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L201106 Response 19-00743-FPM



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SUBMITTED VIA EMAIL

Dear Mr Chettleburgh

APPLICATION FOR OUTLINE PLANNING PERMISSION FOR THE DEMOLITION OF EXISTING BUILDINGS ON SITE AND MIXED USE REDEVELOPMENT LAND AT THE SG1 DEVELOPMNET SITE, STEVENAGE TOWN CENTRE RANK GROUP PLC

Introduction

We write on behalf of our client, Rank Group Plc (**'Rank'**) in respect of the above planning application which has been recently considered by the Local Planning Authority (**'LPA'**) under Reference 19/00743/FPM (**'the Application'**).

As the Council will be aware, the Rank Group is the freehold owner and operator of the Mecca Bingo at Danestrete (**'the Subject Property'**) which forms part of the application site (**'the Site'**).

We understand that the Application was considered by the Council's planning committee on 20 October 2020 where it was afforded a resolution to 'grant' planning permission subject to the completion of a legal agreement and direction to the Secretary of State.

As you know, an objection was made during the formal consultation period by 'Mecca Bingo' which set out a clear objection to the development on behalf of the operational arm of the Rank Group. The consultation response 'objected' to the development on the following grounds:

- The existing operation provides an important local leisure and cultural facility to help meet local need. It is an important community asset;
- The existing operation contributes towards local economic productivity and creates employment and wages within the Town Centre;
- There is no intention for Mecca (as the freehold owner of the premises) to cease operating for the foreseeable future.

Whilst a resolution has been made by the Council's planning committee, we want to ensure that professional officers are fully aware of Rank's position in respect of the proposed development and its ongoing freehold interest in the Subject Property. That has a direct impact on the deliverability of the proposed development in the form as set out in the planning application submission.

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Commentary on the Proposed Development

The application was submitted in hybrid form with outline permission sought for demolition of all buildings and a masterplan for Plots A – J. Detailed planning permission was sought for the redevelopment of Plots A and K. The Subject Property forms part of Plot C.

Plot C is anticipated to form part of Phase 4 of the development. It is envisaged to include a mix of residential and commercial uses. The commercial uses will be at ground floor fronting onto the proposed Stevenage Boulevard. The proposed building for Plot C is a mix of 7 and 8 storeys in height.

The Planning Statement submitted as part of the application make reference to the loss of the leisure facility at the Subject Property. It states:

“Whilst the proposal would result in the loss of the Mecca Bingo on Plot C, the proposal will provide alternative leisure floorspace within the public services hub on Plot D, as well as the potential for other leisure uses within the commercial units across the scheme.”

We would stress that the Applicant has not made any attempt to formally engage with Rank to discuss the proposed development nor to explore Rank’s aspiration for the Subject Property or ongoing operation. The proposal is a unilateral one which does not seek to work collaboratively with existing stakeholders such that any future development can continue to effectively meet existing and new demand for leisure and other services.

The Council has sought external advice on the loss of the bingo hall from LRA Planning. That advice confirms explicitly that the bingo hall should be treated as a ‘leisure and cultural’ facility based on the adopted policies of the development plan¹.

There is no certainty brought about through the planning application submission that any of the replacement leisure floorspace would meet the same consumer or operator need as the current Mecca Bingo. The advice from LRA Planning highlights the primary demographics of visitors to bingo halls within the UK. So as not to materially impact any particular demographic group, any replacement floorspace would also need to serve the same demographic profile. Direct replacement provision of a ‘bingo hall’ as part of a planning condition would help to ensure there is no unacceptable impact on ‘leisure and cultural’ facilities for any particular demographic groups within the Borough.

We would highlight the following:

- Rank is the freehold owner of the Subject Property and has an ongoing operation. There is no intention to cease that operation from the Subject Property and as such there can be no certainty that the proposed development can be delivered in respect of Plot C without the use of compulsory purchase powers (which Rank would strongly resist at this stage).
- Rank has not been contacted or consulted in relation to the Application and has not been made aware of any potential use of compulsory purchase powers to enable delivery of the proposed development to which the Application relates.
- Rank considers that the true development potential of the Subject Property is significantly greater than that which is proposed as part of the current Application.

The proposed development of Plot C does not realise the full capacity of the Subject Property. The current Masterplan fails to optimise the delivery of new commercial floorspace and homes within what is a highly sustainable location.

¹ Policies SP9 and HC9.



Summary and Conclusion

We would be very grateful if you can fully consider the content of this correspondence prior to a formal decision being issued. Rank would welcome the opportunity to discuss matters further with the Council in respect of its aspirations and objectives for the Subject Property.

Please note that we have copied this correspondence to the Government Office dealing with the Direction for completeness.

If you have any queries regarding the above or require any further information in order to be able to issue the certificate, please do not hesitate to contact Tim Price at these offices.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in grey ink, appearing to read "Savills".

Savills (UK) Limited
Planning

cc. Gerry Carpenter - Planning Casework Unit