

Last-ditch plea to stop council's sale of farmland

by Samantha Adler

PROTESTERS fighting to stop the sale of a farm in the Surrey Hills have made a last plea to Guildford Borough Council (GBC) to reconsider their decision.

A spokesman for the Save Tyting Farm campaign, John Rigg, is urging the local authority "to make the right decision and not a decision based on short-term monetary considerations".

Campaigners believe that GBC's plan to sell the farm in six lots at "development value rather than agricultural value", means it is doing everything possible to invite development and preclude agriculture.

"Once sold off in lots of possibly six different owners, the current landscape will be lost to farming and future generations as farming ends and commercial pressures take over," Mr Rigg said.

"Neither home owners nor developers can be relied on to have the knowledge or will to protect the agricultural nature of the landscape.

"The more the land deteriorates, the more alternative uses become acceptable to the planners."

On Monday "best and final offers" for the 115-acre site in Halfpenny Lane in St Martha's



Tyting Farm on the outskirts of Guildford.

parish were submitted to Clarke Gammon Wellers estate agents.

All bids are set to be considered at a meeting next week by a joint panel of GBC members and officers, although a date to announce a final decision has not been set.

Cllr Tony Rooth, GBC's lead member for finance and resources, said bids would be evaluated under strict criteria including the proposed use of the land, the sustainability of such use and the level of the offers.

However, Mr Rigg said if the Guildford community is behind protecting Tyting Farm and GBC chooses to proceed then this is a reflection on how the council values the views of rate payers.

He said that public consultation carried out by GBC for the proposed sale of Tyting Farm had been abysmal.

"To see it sold off to effective urban buyers is wrong

and short-sighted and should be subject of much more debate," he said.

Mr Rigg said that if farm buildings were converted to offices or for residential use, and the remaining land sold to house owners, who wish to extend their properties, this could lead to a tragic urbanisation.

However, David Williams, GBC's chief executive, said if the council decides to sell all or part of the holding, it will only do so having put in the most stringent safeguards to protect the landscape's character of the area.

"I should like to refute the suggestion the council is about to embark on an act of 'vandalism' in order to raise money by selling Tyting Farm for development," he explained.

"The council is scrupulous in separating its planning and land owning functions.

"There is no question of any

planning application being dealt with other than in strict accordance with national and local planning policy, regardless of whether council stands to gain financially from its approval."

Campaigners are working on the possibility of setting up the Guildford Landscape Trust, which would bid for the land while excluding the farm buildings.

This agreement would allow GBC to receive a substantial sum for the buildings but the community would own the land and let it to a farmer.

However, Mr Rigg said that although the campaign had "financial pledges from a number of people", a bid was not put forward in the time available.

"It is difficult to persuade people in the light of the council's actions," Mr Rigg added.

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