

ACTION PLEDGE ON TOWN CENTRE DECAY

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Planning chiefs have revealed progress on Tunbridge Wells' empty town centre sites.

After seven years of the **ABC cinema** standing empty in the heart of the town, developers have asked for permission to start demolition. Architects working for landowner Ryedale Properties are also in discussion with borough planners about a possible fresh application.

Council director of planning and development Robert Cottrill said this week he hoped new proposals would "result in a better development". He told the Kent and Sussex Courier: "The council has been very proactive recently in contacting the owners and working together to get work to start. The fact a notice to demolish the buildings has been submitted is very encouraging and is a marked change from the past two years of inactivity."

The council appeared upbeat this week about other controversial prime sites in the town; from tomorrow (Saturday 10 March 2007) four key buildings will be unoccupied.

Tunbridge Wells MP Greg Clark said yesterday it was vital to attract top quality businesses to the town.

- **McDonald's** will shut the doors tomorrow on its 75-seater fast food restaurant at Five Ways - the town's central interchange - where it employed 21 staff.
- Just a stone's throw away, the imposing former Mount Pleasant Congregational Church which housed **Habitat**, has stood empty for more than three weeks since company bosses pulled out of the town.
- Further along the town's main artery is the boarded-up former **Morrison's** .

The Kent and Sussex Courier recently reported under the banner "*A Town For Tomorrow*", multi-million pound regeneration plans for the town by the borough council. Although there is concern among conservationists about the properties becoming grot spots, Mr Cottrill said the council was working hard to ensure outcomes which would benefit the town.

Talking of the former Morrison's premises which closed last autumn, he revealed planners were working closely with landlords Canada Life. He said: "Clearly it is vitally important that we secure a good use of that site as soon as possible and we will help the company in any way we can to achieve that."

He described the McDonald's building as a "prime site subject to the greatest footfall" and said it would generate a lot of interest from the private sector.

Owners of the former Habitat building were in negotiations with a number of prospective retail occupiers, he added.

Tunbridge Wells MP Greg Clark warned of a north-south divide in the town but was also upbeat about the regeneration plans.

He told the Courier: "It is very important that Tunbridge Wells is not split into two, with the Pantiles and High Street completely divorced from the Calverley Precinct and Royal Victoria Place. Mount Pleasant Road, which links the two areas, is therefore a vital thoroughfare and must be vibrant, attractive and boast high quality shops and restaurants. It is clearly a commercial decision as to who decides to lease the vacant shops. But in my meetings with the Council I have emphasised the need for TWBC to do all it can to help attract top quality businesses. From these meetings, I know that this is something the leader of the council takes very seriously, and is informing the proposed town centre regeneration strategy."