The most recent **Parish Council Meeting** was held on Wednesday 8th July 2020 using the Zoom conferencing facility. Present were Parish Councillors Graham Bates, Stewart Briggs, Peter Chase (Chairman), Harry Fowler, Chris Gee, Alan Jacobs, Krys Osuch, and Joe Warren. Apologies were received from Councillor Francia Slade. Borough Councillors Jon Gambold, Roger Rigby and Jim Weir, Clerk Lyn Lyman and 24 members of the public were also present.

PUBLIC OPEN SESSION

Someone keeps pulling signposts down. First it was the 30mph repeater sign near Kings Corner, now the rather classic green signpost on the corner of Vicars Close. Cllr Gambold raised this on behalf of Mr Culverwell at the meeting. If the culprits are seeking publicity then they’ve got it (by virtue of this article). Perhaps that’ll make them stop, but I doubt it. Borough are just going to cement the thing in using double the normal amount of concrete. Like graffiti under the A428 road-bridge at the river, zero tolerance will be shown for this sort of thing. We will just keep repairing and cleaning things until the vandalous delinquents get bored or grow up.

Another concern raised by Cllr Gambold came from the cricket club, whose outfield mower is now utterly beyond repair. Jon and Roger have kindly offered five grand from their “ward fund” towards a second hand replacement machine, and as the Parish Council we will apply to the Borough’s Rural Fund to match that, to get us up to the asking price of £10,000. New ones are £30,000. Cllr Briggs kindly offered to complete the paperwork for this.

Mr Glasper, who heads up the Biddenham Speedwatch posse, noted that the government have now lifted the rather draconian restriction of not permitting over 70-year-olds to hold a speed gun by the side of the road with an associate two metres away. So the team will be back in action shortly. Any speeding motorist nabbed gets noted to the police and, if they become a repeat offender, will be contacted and potentially prosecuted.

RIP (?) GREAT DENHAM GOLF COURSE

The main concern, and the reason for such a high attendance at the meeting, was the recently received news that the Great Denham golf course operator had heard their lease was not to be renewed by the landowner. This means the course will close in mid-October, the land will become fallow. Worst of all, it opens up the possibility of the land being put forward for housing. We do not want to lose this green lung in our midst to yet more houses. Borough Cllr Weir, whose ward is Great Denham, attended to give us all an update and noted that in only 10 days his online petition had been signed by over 2,500 people.

I have to tell you that the reason we keep losing land to housing in our area is down to two significant factors. Firstly, the Borough Council’s own policy is to deliberately prefer housing development within the town boundary. This is in order to try to reduce development in outlying villages. Sadly, Biddenham is not a “village”, nor Great Denham, by their definition; we are both within the town (or “urban”) boundary and classed as “urban settlements”.

Secondly, no matter what protections Borough themselves put in place on urban green spaces, if they don’t keep up a steady supply of new housebuilding across the whole of their region to satisfy central government quotas, they are in big trouble. Financial trouble. What we saw in connection with the development of 250 houses west of Gold Lane is that even if Borough don’t agree to allow developments, landowners will appeal to the Planning Inspectorate who will then permit these things anyway. This is apparently for the “public benefit” of construction jobs and houses for people, and trumps almost all environmental, social and infrastructural (schools, traffic, etc.) concerns, every time.

Our fear, therefore, and that of Great Denham’s Parish Council and residents, is that a few years will go by and the owner of the golf course land will put it forward for development. They will carefully choose their moment to be a time when Borough are struggling to meet their housebuilding quota. And the result will be the loss of 70 hectares (or 173 acres in old money) to the bulldozer.

So, the meeting heard and, indeed, considered what we can do about this situation.

Firstly, Cllr Weir was encouraged to try to mediate between the landowner and the golf course operator. Surely if we can persuade the parties to review their decision, we remove any concern about housebuilding. But some considerable damage has already been done to the membership of the club by the uncertainty of the last few months, and this creates issues of its own in trying to sustain the operation.

Secondly, we try to fire up the Borough politicians to chime in with our concerns. Cllr Weir attended a full Borough Council meeting a few days after our Parish meeting, and I am pleased to say both the Mayor and Deputy Mayor spoke in support of our concerns. Indeed, the Mayor correctly pinpointed housing supply as the key issue.

Thirdly, our MP Richard Fuller might help influence national housebuilding policy. It is a mystery to many of us why so many houses still need building every year. And, as a result of the Coronavirus pandemic, I for one feel that that policy should now be reviewed. My day job is working for one of the myriad of small companies who occupy a suite of rooms in central London (Holborn to be precise). Our senior management, in common with many others, have already decided that the home-based methods of the last four months have been working very well, thank you, and thus we will be letting go of our Holborn office. Permanently. I therefore have a firm conviction that commercial property is going to be one of the hardest hit sectors in what people are coming to call “the new normal”. Millions of square feet of office space are going to be left empty. Owners have virtually no option but to convert them to residential space – there are quite enough hotels already, too, and a lot of people only come to stay in them to visit people in their offices (who won’t be there any more).

So the world is going to be a different place post-Covid. Whilst some differences will create difficulties for previously prosperous business sectors, other changes will definitely be a blessing. Why carpet-bomb green belts with houses when our inner cities are going to be awash with flats?

We ended our meeting by considering whether we need an extraordinary meeting in August to discuss the golf course land issue further. We are still, at the time of writing, unsure if it’s needed. If it is, it will be at **7.30pm on Wednesday 12th August**. If you would like to attend, then please follow the same instructions as those below for September’s next full Council meeting. If the August meeting isn’t needed, I will nevertheless turn up to the Zoom room in the cloud to greet you and answer any questions or concerns you may want to raise.

OUR NEXT MEETING – **IMPORTANT INFO**

The Parish Council meets every second Wednesday of most months. We very much welcome hearing from residents, there being a public “open session” near the start for anyone wanting to say something. Please call in and let us know anything concerning you about our village, or just listen. The date for the next full meeting is **Wednesday 9th September** at **7.30pm**.

To participate, please ring **0208 080 6592** and then use your phone keypad to enter the code **524 544 164** followed by the **#** key. Calls are national rate, I’m afraid. We cannot stretch to a service where we pay for your phone call via a toll free number.

Alternatively, and at no charge, you can use a computer or tablet by accessing the Internet and carefully entering **https://zoom.us/j/524544164**

This information is provided on the village website at biddenham.org.uk.

Peter Chase
Chairman