

Precognition on behalf of The Scottish Green Party to the Public Local Inquiry into the Outline Planning Application for Golf Course and Resort Development on Land at Menie House, Balmedie Aberdeenshire

I am Shiona Baird Vice Convenor of the Scottish Green Party and former North East Regional MSP. I am representing the views of the Scottish Green Party to the Inquiry.

The Scottish Green Party is committed to forming a sustainable society. In defining sustainable, a much-abused word, we refer to the 1987 Bruntland definition of sustainable development as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

Sustainable development has crucially been seen as having three interconnected parts – economic, social and environmental. This has been described by a Nobel Peace Prize winner Wangari Maathi as a three-legged stool – take any one of the legs away and the stool collapses. To suggest that any one or two of these aspects takes precedence over the other, misunderstands the meaning of sustainable development. Both the Scottish Government and Aberdeenshire Council are committed to this ethical approach. This requires all of us to reduce CO2 emissions, protect the natural environment upon which we all ultimately depend and consume less resources.

Scotland as part of the UK has signed up to the Kyoto Agreement to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Aberdeenshire has not only taken part in a WWF project to measure the North East Global Footprint but also has signed up to Scotland’s Climate Change Declaration. The third point in the Declaration states that we (Aberdeenshire Council) commit to.....

“Ensure that greenhouse gas reduction and climate change adaptation measures are clearly incorporated into our new and existing strategies, plans and programmes, in line with sustainable development principles”

In applying these principles to this application it is evident that this proposal, as it stands, is unsustainable and contravenes many of the planning guidelines which Aberdeenshire Council has honourably laid down. Many of these are being addressed by others, so I will concentrate on those areas which conflict specifically with climate change issues.

Transport

Transport Scotland, in their written submission, state that their policy is aimed at:

“ensuring development is sustainably located
encouraging alternative means of travel with less environmental impact and
reducing reliance on the private car”

As others will state, this development does not fulfill any of these aims and with an estimated 5000 residents and visitors, Transport Scotland’s submission places great emphasis on improvement to the roads network to cope with the expected increase in traffic.

Point 12/4 does request details for the provision of new or extended bus services but we note that in the Applicant's Access Strategy, it refers to buses requiring transponders before accessing the residential areas of the proposal. One doubts their genuine commitment to public transport.

In Aberdeenshire's Global Footprint project a high priority is placed on sustainable transport. This is not evident here at all.

Furthermore it is with great concern that we note that in Point 12/19 that Phase 3 and 4 will not be allowed to progress "until after the opening of the new Aberdeen Western Peripheral Route is in place".

This raises two issues

- a) The Public Local Inquiry for the AWPR has not yet taken place so no presumption can be made on its progress
- b) If the AWPR does not proceed, serious doubt is then placed on the open housing element and the holiday accommodation, both of which are included to underpin the economic case for the whole proposal.

With ever rising world wide CO2 emissions and unprecedented oil price rises, the commitment to sustainable development by the Scottish Government will be severely compromised if the AWPR progresses. So doubt must be cast over the residential and holiday accommodation proposed, which in turn undermines the economic viability of the whole proposal. To permit Phase 1 and 2 to proceed with this degree of uncertainty is unacceptable. To permit the irreversible destruction of an environmentally unique area with the possibility of the developer walking away claiming the development is subsequently uneconomic is unacceptable. The precautionary principle must be observed. Future generations deserve no less.

It is with concern that we note the applicant states that one of the attractions to this site is the proximity of the airport. Increased aviation traffic is inevitable with all the attendant environmental problems of air and noise pollution, and CO2 emissions. Dyce and Stoneywood Community Council's concerns over the possibility of increased helicopter journeys again will also compromise any notion that this development complies with sustainable development criteria.

Golf course development.

Others will highlight the unique nature of this coastal zone and its importance for biodiversity. Suffice to say that any development on an SSSI must not be permitted. Aberdeen and the Shire should be justifiable proud of this outstanding area of scenic beauty and its importance as a unique habitat for flora and fauna. Placing a local designation – Site of Interest to Natural Science (SINS) complements the national designation. This is a very special area.

Replacing much of the dunes with greens and fairways imposes an artificial landscape, irreversibly damaging this special area. The applicant recognises the unique attraction of the area and his assertion that "we are going to make it spectacular but it is already spectacular and the more you do to that land the worse it is" (Business Bulletin August 2007) couldn't be more true. Building two golf courses will damage the land irreversibly. How does the applicant justify his statement in the

light of his present proposals and his unwillingness to negotiate a more acceptable solution?

As the consequences of climate change emerge, the result will be seen in increased extremes of weather. The predicted sea level rises will impact over the decades on the development but of more immediate concern are the increased storm surges encroaching on the development. These are mobile sand dunes so as wind intensity increases, major problems of sand blow over the area intensifies and more severe rain events with consequent run off can do immense damage to the surface area. This is all clearly visible in coastal farming land around Scotland. East coast haar is another natural weather phenomenon which will have an impact on the viability of the courses particularly as it occurs more commonly in the summer months. Whilst this might be a spectacular site on a clear calm sunny day, serious doubt must be cast on the appropriateness of these courses for substantial year round golfing use. Compromising this unique area by permitting this development as it stands, on speculative usage cannot be justified.

The concessions which have recently been made to the north do not reduce the overall harm to the area as the mobile dunes to the south of the area will be under more pressure. Importantly this move south compromises the access that many take for granted when visiting the Balmedie Country Park. Access to the high sand dome area just north of the Park will be severely restricted. The underlining ethos when the Access Bill was passed in the Scottish Parliament was to permit responsible access to Scotland's land. The land is part of our heritage and particularly where open access has been taken for granted for generations, it must be singularly unacceptable for this access to be now so restricted.

The desire of the applicant is to build a "links" course. The term "links" comes from the fact that the land used for golf originally was near the sea that was not good for farming. This land was a "link" between the farmland and the sea. This definition gives the applicant the opportunity to move off the SSSI area and the unique mobile sand dunes and develop a course adjacent to the fragile dune system, which would not compromise Scotland's unique heritage of which he is justifiably proud, nor future generations, the opportunity to experience this very special area.

Like several other objectors we are not entirely opposed to a golf development, though its size and scale must comply with sustainable development criteria.

Housing and ancillary developments

Others have addressed this very extensive element of the overall proposal. Suffice to say that this has to be refused until there has been full consideration under the new Structure Plan. To do anything else will severely compromise planners throughout Scotland by creating an unacceptable precedent. There are too many unanswered questions concerning amenities, water and sewerage infrastructure, which if outline permission is granted before resolution, could cast doubt over the whole project.

It is extremely disappointing that the architects for the Trump organisation have been so unwilling to adopt a style of development more appropriate to the immediate location. Like supermarket architects they have repeated the same style reminiscent of

other golf developments and not in the local vernacular. The suggestion which I made in good faith to the local Trump representative, that they might consider the style of the renown American architect Frank Lloyd Wright, did not receive a response. To build in harmony with the land would surely receive a more positive response than the enormous hotel complex proposed for the highest part of the dune system, a development which will dominate the landscape for miles in either direction.

From a relatively modest proposal initially, the present proposal is unprecedented in its size and implications for the surrounding area. The carbon footprint which it now presents, compromises the already unacceptable position of the North East in having a higher than average footprint for Scotland. Scotland is open for business but only if it is sustainable. We do need to accept that we all have to live on just this one planet.

The issue of sustainable development as a material consideration in planning must be implicit in any application. The Reporters in considering this application have a duty to ensure that sustainability is properly considered in its entirety.

In conclusion I am concerned at the way this project has progressed. Aberdeenshire Infrastructure Services Committee's decision cannot be faulted in planning terms. There are no acceptable factors of national significance which justifies departure from the development plans.

The involvement of key politicians, albeit in an indirect way, has given this application less chance of being treated as objectively as it requires. The size of the proposal merits a very carefully considered response without undue pressure to hasten final determination.

Despite the very minimal concessions made by the applicant, I urge the Reporters to reject this application as it stands.