



TUNNEL DERAILS SALE OF CINEMA

Rail line under town 'grot spot' will cost additional millions to any developer

26/06/2010 By Jenna Pudelek – Jenna.Pudelek@kosmedia.co.uk

A railway tunnel running directly under the site of Tunbridge Wells' most notorious grot spot – the derelict cinema – could be set to derail plans for a quick sale.

The tunnel owned by Network Rail runs directly into the station at the bottom of Mount Pleasant Road. But it must be protected from any damage carried out above, meaning anyone who takes on the cinema site will have to fork out millions of pounds in additional costs. And that is fuelling concerns it may make the site an even more difficult proposition to any developer. Already, multi-millionaire Simon Hume-Kendall – who owns Bewl Water – who has said he is looking into buying both the cinema and the Pantiles, says the discovery of the tunnel is “terrible news” and a “real blow” to his plans.

Now on the open market with a price tag of around £8 million, the corner site has become a major eyesore since the ABC cinema shut 10 years ago and a previous £50m redevelopment plan folded in the credit crunch. But the new buyer will have more than commercial concerns as the country slowly pulls itself out of recession and into an ‘age of austerity’. The tunnel underneath the site will force the developer to pay out for any structural engineering work that is needed to ensure it is protected.

Roy Bullock, leader of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council, said: “The tunnel is there and cannot be avoided. It carries services to and from London and cannot be moved so an engineering solution needs to be proposed and agreed with Network Rail that will ensure any new development does not impact on the tunnel. That is the problem. “So the site will bring with it an additional cost to whoever the developer will be.” This cost, he said, would run into millions of pounds. The council itself has not ruled out buying the site and Cllr Bullock said “we are considering all options”.

With the extra costs relating to the tunnel, coupled with the economic downturn, there are fears the site could remain an eyesore for years to come. “We want the grot spot removed as quickly as possible,” Cllr Bullock added. “I would hope whoever buys it that their first action will be to demolish the buildings.”

The agents Savills describe the site opposite the town hall as “a prime mixed-use development opportunity available as a whole or in tow lots freehold with vacant possession”.

Mr Hume-Kendall is among the perspective buyers and has launched an audacious bid to buy both the cinema site and the Pantiles. He described finding out about the tunnel as a “real blow”. He said to carry out a survey to find out how much the work to protect the tunnel would be a “very expensive” job in its own right. “It would be a very, very brave man to take it on,” he said. Mr Hume-Kendall warned that more problems could beset the new owners of the site. He said: “There are catacombs below the tunnel. A network of tunnels that were used to take gentlemen to meet their lady friends in secret. We are waiting to see what happens with the price. I do not believe that all the technical and commercial problems make it sustainable at the current price. “My belief is the site will, in the short to medium-term, either have to stay as it is or be developed on the strip and nothing more.” He said there were “massive commercial complications” to consider and what use it could have because rent has fallen across the board. “It is a terrible piece of news about the tunnel,” he added. “It is already a site of such complexity”.