

University building plans spark fierce opposition

EXCLUSIVE

by Gerry Warren
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CAMPAIGNERS say they will fight 'tooth and nail' to thwart new plans by the University of Kent to develop the Chaucer Fields.

Their stance follows the revelation this week that university bosses are withdrawing the previous scheme and making two separate development proposals - one for new student accommodation next to Keynes College and one for a 300-bed conference centre and hotel on the disputed lower slopes.

Urgent need

They say there is urgent need for more student rooms and the proposed site for 750 new units, made up of townhouses and flats, albeit on land designated for business use, is not expected to face the opposition of residents campaigning to protect the lower fields.

But the plans for the conference centre and hotel will be fiercely fought, even though the proposed development is further away from residential areas and on only a third of the land which had previously been under threat.

Campaigners trying to protect the lower slopes lodged an application for the land to be designated as a village green.

On Tuesday a committee of county councillors meeting in Canterbury agreed the application should now be decided at a planning inquiry.

But Save Chaucer Fields chairman David Smith said: "We will continue to fight tooth and nail to stop the field from being built on."

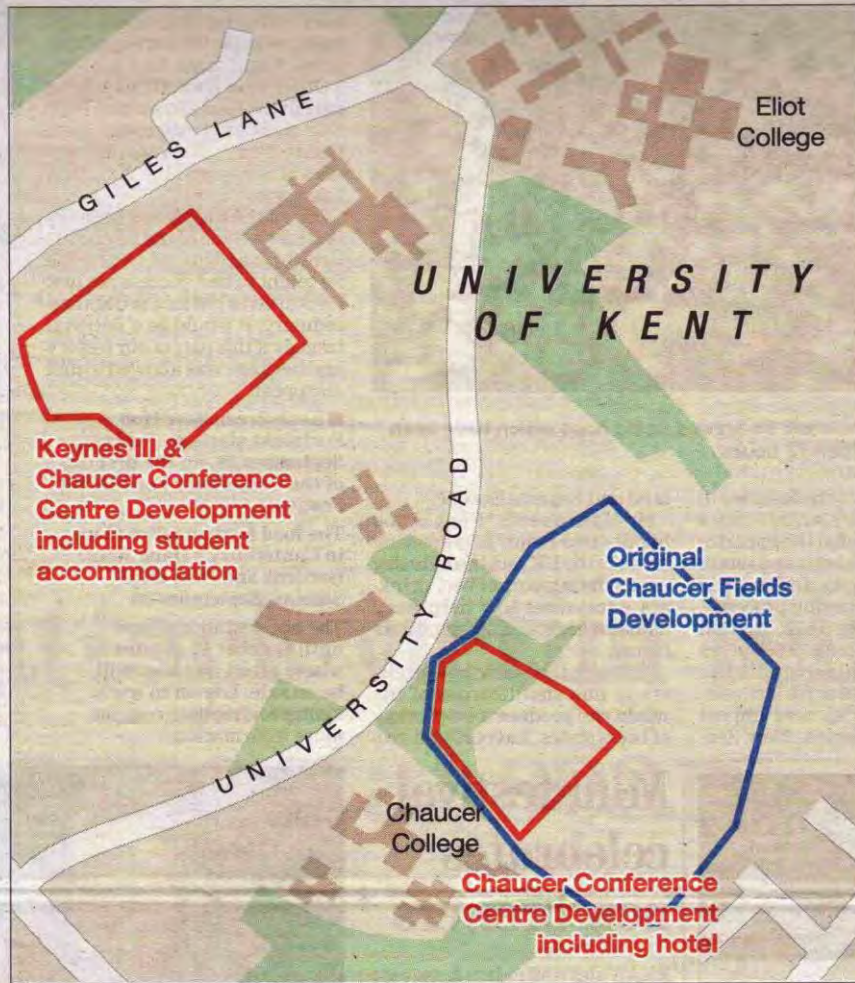
"The university has tried to compromise by placing the planned conference centre

'We will continue to fight tooth and nail to stop the field from being built on'

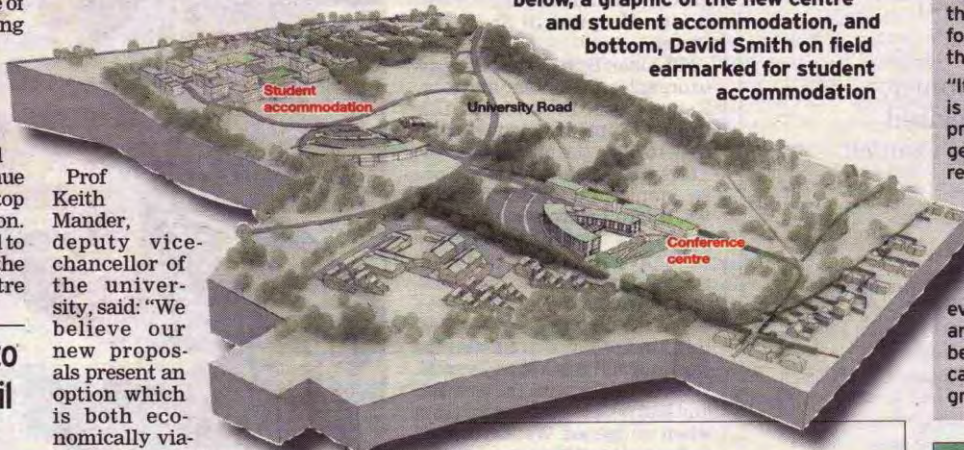
and hotel further away from homes.

"But we will continue to resist any form of development. If allowed, it would simply set a precedent for the years ahead and there would be pressure to build on the rest of the land in future."

"Councillors considering the village green application visited the field on a site meeting and seemed very impressed by the environment and setting."



ABOVE: A map of the proposed old and new sites, below, a graphic of the new centre and student accommodation, and bottom, David Smith on field earmarked for student accommodation



Prof Keith Mander, deputy vice-chancellor of the university, said: "We believe our new proposals present an option which is both economically viable for the university and responds to concerns of local residents."

He says the scheme for the conference centre is more acceptable because there is a greater "green buffer" between the planned building and residents.

The scheme has already been shown to city councillors and will be on public display and consultation at Keynes College on September 22 and the Darwin Conference Suite on September 24.

A new planning application is likely to be submitted in October, but the univer-



sity says it cannot say yet whether it will be one application covering both sites or two separate applications.

It also says it has taken

into account delays in progressing with the conference centre scheme caused by the village green planning inquiry.

Making the case for village green

Almost 100 residents attended the village green application hearing before a committee of county councillors at the Westgate Hall on Tuesday afternoon.

Council officers recommended that because of the two contradictory views of the history use of the Chaucer Fields, the issue should be decided at a planning inquiry and the committee agreed.

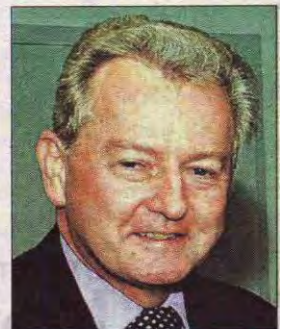
After the hearing, Save Chaucer Fields campaigner Ursula Harris said: "As part of their case, the university said people only use the paths not the land, and they had put signs up in 1989, which they maintained and replaced before 2011, saying use of the land was by permission."

"We dispute this. There is no recollection of permission or licence signs on the site for the 20-year period before the blue ones were erected in March 2011. Previous signs must never have been replaced or maintained."

"Until there is a result from the inquiry, the land cannot be developed, but the University can apply for planning permission in the meantime."

"If village green status is awarded, the land is protected for future generations to use for recreation, and to protect the environment."

"We expect the hearing will not be until March 2013 at the earliest. We thank everyone for their help and support and still believe we have a strong case for the village green."



Prof Keith Mander, deputy vice-chancellor of the University of Kent