

Esso Pipeline Project Update - 27/2/2020

Introduction

A hearing to examine the submissions made by Esso in relation to the building of a new pipeline from the Fawley Refinery on Southampton Water, to Heathrow Airport was held at The Village Hotel, Farnborough on Monday through to Wednesday this week (24th to 26th February).

The first day was concerned with the compulsory purchase of land required to build the pipeline, the second day covered the Development Consent Order (DCO) – essentially the legal document that when approved by the Secretary of State covers all aspects of the works and the final day covered the environmental aspects of the project. The hearing was recorded and the aural recording constitutes the official record of the proceedings. The recordings are available on the Planning Inspectorate website at:

<https://infrastructure.planninginspectorate.gov.uk/projects/south-east/southampton-to-london-pipeline-project/?ipcsection=docs>

Surrey Heath officers from planning and legal departments and Councillor Cliff Betton, Lib Dem, Frimley Green attended the inquiry.

The purpose of the enquiry was for the four Planning Inspectors to ask questions of the applicant (Esso) and any others who had submitted written evidence to the planning authority. This was hearing was examining documents that had been submitted to the 5th deadline for comments, showing that this process has been in progress for some time! It is also the final opportunity for anyone to submit information to the inspectorate. Following this weeks hearing, the final deadline for submission is 2 weeks away, after which the inspectorate will base their report and recommendation to the Secretary of State on the documents that have been submitted.

Procedure

There are 4 planning inspectors, all specialists in planning involved in the process, each has a different specialization and only they are involved in the production of the final report and recommendations. As mentioned, the hearing is based on the written submissions, both from Esso and the various authorities – South Downs National Park, Natural England, Hampshire County Council, Surrey County Council, Hampshire Highways Authority, Surrey Highways Authority, Rushmore Borough Council and Surrey Heath Borough Council. These organisations had legal representatives and experts as well as the in-house officers, with cooperation for instance between Surrey Heath and Rushmore Councils sharing the services of a barrister. There were also representatives from Queen Elizabeth Park, Farnborough and Herons Park Residents Association.

Each inspector covered their own area of expertise and asked detailed questions of the Esso team, who had a number of experts including in planning and a QC as well as engineers and environmental staff. The responses were then put to the other interested parties who were asked for their view on the response given by Esso. There were also opportunities at every stage for members sitting in the “public” seating to ask questions or to make points. The

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hearing was as open as it could have been, and the openness but also the depth of the detail that was covered was impressive there was no evidence of bias in the process. The inspectors were also quite tough, at one stage telling Esso that they should “get their act together”. The final document will represent the final planning approval and conditions for the project, which is why the inspectorate and the authorities are concerned with details and why Esso are trying to keep the DCO as flexible as possible

It was made clear that any deviations from the final DCO will require approval from the local planning authority concerned, not the Planning Inspectorate.

In relation to the issues that affect Frimley Green and in particular St Catherine’s Road, the SANGS site and Balmoral Drive, Cllr Betton was able to ask direct questions and some clarity was obtained:-

- St Catherine’s Road is the only site in the entire length of the pipeline that is being closed for the progress of the works
- Closure will be to traffic only for a period of from 12 to 24 weeks.
- A pedestrian walkway will be maintained at all times to allow access for pupils to Tomlinscote School.
- Balmoral Drive will no longer be closed and the plan to divert traffic over Buckingham Way has been dropped.
- Traffic management will be put in place as the works move along Balmoral Drive and the existing exits from Paddock Hill will remain in place over Buckingham Way and Dunbar/Worsley Road will be unaffected.
- Contrary to what has been stated elsewhere, the location of the “Construction Compound” preferred by Esso is on Frith Hill; North of Blackdown Road and East of Deepcut Bridge Road on the land where Canadian troops were located in 1944.
- This location already has ample hardstanding and far superior road access than St Catherine’s Road, both of which Esso were hoping to utilise.
- The reason that the MOD have refused access is due to Netflix who have been filming in the wooded area and the MOD see Netflix as a regular potential source of income!
- Location of the Construction Compound in the St Catherine’s Road SANG will be for a period of up to 32 weeks only
- Once the pipeline works in St Catherine’s Road have been completed, the road will be reopened to traffic.

Conclusion

The pipeline will be built, the preferred route is unlikely to change from that already published but detail such as exact location and whether sections of pipeline will be buried underground, in open trenches or above ground are still not determined for some areas, with only 2 weeks to go before the plan is to be considered.

Based on the fact that so much is still not determined, it is likely that local planning authorities may be involved at a later stage as work progresses, but until the final report is published we will not know for certain.