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Subject: Response to West Lothian Local Development Plan
Date: 18 November 2015 14:11:54

Response to West Lothian Local Development Plan

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This submission regards Linlithgow and in particular Preston Farm Field, site Ref: H-LL 12.

This is in response to the consultation on the West Lothian Local Development Plan. I make this submission as an individual, representing my own views. This is the first time I have made a written representation on the Proposed Plan.

Summary of grounds for objection:

- Downgrading of protection for the Union Canal
- Under-appreciated flood risk
- Impact on Protected Species and Biodiversity
- Existing traffic and road-safety concerns exacerbated
- Inadequate process of re-designation of land in the proposed plan
- Loss of Prime Agricultural land
- Proximity and impact on the setting of the Grade A Listed Building, Preston House

“POLICY ENV 12 The Union Canal

Conservation, recreational and economic proposals associated with the Union Canal will be supported, especially at Linlithgow, Broxburn and Winchburgh, provided they:

- a. sustain and enhance the natural and built heritage of the canal in its setting;*
- b. allow opportunities for access and biodiversity promotion and improvement along the canal and the emerging CSGN green network as a whole; and*
- c. comply with other policies of the LDP and development briefs approved by the council.”*

1. Impacts on the Union Canal

The proposed plan shows an unmistakable downgrading of protection for the Union Canal.

Under the proposed plan, the canal’s setting will undergo marked deterioration. Its condition as a waterway may also be at risk. The lack of regard shown for the canal in the proposed plan is in stark contrast to how the canal is currently perceived by other bodies and the general public. Indeed, the Canal is enjoying a higher cultural profile, greater recreation use and more recognition as an asset than at any time since its opening in 1822.

Page 200 of the proposed plan on Site H-LL 12 does not even mention that the Canal is a Scheduled Monument. This marks the Planning Authority’s failure to acknowledge its full responsibilities towards the canal – along its full length. Scheduled monuments and their settings are protected by Scottish Planning Policy (SPP), Scottish Historic Environment Policy (SHEP) and PAN 2/2011. Note that a major requirement under this guidance is to protect ‘the integrity of the setting’. The proposal to permit house building on the slopes above the canal brushes aside the protections that are set out in the planning guidelines.

With reference to Policy Env 12, as part a. acknowledges, the canal’s setting is important. This part of the canal currently enjoys a rural setting and this is the first open countryside view going west out of Linlithgow. To build modern houses here would do nothing to sustain or enhance the built heritage, and, worse, would obliterate the natural heritage of the canal.

Any housebuilding on the slopes of Preston Field would mark a wholesale shift in the character of the landscape from rural to suburban. Furthermore, it would be an extremely conspicuous change in character because the slope is so steep that houses would bear down on the canal below. This effect would be the dominant feature for walkers and cyclists on the towpath, exaggerated further for boat passengers sitting low on the water.

The integrity of the setting at Preston Fields has been established for 200 years: accounts of views across the open fields of Preston to Cockleroy hill exist from 1823 (*A Companion for Canal Passengers Betwixt Edinburgh and Glasgow*, Edinburgh, 1823, page 17). No credible argument can be made that modern housing wouldn't affect the 'integrity of the setting' at Preston Fields.

Similarly, no comparisons can be made between the existing housing **below** the canal's north bank and a potential development on the slopes **above**. Topography must be taken into account (see also Flooding below). Development on higher slopes would be many times more conspicuous than below. Even a small number of houses on the slopes above would erase the rural character.

The predominantly rural aesthetic of Bridge No. 46 would be destroyed by building on the slopes above it. It is a Listed Building associated with the canal as a Scheduled Monument. Again, there is no mention of this specific feature on page 200 of the proposed plan.

Bridge No. 46 is one of the original fixed masonry bridges that were built over the canal by skilled stonemasons using the now-revered arched bridge building techniques of the time. The original Bridge No. 45 over Preston Road has been lost. To spoil a second bridge in the area indicates that this part of the canal is neither properly appreciated nor valued.

This is currently an attractive section of canal. Under the proposed plan, its appeal would be lost for ever.

The Linlithgow section of the Union Canal should be given increased protection - not downgraded. The canal, in its setting, is no less historically or touristically important and deserves the same level of protection as that given to the canal in the Winchburgh area.

2. Lack of knowledge about the Flood risk on this section of the canal

Page 200 of the proposed plan acknowledges that there is a flood risk in Linlithgow. It is a reasonable assumption that this flood risk could be increased by permitting house building on site H-LL 12.

The contractor who built this section of canal 200 years ago wrote about the collapse of the nearby bank on two occasions (Mudie, R (1841) *The Surveyor, Engineer, and Architect*, p. 67). In the modern era seepage, leakage and overtopping of canal banks, especially on steep slopes, on occasion still occur. If not detected in time these can lead to catastrophic collapse of canal banks. Such events have occurred in modern times,

especially after heavy rain (see for example the Great Western Canal at Halberton in Devon two years ago). The result can be disastrous, particularly if settlements lie below.

Building above this bank of the canal would remove a vital sink for rainwater. No matter what mitigation measures may be employed, or what guarantees are made by developers, a large reduction in the capacity of the land to absorb rainwater is the likely outcome. Likewise, were a severe storm or extreme rain to strike during housebuilding, risks exist that heavy plant or materials on the banks above could compromise the safety of the bank below; or for example dislodge large stones that could cause unintentional damming of the canal.

3. Protected Species and Biodiversity

This area is rich and wildlife but the habitat is, bit by bit, being eroded.

My garden on the [REDACTED] is directly above the bank of the canal and is about a minute's walk eastwards of Preston Field. From March to October bats occur almost nightly in the garden and on the path leading to Preston Field. In the summer a badger was seen above the canal bank (e.g. about 11pm). After foraging, the badger went through the fence onto the canal bank. Both are protected species and both will be endangered by development on Preston Field.

A great variety of wildlife is present in the area. Every common species of garden bird occurs on the canal bank, the path above the canal and around Preston Fields, as well as buzzards and sparrowhawk. The removal of trees will remove habitat these species **need** for their survival.

The habitat required by these species is gradually and irrevocably being reduced in this area. For example: 1. More than 20 trees were removed from the south bank of the canal this summer and have not been replaced in the making of a cycle path. 2. Shrubbery and trees were removed during a nearby house-extension nearby two years ago (during which a nest containing baby birds, species unknown, fell or was thrown onto the ground in contravention of wildlife legislation). This tree removal had been officially approved by the council in paperwork during the planning process.

The rezoning of Preston Fields will be a further, and a very substantial, blow to the protection of wildlife in the area.

4. Existing traffic problems and road safety threat to children exacerbated

From page 200 of the proposed plan it is not clear what amelioration measures might be put in place to offset the impact of over 100 new cars in the area. Indeed, it is impossible to conceive of any measures that might be taken. Linlithgow Primary School has appealed to parents not to bring cars to school where possible, to no avail. New cycle paths and road crossings will not make the problem of excess traffic disappear – it will only get considerably worse. Illegal and chaotic on-pavement parking abounds at peak school dropping-off and collecting times. The proposed plan offers no solution to this - nor to the very real road safety risk.

. Inadequate process in changing the long-standing environmental designation, Area of Great Landscape Value, to housing

35 objections were received by the council from local residents at the Main Issues Report stage. Those views were not adequately taken into account, as the continued pursuit of the rezoning suggests.

Furthermore, many residents who believe they are potentially affected by this change received no notification at this earlier stage and were unaware of it. Given the flood risk, people who live on the lower canal bank ought to have been informed, as should all residents of [REDACTED].

At the recent open event for the local development plan at Linlithgow's Burgh Halls it was suggested that views were less likely to be taken into account at this more advanced stage of the process. This, I believe, is a deficit in the process that residents can claim may work to the advantage of potential developers. If the views of a substantial proportion of residents are not genuinely and publicly taken on board at this more advanced stage, then it is not a 'consultation'; it is something of a different nature.

6. Loss of Prime Agricultural land

At the same event at Linlithgow Burgh Halls, it was stated that Prime Agricultural Land is valued in the proposed plan. House building on Preston Field would mean the loss of such quality land and it is difficult to see how it could be replaced.

7. Proximity and impact on the setting of the Grade A Listed Building, Preston House

The Grade-A listed Preston House was the seat of the Setons, the second most important barons in Scotland 150 years ago or more. For such a property to go from a rural setting to find itself in the midst of modern suburban sprawl would undoubtedly detract from it.

(submission ends)

Thérèse Stewart