

EWS ROLE IN SNOASIS

SUMMARY

For Blue Circle Industries plc

Marketing and Sale of 360 ac Quarry and Factory site to Onslow Suffolk Ltd.

For Onslow Suffolk Ltd.

Early planning advice

Sale of surplus land e.g. the 12 Chapel Lane cottages

Arranging short term lets to generate income e.g. Amey Mouchel

Acquisition of additional land e.g. 8 ac. MOD oil depot on Gipping Road

Introduction of Snoasis Snowdome concept promoters

Preliminary Letting discussions with key tenants and specialist operators

Supporting Public Exhibitions on Snoasis

Providing Presentations on Snoasis

Supporting the Call In Planning Inquiry

INTRODUCTION

EWS's initial involvement in the 360 acre Mason's Quarry and Cement Factory site was on behalf of Blue Circle Industries plc. BCI plc's intention was to bring the site forward for development itself and EWS assisted with this the process for 2 years, working alongside the BCI plc Development Manager and planning consultants, David Lock Associates. As part of this process, EWS held meetings with Suffolk CC and Mid Suffolk DC and an allocation of 300 dwellings in the 'Gt. Blakenham area' was achieved in the Suffolk Structure Plan.

In late 2001, BCI plc, was the subject of a hostile takeover approach from Lafarge, a large French company. The company needed to raise funds to contest this. EWS was instructed to achieve a sale of the entire Quarry and Works holding as quickly as possible. After a selective marketing campaign and interview process, Onslow Suffolk Ltd. was selected as purchaser, the sale being completed in March 2001.

Through the interview process, Onslow became aware of the role EWS had played in bringing the site forward to date, and, with Blue Circle's blessing, was instructed to continue this. That role was to assist in identifying an optimum strategy to realise the site/its components and effect sales/lettings at the appropriate time/s.

CORE TASKS

The core property tasks were to:

1. Bring forward the Works Site for residential development.
2. Explore options and opportunities for the Quarry Site.
3. Sell any land not needed for 1 and 2.
4. Acquire land likely to complement 1 and 2.
5. Arrange short term lets, where feasible, to generate income to help fund development strategy costs.

EWS arranged discussions and these core focus points with EERA, EEDA, Suffolk CC, Mid Suffolk DC and the Suffolk Development Agency. For the first two years or so, EWS handled all property aspects including planning and were the main contact point with the several statutory bodies.

KEY STRATEGIES

Against the above 4 criteria, a strategy evolved fairly quickly:

1. **The Works Site** – arrange short term let of part – marketing for residential / mixed use.
2. **Chapel Lane Houses Adjoining Works Site** – were surplus to requirements and could be sold.
3. **MOD Site North Of Works Site** – would be beneficially acquired to “round off” works site.
4. **Quarry** – needed in depth appraisal and further discussion with planning authority to identify a suitable use – arrange short term let of parts where feasible.

INITIAL TASKS

A formidable background difficulty was the absence of a planning policy to steer uses for the site’s several component parts – and the lengthy vacuum in this caused by the government’s intended changes to the Local Plan system and focus on regional government.

In the circumstances, EWS moved ahead with arranging short term lets of part of the Works Site to Amey Mouchel for A12 / A14 maintenance - and part of the Quarry area to Blue Star Skips for a Waste Transfer Station.

EWS then proceeded with marketing of the Chapel Lane houses and received a number of competitive bids for them. A sale at £0.75m. was negotiated to Grainger Trust.

EWS marketed the Works Site to selected national house builders. In view of the planning and use constraints, a conditional agreement was negotiated with Persimmon Homes. EWS have monitored this agreement on Onslow's behalf since.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Persimmon agreement, EWS entered into negotiations with the MOD for the purchase of their adjoining oil storage depot site. Terms were agreed and Onslow purchased this site, which Persimmon then promoted in conjunction with the conditional contract land.

THE QUARRY

The real challenge was the Quarry. From an early stage, there was a broad consensus that a form of leisure use would be appropriate. In order to develop this idea in more detail, MSDC appointed Dahlia Nathaniel Lichfield to identify options and suggest ideas for further consideration. DNL put forward a range of leisure uses as most appropriate.

At about this time, EWS received an enquiry from an agent seeking a suitable site for clients on which to establish a snowdome. The Quarry was clearly a potential for this. After initial consideration of information, a site visit was arranged. In principle, this was found to be suitable – a particular advantage being the long slope left by the mineral workings and the overall reduction in level that had taken place right across the site resulting from the working of clay. Access was good too. There was a skier on the Dahlia Nathaniel Lichfield Concept Plan – so this idea had planning orthodoxy too!

MSDC, after due consideration, were broadly supportive of this proposal. This encouraged further creative and entrepreneurial thought. With a 360 acre site there was potential for far more than an indoor ski slope.

Other sports uses – winter and otherwise - could be provided – and there was sufficient space for on site residential accommodation and service facilities.

THE EVOLUTION OF SNOASIS

The point had been reached where the challenge ahead needed more than the combined skills of Godfrey Spanner and David Lowe. Onslow instructed specialist architects and engineers to devise a workable scheme and then planning consultants following by a whole range of further specialists.

The professional team was now focussed on generating a well planned, multi-use destination simulated winter sports resort. This was a completely new concept in a worldwide context. Snow domes existed, skating rinks existed – and destination

resorts revolving around conventional sports existed (Center Parcs) but not in combination.

What was the prospect of such a development being successful in this location? What facilities should be included – and what size and arrangement was optimum?

The Onslow and Snoasis directors, together with appropriate professionals, embarked on fact finding missions across Europe visiting existing skiing and skating centres and destination resorts. EWS was involved, visiting the new Xanadu snowdome in Madrid and Center Parcs at Elveden Forest.

A Masterplan evolved which is still substantially the same today. This was costed and then a series of appraisals carried out by economic/business specialists – all of which indicated the proposal was viable.

EWS WIDER ROLE

EWS has had a role in the evolution of Snoasis beyond that which would normally be envisaged for a practice of Chartered Surveyors.

This arose primarily through David Lowe's keen interest and participation in winter sports – downhill skiing, cross country skiing and ice skating and in line skating.

EWS were actively involved in discussions/presentations to Sport East/England and with the several skiing bodies. EWS also developed contacts with the in line skating fraternity – both in relation to hockey facilities and recreational track round the site, to be combined with a cross country skiing circuit.

EWS opened up a strong link with the Fenland Iceskaters. This was particularly valuable, as Fenland ice skating is pretty much the only East Anglian competitive winter sport, racing on natural fen ice when the weather is suitable.

I think it is fair to say that the Fenlanders were initially sceptical about the proposals - particularly when being promoted by an “estate agent”! However once the agent had accomplished some circuits on the chairman's 200 m racing track without too much embarrassment – and photos had been pored over of David skate touring in Sweden, and Fenland skating, a warm friendship developed.

The Fenlanders were keen to become involved because of the paucity of outside skating opportunities due to warmer winters – indeed this sport was at risk of dying out because of this. Members of the club (NISA Fenland) were obliged to travel to Holland to use the indoor facilities there – as visited by the Snoasis team.

TOWARDS REALISING THE DREAM

It was clear that Onslow had an inspirational and viable concept. But how was this to be taken forward in the planning vacuum that I have already referred to?

MSDC felt that they could issue Supplementary Planning Guidance under the auspices of a policy in their Local Plan relating to redundant mineral workings. This suggestion was welcomed – after appropriate publicity of the Supplementary Planning Guidance policy, a planning application could be submitted which accorded with it, which would then hopefully be approved.

Onslow arranged a public exhibition in Claydon in Summer 2003. A series of presentations took place, which EWS had a role in both arranging and attending. Their local contacts made this a relatively straightforward task.

Unfortunately, GO EAST advised MSDC that they did not feel it was appropriate to issue Supplementary Planning Guidance under the Local Plan Mineral Workings policy in respect of Snoasis. They advised that the scale of the development was too large to ‘fit’.

This was quite a setback – EWS arranged a meeting with the GO EAST directors to discuss the situation. There was a real problem here. There was no relevant Local Plan Policy, the review of the Local Plan was years off because of central government proposals to change the system, while the now Regional Plan draft was some way off.

A planning application could/was likely to be refused because of non conformity with any Plan!

A consensus was reached that the best way forward was to submit a planning application with an RSS 14 Policy as a (hopefully) supportive backdrop. Thus a further round of meetings with EERA and EEDA (amongst others) which EWS arranged to canvas for a suitable policy. Meetings were arranged with all relevant MPS and again with councils and related agencies.

This effort was repaid by the formulation of a supportive RSS 14 policy – so a planning application could now be prepared with some prospect of success.

The submission of a planning application involved the compilation of a very significant amount of technical detail, and also the canvassing of wide ranging support. A further public exhibition was held (on site) – EWS arranged meetings with local schools, colleges and universities. A number of local organisations expressed support for Snoasis – and frequent requests were received for speakers. EWS devised a power point presentation for this purpose, in conjunction with Good Relations, and both Godfrey Spanner and David Lowe gave a number of presentations.

Planning applications were submitted - separately for Snoasis, the new railway station on the London/Norwich line and the residential development on the Works Site. Shortly afterwards, EWS facilitated (and attended) the Snoasis London launch at RICS HQ, Great George Street, Parliament Square, London SW1.

EWS also contributed copy to a number of property press articles and took journalists on accompanied tours of the site - and arranged and participated in radio and TV coverage.

The planning applications were heard by MSDC in Autumn 2006. They were approved by the Council – but the intended decision had to be referred to GO EAST as a departure from the “Development Plan” - the Local Plan - though in conformity with Regional Plan policy RSS14.

The planning process then threw another hurdle in front of Snoasis. GO EAST required that, due to the size of the proposed development and some other factors, the three planning applications should be reviewed at a public inquiry.

This took place in March – May 2007. EWS were much involved in arranging supporters to speak in favour of Snoasis – which included Essex University, Suffolk College, Suffolk Chamber, NISA Fenland and Suffolk Top Tourist Attractions.

Whilst activity has been reduced since the Public Inquiry, there have still been calls for presentations on Snoasis, which EWS has provided.

In October 2007, EWS and AWC Publicity were briefed by Onslow to mobilise on the assumption of a positive result from the Inquiry – now expected early May 2008.

EWS have been involved in the updating of both Snoasis and EWS websites and preparing for marketing of the accommodation at Snoasis on a number of fronts. There are approximately 30 shops to be let and a number of operational facilities where EWS will assist in identifying appropriate users and negotiating terms. It is also anticipated that EWS will manage the property element of Snoasis.

All in all, this has been a challenging but fascinating project to be involved in. It has frequently stretched the normal role a chartered surveyor!