

Flamingo Land.....democracy strikes back against our rotten planning system

Description



From Herald, yesterday, under article about the public meeting on Monday organised by Save Loch

The last thing I was expecting when I was writing on Tuesday about the democratic deficits in our planning system ([see here](#)) was for West Dunbartonshire Council to vote unanimously to oppose the Flamingo Land development, but that is what they did at their Council meeting last night. Tories, SNP, Labour and Community Party Councillors all agreed the Council should object to the development. Congratulations to them all!

The omens were not good because the Council decided to exclude the public from the meeting before it started. A basic tenet of democratic decision making is that it should take place in public. I understand the crowd were able to make their presence and feelings known to Councillors by singing from outside! The Council has, however, unlike the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, started to record meetings ([see here](#)). I hope the meeting was recorded and people will be able to hear for themselves which Councillor said what in due course.

While some Councillors had previously supported the development, one of the important things about our elected Local Authorities is they provide a means to enable democratic deficits to be addressed. The ballot box concentrates minds and helps bring the views of our elected representatives into line with their electorates. Jonathan McColl, the local SNP Councillor and Leader of the Council, who had previously declared that while he was personally opposed to the development this was not the Council position, had come under a lot of fire locally ([see here](#)). He proposed the motion opposing the Planning Application. A welcome U-turn which reflected the view of his electorate, including many SNP members.

The question now is whether Jonathan McColl will use his position to force the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority, Scottish Enterprise and the Scottish Government to undertake a fundamental re-think about what development is appropriate at Balloch? We should not underestimate

how difficult this will be.

Could the LLTNPA change its position on Flamingo Land?

I had hoped that the fundamental failure by the Loch Lomond National Park Authority to involve the local community in developing plans for Balloch might have helped convince the Scottish Parliament to give local communities far greater powers over planning ([see here](#)). Unfortunately, as Ross Greer MSP has clearly explained (above), the Scottish Parliament last week rejected proposals which would have addressed this leaving the planning system still stacked in favour of developers. Most MSPs appear to be more out of touch with their electorates than Councillors, they've just not been found out.

If the LLTNPA as Planning Authority were, like West Dunbartonshire Council, now to admit they have got the whole process wrong they would almost inevitably face legal action from Flamingo Land. The LLTNPA as Planning Authority is therefore, I believe, likely to have to continue with processing the whole application as though nothing has changed.

That, however, should not prevent the LLTNPA from reviewing its position from other perspectives. A good start would be to consider in public whether it agrees that the small area of land it owns at the pierhead, which has been included in the Planning Application, should be part of it. Were it to withdraw this land and start engaging with the people of Balloch and wider interests about how it might best be used, that would make life very very difficult for both Flamingo Land and Scottish Enterprise.

The two elected Board Members for the southern part of Loch Lomond are in an ideal position to make this happen. At the last Board Meeting both Willie Nisbet and David Cowan declared an interest in the Planning Application so can take no further part in the planning process. They are free therefore, like West Dunbartonshire Councillors, to decide now to represent the views of their electorate instead of their own personal interests.

The Park's draft annual report for 2018/19 records that Mr Nisbet, who is vice convener of the Board but almost never, in my experience, speaks in meetings, earned £14,641 in fees last year. That is double the amount received by other Board Members who served the full year. Perhaps its time he started to earn his fees?

I would also hope that other Board Members start engaging with people locally and speaking out, even if this risks them being excluded from participating in the formal quasi judicial planning process.

Should the LLTNPA Board fail to act, that seems to me justification in itself for the Scottish Parliament to initiate a review of why the democratic elements of the National Park are failing to represent the interests of local people as intended.

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Author

nickkempe

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