

£60M-£75M OUTLAY COULD SAY GOODBYE TO GROT SPOT

MARY HARRIS

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A multi-million pounds "landmark" development could replace Tunbridge Wells' most infamous grot spot by 2010. **The run-down former ABC cinema site** in the heart of Tunbridge Wells will be transformed into a "£60million-£75million" centre likely to feature a hotel with around 100 rooms, shops, restaurants and offices. Talks are already under way with up to two anchor stores and three hotel chains.

This week the developer said work could begin on the site at the end of next year or even earlier to avoid wintry weather, with building taking approximately two years culminating in a "grand opening". It is hoped the large prestigious development with interesting frontages on Mount Pleasant and Church Road will pull together the northern and southern ends of the town - drawing people up from the Pantiles and enticing shoppers down Mount Pleasant.

An architect will be handpicked by the Royal Institute of British Architects, which this week in partnership with Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and the developer Cork-based Rydell Properties, unveiled a high profile design competition.

RIBA has invited five architectural practices to compete with their "concept designs" and the winner will be announced in early February. The practice will then work up detailed drawings for discussions ahead of a planning application, which is expected to be submitted to the Town Hall in the middle of next year, with demolition hoped to start by this time next year.

The council described the site yesterday (Thursday 13.12.2007) as "crucial to the town" and the development had to be "110 per cent right".

David Swann, of Lordland Europe, for the developer, told the Kent and Sussex Courier: "My role is to make this happen - there is so much interest in this site that we decided to collaborate with the council and go on the competitive route. The RIBA have chosen architects who will be very mindful of Tunbridge Wells itself, its style and design and its history and so on. We want to see a landmark building for Tunbridge Wells and the offices and shops will create more jobs. We are looking for a commercially successful development as well as a handsome piece of architecture."

Although planning permission was eventually won by GLN Properties through the Secretary of State in 2004, the company sold on the site which is flanked by Mount Pleasant Road and Church Road.

New owners Rydell Properties have since extended the site and bought Pizza Hut, Gamleys and the Gourmet Burger Kitchen and Clanricarde House. The site is approximately 0.54hectares and the borough council's design brief looks for a minimum of 7,000m² of retail space. But the developer revealed it was still "active in the possible acquisition of a greater area" to the rear.

Director of RIBA South East Helen Wren said the architects from the South East were chosen for their wide variety of experiences and styles and the concept designs would be "broad brush" not detailed designs.

Council leader Cllr Roy Bullock said the council was "very excited about this development " and said he hoped "the people of Tunbridge Wells will be too".

There will be no public consultation on the competition designs because they will be conceptual only but there will be opportunity for public comment as part of the normal planning process.

The Royal Tunbridge Wells Town Forum wrote to Cllr Bullock this week, saying it supported any initiative to remove the "grot spot" but it hoped existing permission to demolish the site was acted upon "as soon as practicable". It also said architects should listen "and want to listen" to those living nearby.

In 2004 the Secretary of State decided a cinema did not have to be provided on the site despite the council's wishes. The authority this week said it now felt the development "could offer so much more".

Reader comments

A 'flagship' development as proposed would bring a lot of economic benefits to the town, but will certainly generate a large amount of extra traffic. The town is already gridlocked during peak periods. The developers and council must ensure that this work is accompanied by some proper traffic management.

Hugh Bankier, Tunbridge Wells

Since Rydell Properties have extended the site, it would seem to be a golden opportunity to build a cinema on the extension since it will not be affected by the restrictive covenant imposed when the cinema was sold or the decision of the Secretary of State in 2004

Colin Simpson, Calverley Park, Tunbridge Wells