced the speakers and also kindly asked those present that questions and recommendations' be put to the relevant speakers after the recess, where time will be allocated to this.

1. Dave Whetter gave a PowerPoint presentation that outlined the Council's 3 Stage restoration policy for the Crumlin Arm and how the potential Lottery funds could implement Stage 1 of the policy. Dave made it very clear that the annual capital works canal budget of £250k per annum is being set-aside and safeguarded for 2005/06 and 2006/07 to be used as match funding if and when the Partnership is successful with the "Living Links" bid.

Dave explained that the total estimated cost of full restoration of the regional canal network is in the order of £66m. Dave highlighted that success in securing a £33m Living Links project would still leave approx 50% of the overall regional restoration programme to be funded from other sources. Dave advised that the Living Links project needed to address key themes set by Big Lottery and canal infrastructure improvements and enhancement would be an indirect by-product of satisfying the key outputs of community, economic, social, health and education improvements. Living Links projects seeks to attain these outputs by improvement and enhancement of the regional canal corridor. In closing Dave addressed local press report (South Wales Argus, Monday 6th November) reporting rumours of the imminent closure of the canal within Caerphilly County Borough's area. Dave reiterated that the memorandum of understanding signed by all the Partners, aspires to pursue FULL restoration of the canal by 2020.

2. Rob Frowen gave a similar presentation on the "Living Links" application, where we are at now, with the Stage 3 bid and the consultants being appointed, and a limited history of the canal for the interest of those present. Rob explained that approx 70% of any funding would be used in Torfaen, with Newport getting 22% and Caerphilly 8%.

Questions and answer session

Q1 Gentleman from Pontywaun:

I would like to commend and congratulate CCBC on the stonework at the Nant Carn Aqueduct either side of the canal, but why could not the leak be stopped? It is a dirty, smelly mess at the moment.

Answer DW, The repair of the channel of the Nant Carn Aqueduct is part of the CCBC bid for Lottery Funding. If we get the Lottery funding the work could not commence until 2008 at the earliest. If we do not get the Lottery funding then this work would be undertaken via the Council's annual capital works budget historically £250k pa. DW thanked the gentleman for his congratulations and would pass them onto his colleagues at CCBC.

Q2 Michael West from Pontymister:

Who is going to clean the canal channel? It looks like a landfill site.

Answer DW, the Council (CCBC) have EH&S (Environmental Health and Safety) difficulties with getting workers into the canal channel to remove debris etc. The relevant departments are trying to address the problem and they are examining private sector contractor options to undertake this work. Such work is progressed from the Canal's annual maintenance budget.

MW how often will it be done? DW as often as is necessary once appropriate contractor has been identified.

Graham Thorne (Ornithologist, Islwyn Canal Association) asked DW "In light of Environmental Legislation are you able to define what work takes place and where? DW answered all work will take the 1981 Wildlife Act into consideration. The cleaning operations will need to take account of breeding bird legislation so provided contractor can be found a through channel clean up by late February 2007 is targeted.

Q3 Resident

Is there a plan if the scheme runs over budget?

Answer DW CCBC costs are the most up to date, Newport and Torfaen costs are older and will be updated by the findings of the consultants during the stage 2 process.

Q4 Resident

There were plans put about for a marina in Adams Quarry, with the marina approx 100sq metres, 1000 cubic metres would have to be removed in order to bring it down to the same level as the canal. This would generate HGV movements to dispose of arisings.

Would not there be a better place for the marina?

DW answered the Adams Quarry project is an aspiration and potentially results following the full restoration of the canal network. Any proposed marina development needs to be financially sound, developers need a return on their investment so it will have to be in an area of demand. Detailed investigation would need to be done and demand measured. HGV movements could be mitigated by an onsite cut and fill exercise with fill accommodated on peripheral areas of the very large quarry floor.

Q5 Graham Thorne

What is the timescale for this project, for the people of Risca to buy into the scheme they need to see thing happening? What about job creation and tourism, we want to see it. Out of the £25m how much will be spent in Risca? If the total cost of the whole project is £60m, where do we go for funding after the lottery funding?

Rob Frowen answered that Dave Whetter's presentation had already covered the CCBC costings of the £25m. The Risca area is fortunate in that it has already benefited from past investment on the canal, but whilst there are works within in the bid for the Risca area, the bulk is in the North. We will explore other funding pots, for example the potential of EU funding.

Q6 Chris Cook

Why were the dams left in the canal at Pontywaun and at the "deeps" in Crosskeys? The contractors only took the tops off, this enables the trip boat to go aground, especially when full of passengers.

DW explained as far as he was concerned the bungs / dams had already been removed by the relevant contractor. DW agreed to meet Mr Cook onsite on 10th November to identify the locations of Mr Cook's concern.

Chris Cook replied that (a girl?) from CCBC had been and measured the depth of the canal at these spots and it was only 7 inches deep. Chris Cook also told the meeting the (girl?) had said the dams / bungs could have been taken away free of charge if done earlier, now they would have to pay, CCBC Eng Dept had been given photo evidence of this.

Chairman Bernard Illman interrupted to remind those present that this line of questioning has nothing to do with this meeting and could we please keep to the point.

Reply by DW to Chris Cook, Please leave me your contact details after the meeting and I will meet with you tomorrow, Friday 10th November to look at the areas of concern.

Q7 Chris Cook asked those in the room to confirm that boat owners on the British Waterways owned section of the canal are able use their boats for 12 months per year.

This was confirmed by Alan Birchall (boat owner) and Bernard Illman who advised that boat owners on BW canals are also subject to winter stoppages of up to 3 months due to maintenance works.

Chris Cook asked why the Pontywaun Boat Club had been told that they could only navigate their section of canal April to October.

Dave Whetter answered this is CCBC policy.

Chris Cook said why then should they have boat insurance etc for 12 months and only be able to use them for 6 months?

Dave Whetter replied, because boats are moored on the canal owned by CCB and the boats still need to be insured for mooring purposes. Not having appropriate current insurance and associated documentation will lead to removal of boats.

Q8 Resident

Has the lottery “Living Links” bid included information boards etc?

Rob Frowen Yes.

DW, yes in the shape of the traditional bridge weight limit sign and as part of the educational aims of the project. DW explained that CCBC has been working with members of the Islwyn Canal Association in developing signage style and information leaflets. Likely that information boards will be installed over time regardless of success of Living Links bid.

Richard Dommett (Mon & Brec Canals Trust) explained about the interpretation works planned for the Cefn Flight at Rogerstone, which will work in parallel to the Living Links project. Richard went on to mentioned about the possibility of another meeting in January, the Santa’s Grotto at Fourteen Locks, and told everyone that “it’s your project”.

Q9 Resident

This is not a politically loaded question – but it looks like Cwmbran (Torfaen) is going to get the lions share of this funding. Cwmbran (Dev Corporation) ripped the canal up, now we have to live with the results. Can’t we get some sort of compensation? Risca gets an unfair share because of this?

RF replied the original Cwmbran (New Town) enquiry included the canal and the inspector mentioned that if the canal becomes usable then the Welsh Office should pay for it’s reinstatement. Rob and his colleagues (at Torfaen) will be looking into this. RF also explained that Torfaen is the vital link for the canal from Brecon to Newport, once this is in place, the project will go on.

Q10 A gentleman asked about consultancy fees, and as to whether they will come out of the £25m if won?

DW and RF confirmed that the £25m bid is made up of works, contingencies and professional fees for design and supervision of the works.

Q11 Gentleman from Cwmcarn

There is a memorial planned for those who died in the flannel factory flood disaster, unfortunately this will sit by the head of the currently dirty canal at Cwmcarn site

DW replied, it is all down to priorities and the necessity to multiply current funding by 3 (£250 k p/a), to achieve the match funding.

If we get the lottery funding we are looking at a completion of 5 to 6 years, if we do not then the work will have to come out of the normal capital expenditure fund of £250k p/a. DW went on to stress as an Engineering Dept they were being prudent with tax payers money, in order to achieve more on top, via the lottery.

Q12 Lady resident from Pontywaun

The main road is caving in, the gardens are falling in the canal, surely this cannot be left for 8 years?

DW answered that this work is a significant part of the CCBC £2m from the Living Links application. Priorities need to be sorted.

What about European funding?

DW replied, as engineers we have been criticised for not using enough external funding, and so here we are attempting to get Lottery funding to enhance the Council's capital budget for the Canal.

What about the adjacent canal properties and their boundary walls?

DW answered they are currently considered as being part of the structure of the canal. This may require legal opinion in due course.

Q13 Pontywaun resident

Why can't money be spent at Pontywaun from a health and safety perspective?

DW replied he will discuss the H&S implications with his colleagues.

Q14 from the floor

What about the blockages (highways) on the canal through Risca? I see no reference to them in this plan?

DW replied that the questioner was quite correct; the proposals for the removal of existing obstructions resulting from culverting of the canal below highways within CCBC (Stage 2 of the Council's 3 Stage Restoration Plan) are not in this bid.

Q15 Chris Cook asked why there had been no working parties organised by the Canals Trust for Waterway Recovery Group (WRG) volunteers in the Pontywaun / Crosskeys area.

Richard Dommert (Canals Trust Regeneration Officer) explained work has been concentrated on the locks in Newport at Allt-yr-yn (Locks 2 and 3) and at Cefn on footpaths, fencing and culvert repairs. The MBACT has to bid a year in advance to get these camps. Newport have always come up with the materials costs for these camps. These camps are a vital part of the SEPARATE "Heritage Lottery" bid for the Cefn flight that if successful will see two locks completed per year over the next five years.

Chris Morgan (Chairman Mon & Brec Canals Trust) explained that in 2001 the MBACT invested £3k in partnership with CCBC in building the slipway at Pontywaun, and if suitable projects could be identified by CCBC that matched the skills of the WRG's volunteers then the MBACT & WRG would look to return to the area.

Q16 Graham Thorne asked about water supply issues, and about policy changes due to political changes (from CCBC point of view) if and when they occurred?

DW replied the current council administration (Labour controlled) had set the same budget for the canal as the previous one (Plaid). This was £250k per annum.

RF mentioned the Leader of Torfaen Council is watching the bid closely and supports it 100%. DW advised that the Stage 2 submission would need to be submitted before the next Council elections.

Water supply is an issue, water is needed at Newport (RF).

DW explained the Nant Carn feeder control system needs improving.

CCBC need to look at future water supply, abstraction, impact of Fourteen Locks becoming operational etc. CCBC need greater control over supplies and retention of water within the canal channel – many of the list of projects are hydraulic improvements.

Q17 With reference the profile of the canal at Pontywaun, the boats hit the side, people are having trouble getting on the boats, what about disabled users?

Will the Pontywaun section be rectified?

RD replied he had attended a recent seminar that advised of new methods of profile and bank protection and that various of schemes are being looked at to protect the banks and integrity of the canals.

Q 18 from Chris Cook

Did Mr Fletcher from IWA, Inland Waterways Association (visited the area summer 2005) comment on the profile of the canal?

DW, yes Mr Fletcher did comment.

DW advised that the priority of past CCBC works had been to address concerns associated with safety, embankment stability and hydrology. It is acknowledged that previous works may not have fully addressed the requirements for longer-term restoration to a “navigational” standard.

DW explained that future works will take navigation aspirations into account to reflect the Partnership’s ultimate aim of the completely restored canal by 2020.

Bernard Illman highlighted recent experience on the Shropshire Union Canal and on certain stretches of the navigable Mon & Brecon canal where there is a need to use a gang plank to gain access between towpath and boat. BI suggested that a canal network restored to a “perfect” navigational profile was an aspiration that was unlikely to be achieved.

Q19 Chris Cook raised the possibility of stopping the leak at the Nant Carn Aqueduct?

BI suggested that this question had been previously addressed.

Q20 Richard Wysom, Chairman Islwyn Canal Association asked if other funding opportunities were being examined?

DW replied, not at present as activities to progress the Living Links project are taking priority. DW noted the potential in the future to seek award of Aggregate Levy Funding

and stressed that the Big Lottery funding limit of £33m (including match funding) is only approximately half of the estimated total cost of full restoration of the canal network.

Q21 Adam Viggers asked if minutes of the meeting could be circulated?

Bernard Illman advised that the MBACT were making notes of the meeting and those notes would be circulated once prepared

Q22 Leighton Hurley

Fisherman are eroding the banking at Pontywaun and Ty Sign, suggested that concrete aprons be installed at specific locations along the canal to prevent erosion from fishing activities?

DW and RF replied that improvements to facilities that related to recreational and leisure use of the canal addressed a number of the Lottery's key themes and the suggestion of providing improved angling facilities would be considered.

Chairman Bernard Illman thanked those attending for their input and the meeting closed at 9.30pm.

Copies to

Rob Frowen (Torfaen)

Dave Whetter (Caerphilly)

Bernard Illman(MBACT)

R Dommett (MBACT)

R Haydon (MBACT)