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Council may go for ABC site

The Council may step in and buy the ABC cinema site if development continues to stall.

The derelict town centre buildings are due to be transformed into a shopping centre and hotel. But the project has been beset by delays, with the latest hold-up over footpaths due to be resolved in weeks.

But the Courier can reveal Tunbridge Wells Borough Council may take control of the site if progress is delayed.

The council's top planner, Trevor Gasson, told the **Town Forum** that demolition could be carried out as soon as the objection period to the re-routed footpaths had ended. In his response to questions by the forum via email, he added if *"progress is not evident on site"* during the early part of this year it *"may be appropriate for the council to consider whether it should assume greater control"*.

Mr Gasson, interim director of development and planning, said this could be via the Regeneration Company or by a compulsory purchase order.

Questions & Answers - Cinema Site and Royal Tunbridge Wells Conservation Area at Risk
<http://www.townforum.org.uk/community/qa160709cinema-rtwcaatrisk-reply171209trevorgasson.pdf>

Asked if the council would intervene, leader Cllr Roy Bullock said it could serve a compulsory purchase order if it had *"due cause and was acting in the best interests of the community"*. He said it could seek interest from *"other developer parties"* and then buy the site compulsorily *"on their behalf and at their expense"*. He added: *"Or, if the site were to be for sale on the open market, (we could) attempt to purchase it, fully identifying the risks associated with such an action. The method of financing such a purchase, should the opportunity arise and the council agrees to such a course of action, would be decided as part of that process."*

Asked if he would call a crisis meeting with Rydell, he said: *"The council and its partner John Laing are, as I speak, trying to identify the facts about the site and if it is necessary we will arrange a meeting either with the owners or their financial backers."*

He said the council would continue to *"exercise pressure"* on Rydell to complete the project, but he would not comment on rumours the site, owned by Cork developer Joe O'Donovan through Rydell Properties, would soon be for sale with a £12 million price tag.

Cllr Bullock said the council had been told by Rydell's agent it was not for sale and demolition would begin once the final consultation on the footpaths ended, which *"hopefully is imminent"*.

Rydell agent David Swann said there was *"no truth whatsoever"* in the sale rumours.

He said they were moving ahead with signing lettings. *"There's no problem at all."*

"We are proceeding in the normal way. We are waiting for footpaths issues to be resolved," he said.