

Press Release

Embargo: Immediate



200-YEAR VISION OF BEDFORD & MILTON KEYNES WATERWAY HAS NEVER BEEN CLOSER

- *Developers must take account of the route.*
- *B&MK Waterway "one of the most well thought-out and beneficial projects": British Waterways.*
- *Linear ponds to be dug in Marston Vale early next year – newts permitting.*
- *Waterway and community boat at the heart of Bedford Waterspace Study.*

The vision of a waterway linking the River Great Ouse at Bedford with the Grand Union Canal at Milton Keynes first proposed on the very day 200 years ago was celebrated last Friday (4th November) at a conference and dinner when the Mayor of Bedford, Dave Hodgson, said: "I don't want there to be any more mayors before we have completion of the project."

Dignitaries, mayors, councillors, academics, officials and members gathered for the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust's second annual partnership conference and bicentenary dinner at The Barns Hotel, Bedford – the birthplace of Samuel Whitbread, who led a group of local businessmen to petition the then Mayor, Charles Short, to propose the original plan in 1811. The project was revived in the mid-1990s.

The Mayor, who is also chairman of the B&MK Waterway Consortium - local councils, agencies and community groups driving the project forward - told the conference that the line of the waterway is in all local plans and frameworks "and we have to make sure it happens."

Developers were very aware of the waterway route. "They have to consider the waterway in all their plans and we have to keep reminding them of its benefits and keep them on their toes. We are already seeing some added value such as the conversations we are having about a new and better route for the cycle route 51 from west of Kempston across the Marston Forest where people can see the route happening.

"I have never been more convinced that we are getting closer. We have something on the ground with the underpass beneath the A421 – which is obviously something Mayor Short wasn't able to do," said the Mayor.

Conversations were even taking place about how deep channels should be and the slope of waterway bank. "We are talking about actual things which are actually happening. I don't want it to take another 200 years, which would probably include another 100 mayors. I don't want there to be any more mayors before we have completion of this project."

However, this was taking place against the background of the Council's financial constraints. Mr Hodgson pointed to the Borough's £36.8m deficit and the pressures on all services, not least providing schools.

Graham Mabbutt, B&MK Waterway Trust chairman, added: "The Consortium, of which the Trust is a founder, is very ambitious in what we want to achieve. We want to try and get the waterway built and we need sponsorship and volunteers to get involved in the project as well as running our community boat. This is a call to action for a long term project, not a quick fix."

Marston Vale – Greater Crested Newts

Trust director, Drew Marchant, and Paul Vann, Economic Development at Bedford Borough Council, gave a progress overview of the project during which Mr Vann said: "The waterway is an absolutely central feature of the master plan for the Marston Vale Innovation Park."

Construction of part of the waterway would be in the form of a series of linear ponds through the Innovation Park. This had been delayed by a protracted European Protected Species (Great Crested Newts) licensing process with Natural England. It was hoped that this process would be successful so that the ponds could be dug early next year, said Mr Vann.

Waterspace Study and Community Boat

Last month (October) Bedford Borough Council and the Environment Agency launched their joint Bedford Waterspace Study focusing on the stretch of the Great Ouse from Bromham, through the town centre to Willington Lock. The B&MK waterway link is at the heart of that study. Mark Oakley, head of economic development at the Council, explained that the study looked at how best Bedford could make the most of the river – a real asset and the jewel in the town's crown. The next step was to turn the ideas in the study into actions which also made business sense. Some things could be started sooner rather than later. "The river and the B&MK waterway need each other," he said.

Outlining the Trust's aim to run a community trip boat on the Great Ouse to encourage community, business and educational involvement, Jane Wolfson, Trust vice-president, pointed out that the waterspace study had emerged from a trip along the Great Ouse for dignitaries and officials who had seen the potential for themselves of restoring and developing the river. "So this boat is about building awareness of the waterway and promoting it as well as making Bedford a better place to be," she said.



The business plan for the boat was in place and more than £40k had been raised, pledged or loaned. But there is a funding gap of £80k. Calling for greater business sponsorship, Jane said: "In the scale of the project this is a closeable funding gap."

There followed lengthy discussion about funding channels and avenues for grants.

British Waterways – Canal & River Trust

Next April, British Waterways is to merge with the Waterways Trust to create the Canal & River Trust. Richard Rutter, British Waterways' head of regeneration for the south of England, described the B&MK as "One of the most well thought-out and beneficial waterway projects I have seen."

The merger would herald a significant change in the way waterways are managed. British Waterways' emphasis had been to focus on the existing infrastructure of waterways. That would continue although the new organisation would be working in much greater partnership with all canal societies.

Guest speaker at the dinner, Roger Hanbury, chief executive of the Waterways Trust, praised the leadership and vision of the Trust. The project had credibility, strength and resilience. Recognition of this sense of purpose had been reflected in the three awards the Waterways Trust handed to the B&MK Trust earlier this year.

He was supportive of the project's "bite size" chunks approach to progress as circumstances allowed together with the Trust's partnership with local communities so that they participated in its development. It was a key component of the project.

Mr Hanbury welcomed the projected merger of his organisation with British Waterways, and this "new world" would challenge some assumptions. It was something of a "Narnia moment" where they were all "standing at the door looking at something exciting at the other side."

An outline of the B&MK's 200-year history was outlined by B&MK Waterway Trust director, David Fowler.

ENDS

Notes to editors



Picture caption:

Jane Wolfson, vice-president of the B&MK Waterway Trust, accepts a specially framed photograph of the Waterways Trust awards ceremony earlier this year when the B&MK was winner in two categories and runner-up in a third – the pinnacle of her term of office.

Making the presentation, Graham Mabbutt, said his predecessor, who had also been one of the founder trustees, had been a tireless worker and the best possible advocate for the waterway. "Jane has given visionary and inspiring leadership as Chair."

Among her achievements was the creation of a project office; obtaining a Big Lottery grant; obtaining planning permission for the Milton Keynes section of the waterway route and to get the full route protected in local plans; also the creation of the B&MK Waterway Consortium.

Roger Hanbury, chief executive of the Waterways Trust, also paid tribute to Jane's leadership which, in the awards, had received proper recognition for her work behind the project.

Jane said it had been privilege to have worked with colleagues in the Trust and hailed her successor, Graham Mabbutt, as "not just a steady hand on the tiller but a true captain".



Picture caption:

Graham Mabbutt, B&MK Waterway Trust Chairman flanked by the Mayors of Bedford and MK with their consorts - Mayoress Christine Hodgson and Mayor Dave Hodgson of Bedford and Cllr Alan Richards and Mayoress Christine Richards of Milton Keynes.

For further details contact

Name: Neil Hayes, External Communications Director, B&MK Waterway Trust

Phone: 01234 826216

Mobile: 07968 097359

Email: Nhayes@aol.com or media@b-mkwaterway.co.uk

Website: www.b-mkwaterway.co.uk