

14 November 2008 / 18 November 2008 – FOCUS

Richard Williams

” Grot Spot to disappear “ as regeneration gets go ahead

AT LAST! THE GO-AHEAD FOR CINEMA SITE DEVELOPMENT

The long-awaited regeneration of the derelict cinema site in Tunbridge Wells will go ahead, with demolition work starting in January. Permission for the £50m redevelopment, which will transform the grot-spot, was given this week.

The complex, which will wrap around the corner of Mount Pleasant Road and Church Road, will have 9,905sqm of retail space, 7,213 sqm of office space, a 137-bed hotel, and a 122-bay car park. On hearing they had been granted planning permission, Rydell Properties, which is behind the plans, said it hoped it would be ready to open by early 2011.

David Swan, of Lordland Europe, who represents Rydell, told the Kent and Sussex Courier: *"We are delighted with the outcome. It is good for everyone. Obviously we will need to get the demolition out of the way first. It is likely we will start this early in the new year. We have everything in place to start demolition but there are two shopkeepers still there and being so close to Christmas it would be unfair on them to start now. The demolition will take three to four months, then we will start the building work. That will take about 18 months."*

Mr Swan said it could be opened in stages and was hopeful some shops would be ready for Christmas 2010.

He added: *"It still hasn't been decided how many shops there will be. There is space and that can be sub-divided into any number of shops. That is how it has been designed; it is very flexible. There is demand in Tunbridge Wells for big shops and we are in detailed negotiations with two and also at advanced stage of negotiations with a company for the hotel."*

Councillors discussed the plans for the five-storey building at the western area planning committee on Wednesday [12 November 2008].

The development, which will go as far down Mount Pleasant Road as the Oxfam shop, will be made from sandstone and beige brick – in keeping with other surrounding buildings. Shop frontages would be set back from the road, creating a colonnade, and the entrance to the hotel will be half-way up the building on Mount Pleasant. A courtyard would be created inside, for use by the hotel and spa guests and restaurant customers. The main concern raised at the meeting was whether the car park was of sufficient size given the amount of people the building would attract.

Speaking in the council chamber resident Gerald Plastow said: *"The number of cars from workers, guests and shoppers will see a significant increase and the car park is just not large enough to cope with this. It will result in cars parking in residential streets."*

Planning consultant for the scheme Hannah Baker said: *"Within 1km of the site there are 1,320 car parking spaces, there are 11 bus stops on Mount Pleasant Road, it is 250 metres from the train station with a taxi rank outside. It is very well located in terms of transport."*

It was agreed at the meeting the access point to the Lonsdale Medical Centre, which would be directly next to the new car park, would not be affected.

Leader of the Council Cllr Roy Bullock was delighted the *"grot-spot would disappear"*. He said: *"It is a truly historic day for Royal Tunbridge Wells. Of course, these are difficult economic circumstances and we hope there will not be a delay to the commencement of demolition and new build on this site which has been derelict for far too long."*

Mr Swan said he was hopeful the economic climate would not effect the plans. He said: *"If I had a crystal ball I could see what the credit crunch will do. Two years is a long time in financial terms."*

Rydell, as part of the plans, will contribute almost £250,000 to cover highway matters.