

Press Release

Embargo: Immediate

199 YEARS ON AND WATERWAY BECOMES A "BIG SOCIETY" PROJECT



- Dualling of the A421 and planned Marston Innovation Park are "bite size chunks" that will move project forward.
- Bedford Waterspace Strategy well underway.

One hundred and ninety-nine years to the day since the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway (B&MK) was first proposed, the Mayor of Bedford Borough, Dave Hodgson, outlined his vision of how the waterway is at the heart of plans to regenerate the locality.

He said that with the opening of the dualled A421 less than a month away it would create opportunities to attract businesses and raise public awareness along the waterway route through Marston Vale.

The proposed Marston Innovation Park would also bring the waterway a step closer. It would offer business headquarters alongside the improved road, just ten minutes from the M1, and the stretch of waterway through the Park would enhance the location as an attractive place to work, he said.

More than 100 delegates from local authorities, agencies, business, academia, sport and leisure and local communities were present at the first B&MK Partnership conference at the Marston Vale Forest Centre last Thursday (November 4), when the 199th anniversary of the meeting called by the then Mayor of Bedford, Charles Short, was celebrated, together with the founding of the B&MK Waterway Trust ten years ago by the late Brian Young, a Bedford resident.

"Brian wanted to celebrate waterway heritage by reinventing canals for the 21st century in this 'waterway for all'," said Jane Wolfson, chair of the Trust.

In a "call to action" to communities along the 26km "missing link" of waterway between the Grand Union Canal at Milton Keynes to the River Great Ouse at Bedford, Jane explained how the Trust's role in the future would be to work with the Partnership and the 300,000 people living along the route on the various projects which will ultimately link the waterway.

"This is a 'big society' project - whether or not you like the label - with the community actively working to shape the locality and holding our public bodies to account. And there will be new sources of funding available. The key is to seek the opportunities at each moment in time. The economic and political climate gives us a breathing space." she said.

Earlier Jane said that the main lesson learned was that while the B&MK could, in theory, have been a 10-year project, in practice – like most of the original canal schemes – it was likely to take 10 to 20 years to bring it to completion. "It took longer to secure the route in local plans, 8 years not 3, and it is taking longer to secure funding. The big money is still the big dilemma but every year we have made

progress. We have a project which is generating its own success, even if a slower timescale than we would have liked.” said Jane.

She highlighted the example of the Beeston Locks on the Shropshire Union canals, where oak trees were planted to shape the landscape of the future.

“That’s what we want to do – make our mark, make this a better place for the next generations. Ten years ago we were the acorn, today the project is a sturdy sapling which we need to nurture to the very end. It is about identity. It is about saying that this area will be better and more distinctive with the waterway at its heart. It is about the challenge of innovation and making it deliver for the generations to come. Involving young people and schools is key to this,” she said.

Mayor of Bedford Borough, Dave Hodgson

The Mayor, who is also chair of the eleven-strong consortium of local authorities and agencies which was set up earlier in the year to take the waterway forward, said he was committed to working with partners to help deliver the project.

He emphasised how progressing with “bite size chunks” would make the project come alive. “More chunks each year will make sure this is deliverable,” he said.

As an example of raising awareness he pointed to the re-routing of the National Cycle Route 51 so that it follows more closely the route of the waterway in Marston Vale. He also highlighted the progress which has already been made with the building of the underpass to span the waterway near Stewartby.

The last link in the waterway would be over or under Brogborough Hill “because it is the most expensive”, the Mayor added. “I suspect it will be entirely different from the schemes suggested so far. It will be entirely new, unique and I think this is really exciting.”

Funding

Mr Hodgson shared Jane Wolfson’s view that the economic downturn would not be long lasting, but that funding for the project would not be sourced from local authorities. “I think the three local authorities involved (Bedford Borough, Central Bedfordshire and Milton Keynes) will lose over £100 million per annum of funding over the next few years.”

This meant that plans for funding would need to be more creative and more determined in order to make the waterway happen.

In subsequent discussion, Richard Rutter, of British Waterways, was optimistic that new streams of funding would become available, such as the “Big Society Bank” which might draw on dormant bank and building society accounts.

Waterspace Strategy

Erin Vos, of the Environment Agency, outlined progress on the this strategy which is jointly funded by Bedford Borough and is focusing on the stretch of the Great Ouse through Bedford from Bromham Bridge to Willington Lock.

“We want to define the river as a destination, a place worth visiting- a tourist destination all the year round - and not just for boaters but for other river users as well, making it part of the vision of the B&MK,” she said.

The first phase of consultation is completed. Key findings will be distilled and linked to an economic study looking at the marketing demands of the river. A full report would be published, she said.

Other speakers:

Richard Wood (a B&MK director) who, together with Simon Collier (David Lock Associates), Drew Marchant (Renaissance Bedford) and Mark Seward (Halcrow) "walked the A-Z of the route" detailing some of the "bite size chunks" of the project.

James Clifton (British Waterways) outlined the background and thinking behind the organisation's imminent transformation from a quango to charitable status. This would provide BW with the security to plan more effectively in the longer term. It would also continue to offer full support for the B&MK.

ENDS

Notes to editors



Conference speakers (left to right):

Mayor Dave Hodgson	Bedford Mayor and Chair of the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Consortium
Jane Wolfson	Chair of the Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust



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Simon Collier	David Lock Associates
Mark Seward	Halcrow
Richard Wood	Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust
Erin Vos	Environment Agency
Drew Marchant	Renaissance Bedford
Jane Wolfson	Bedford & Milton Keynes Waterway Trust
James Clifton	British Waterways

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