

Godstone Parish Council

(incorporating the Villages of Godstone, South Godstone and Blindley Heath)

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It really isn't easy to build a car park!

Over many years the parking in the centre of Godstone has been a major problem.

After a lot of discussions in 2015 the Parish council applied for permission to build a new car park on a piece of land that had been gifted to us by Hepworth Properties in 1992. This piece of land was considered ideal for a car park as it is close to Godstone Green and the local school. The cost of constructing a car park was estimated to be between £90,000-£120,000 and the Parish council had set aside money to cover this.

So far so good, but then the long-protracted encounters with the Planning authority Tandridge District Council (TDC) and the Highways authority Surrey County Council (SCC) started.

The first planning application submitted to TDC was rejected on the basis that it was in the green belt (this from a council whose local plan wants to remove parts of Godstone from the green belt to build houses all over the green belt in South Godstone). On appeal the decision was reversed, but was subject to certain planning conditions, i.e., ensuring that there were no Bats or Great crested newts on the site and that the area be checked for archaeological interest. So, to comply with the planning conditions expensive and extensive surveys were carried out in advance to enable the project to start and comply with the planning conditions stipulated. The archaeology requirements meant that even when the project started it had to be checked during work causing any disturbance to the ground and a qualified archaeologist had to be present during digging. Having satisfied the relevant authorities we then encountered a boundary issue with the adjoining landowner which needed to be resolved, a conclusion was reached and an agreement to put up a fence was reached, it also meant the plans prepared moved the original entrance used by the quarrying company 5 meters away from the agreed boundary.

That's it we naively thought and so we made a start. We cut down some trees, erected the new fence and started to clear the land, however that was not it.

Prior to work starting we carried out the required checks when you are planning to dig and confirmed that there were a couple of electric cables, telephone and fibre optic cables buried at the edge of the pavement and liaised with the relevant utility companies about the work before starting. Having done the necessary research the project was able to start and we carried out an initial excavation to confirm that the utilities were where we expected them to be. To our horror we found a total of 7 Cables including high and low voltage electric ones and far more than we were expecting (including some unknown to the electrical cable company). None of these utility cables which had been installed had been buried to the current statutory depth. Months of discussions with the appropriate utility companies then took place and we thought we had resolved the cable problems by using ducts and concrete slabs albeit with additional expenditure.

Again, we were being naïve. To cross the footpath and create a new bell mouth entrance we had to have a Section 278 agreement from Surrey Highways which we had worked hard to secure, including carrying out required road safety audits as part of this process. However, the Section 278 agreement and requirement of SCC as the Highways Authority, meant that the work could not proceed unless the cables were buried to the correct current depth requirements. An enquiry with UK Power Networks revealed that to bury the cables to the correct depth would require major cable jointing and major disruption to the local electric supply with potential costs of up to £100,000 being mentioned and a cost the councillors felt was totally beyond the finances of Godstone Parish Council.

As a final effort to build the car park we started to explore if the authorities would allow us to use the original lorry site entrance widened to the required width for Highway safety and as required in the planning consent. However, the information to date has in no way given councillors the confidence that the option would be viable or supported by the Highways authority. It would also be highly likely that a new planning application would be necessary along with the other necessary reports being reapplied for (that have been required as part of the process to date). The council feel that they have exhausted every reasonable avenue and are concerned that it is an unacceptable risk at this time to initiate a new planning application and continue with a project where there would still be considerable risk for further funds being spent, but no guarantee of a car park being built at the end of it .

It is also worth remembering that the Parish council has no full-time staff and all this work over 6/7 years has been carried out by the part time clerk Sarah and Jim Gardner the chairman of the parish council who have spent an incalculable number of days on this project trying to make it succeed.

At the August Parish council meeting it was finally decided with great regret that expensive practicalities and bureaucracy has beaten us and that for the time being we would stop any further work on this much needed car park.

We would like to thank our appointed contractor Phil Kavanagh of JPS Contractors for his unwavering support and efforts trying to keep the project moving, in spite of the additional complications caused by Covid-19.

We are sure that both residents and visitors to Godstone will be very unhappy about this decision, as are we the parish council. After more than 6 years and an approximate spend in excess of £30,000 the Parish council are devastated not to achieve a new car park for the village,.