**Presentation by Ide Parish Council Chair to**

**Weir Meadow open meetings, 22 and 26 Feb 2020**

**1. WELCOME**

Welcome to this open village meeting to share the Parish Council’s (PC) plans for the Weir Meadow project.

[housekeeping]

I’ll start by summarising the background to the project, the recent addition of the Northern Fields and Triangular Field, the proposed layout of the Meadow, and the possibilities for funding. I’ll then open the floor for comment and questions. We have some members of the parish council and of its working groups here to help me out if I get stuck.

[recording; signing attendance register; finish by 8.30]

The parish council is, we hope, about to sign an agreement with the Church Commissioners (CCs) for England giving us a three year option to buy Weir Meadow, the Northern Fields and Triangular Field. We also expect to submit an outline planning application in March for change of use and recreational development of Weir Meadow. Both of these are big actions, and have been several years in the making. Both have been approved in principle and in public by the parish council. The layout plan for the Meadow was published in November. Before going ahead with signing the agreement and submitting a planning application, we wanted to check back with the village one more time.

**2. BACKGROUND and why the Northern Fields?**

On 8 Sept 2016, three and a half years ago, we held a public meeting here, attended by 65 people, about development plans for Pynes Farm Yard, also owned by the CCs. The Neighbourhood Plan (NP) was in full swing, and several residents spoke of their keen desire for some public green open space in Ide for sport, recreation and relaxation. As a result, and long story short, the PC decided to try to acquire Weir Meadow for that purpose; and it was included in the NP. Exactly one year later, after protracted negotiations, the CCs agreed to sell us the 6 acre Meadow for £40,000 plus VAT.

In June 2017 the parish council set up the Weir Meadow Working Group to gather ideas for the recreational use, produce a draft layout for the NP; and fund raise to acquire the land, then develop the agreed facilities.

But there was an immediate snag. One of the vendor’s conditions – apart from their standard conditions of overage, underground mining rights and us having to pay the Commissioners’ professional fees – was that they insisted on maintaining right of access for agricultural vehicles and plant across the Meadow to the Northern Fields which they also own. Because combines in particular now come so big, the traditional access down College Lane from Longdown to the Northern Fields was unacceptable to the tenant.

We spent the next year trying to persuade the CC, with measurements, professional opinions and offers of earthworks, that access down College Lane could work. It is a Devon Lane, like hundreds of other such farm lanes all over the west country. But we failed. So we investigated the feasibility of building a bridge over Fordlands Brook from Triangular Field – which the CCs also own – to the north eastern corner of the Meadow. Whilst acceptable to the CCs, the estimates we obtained were prohibitively expensive, to build a bridge we did not really want, and still have combines driving over part of our land.

So last year the PC resolved to try to buy the two Northern Fields outright, to overcome the problem of access. The CCs agreed in principle. We had them valued by two independent valuers; and on 11 October 2019 the commissioners accepted our offer of £130,000 plus VAT for the 17.46 acres, making £170,000 for the whole parcel.

We subsequently agreed Heads of Terms for an option agreement in mid November 2019; and now await a draft three year Option to Purchase Agreement, which will allow us three years from the date of signing to raise the money to buy the land. Just to buy the land, please note. We can exercise that option at any point during the three years. It may be extendable if after three years we are still short.

This represents Phase I of the project – getting the land. Phase II will be developing it and kitting it out, and will require a fresh fund raising effort, targeting some different sources.

The **BIGGER PICTURE** is that owning these four fields will give the village permanent protection against unwelcome development at the margins of the current built environment. With Pynes Orchard, the other large village project to purchase land, this crescent of protected land will become an increasingly precious local benefit over time.

**3. LAYOUT**

You’ll see the proposed layout on the drawings, which form the basis of our application for outline planning permission. This, the fifth version, is the version currently approved by the Parish Council. It provides for football, cricket, a MUGA for netball, five a side and tennis, a play area, a BMX track, parking and a pavilion; and footpaths. Triangular Field has recently been included as part of Weir Meadow, and will be a wild public area ideal for dogs. This layout does not pin us down; and since November, there have been suggestions for amendments to move the cricket ground a bit north, and bring the pavilion south east to sit between the sporting facilities. We have put in all the activities we could and that have been requested, to allow us the freedom to do what we can when we can.

The key point is that without planning permission, we cannot move forward with fund raising; with it we can. The details of the layout will not be set in stone by the application. TDC know what our ambitions are. They understand this is a two phase process, and are open to modifications later. The key is getting the land – without which we can do nothing. And in turn, outline planning permission together with the option to purchase agreement, hold the key to getting the land.

**4. FUNDING OPTIONS**

There are three main sources for capital costs:

- Private donation

- Grant giving bodies, National Lottery, sporting organisations

- Borrowing from the PWLB (Public Works Loan Board), a government backed body specifically set up to lend at preferential rates to public organisations, in particular parish councils.

Ide PC’s suggestion is to allow one year of the three year option to raise money by donation and grants; and if necessary then to raise the rest by a loan in the following two years.

As an illustration, if we were to take a 50 year loan for £120,000 from the PWLB, and decided to pay it back by increasing our precept, and thus raising council tax - a common and recommended method – it would need in rough terms a £1 a month increase in council tax for the average band D household. This might be reduced by income generated from rent from sports clubs for the grounds, and rent from any tenant farmer on the Northern Fields. This is illustrative only.

**5. HOW TO USE THE NORTHERN FIELDS?**

The simplest option is to let them to a farmer. But there are other possibilities: the council would own enough land to qualify as a farmer itself and apply for the Stewardship scheme, or whatever will replace it under the new Agriculture Bill, which could give a better return than renting. We could plant trees under current woodland schemes. We could put in solar panels, screened from view by trees, particularly at the NW section which is out of line of site from virtually everywhere. The fields would make a great vineyard. We will certainly make a footpath through them to College Lane.

**6. THANKS**

Particular thanks to four people who have given their professional services pro bono:

Stuart Brooking – arboreal survey for the planning application

Julian Perrett – wild life and ecology survey for the planning application

Pete Skinner – agricultural advice and land valuation

David Howe – acting as the parish council’s solicitor on this project

Also thanks to the members of the working group – in particular Richard Cloke and Stuart Brooking for shouldering in turns the task of chairing that group.

Thanks also to those who have contributed so far to the start up, professional and planning costs required get us to the point where we can go out to raise serious funds: individual donors, the Ide Family Fun days, Ide Twinning, Ide Growers, Ide Aloud, Ide Community Shop, our County and District councillors Alan Connett and Andy Swain from community funds, and the Parish Council itself from its precept. The cricket and football clubs have also signalled their firm intentions to contribute. Money has been and is soon to be spent on our landscape architects David Wilson partnership, a topographical survey, planning fees, and legal and agents’ fees.

To be clear: the £170,000 is to buy the land, and we shall be raising that over three years as Phase I. It is securing the land that is our focus now.

Now open for discussion.

Nick Bradley Feb 2020