

## **Meeting to Discuss Public Opinion and Support for Options relating to Sale of The Ram**

Thursday 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2019 in the Village Hall at 7.45pm

Present: Approximately 65, including representatives from the group responsible for the successful Asset of Community Value application (ACV), County Councillor Steve Robinson, Mayor of Nailsworth Cllr. Jonathan Duckworth, representatives from the Parish Council.

The meeting was chaired by Shona Ward a member of the group who registered the pub as a Community Asset; others from the group shared information during the meeting. Since advertising the meeting, they reported having had a positive response.

It was mentioned that photos would be taken during the course of the meeting; anyone not wanting their photograph to be used should make that clear.

### **1 Brief History of The Ram and the current situation – Dave Cliff**

The Ram was built as a Cotswold pub in the seventeenth century. Forty years ago it was a small pub owned by Whitbread. In the 1980s it was run by Dave Hicks who was responsible for the building as it now stands. He purchased extra land for the car park in order to increase the viability of the pub. It was then run by Stuart and his wife before the McAseys purchased the pub about 25 years ago. It was initially well run and was leased to Tim Mullen until about five years ago when it was taken back over by the owners. Since then it has been in decline, no longer serving food, with a reduced range of beers on offer. The number of local groups who regularly hold meetings in the pub has dwindled in the past three to four years.

#### Attributes

The Ram has a fantastic view, has lots of space inside and out, and a fantastic car park. With these attributes, it should be a flourishing, dynamic pub.

#### Application for Asset of Community Value (ACV)

Residents questioned why the pub was being run down and questioned why, with the kitchen closed, wasn't there investment to reopen it?

The owners sought planning permission initially for three dwellings on the site, reduced to two. The lower part of the car park was granted permission for two houses and associated parking in February 2019.

The group could have listed the pub and existing car park in an ACV, but excluded the lower section of the car park on the advice of Stroud District Council (SDC). A planning application was already ongoing and therefore the group were advised that an ACV application would fail.

The ACV gives five years of protection.

Under an ACV, the owner must inform SDC of the intention to sell, at which point SDC will then inform the ACV applicants who must express an interest within a certain amount of time. This expression of interest has been logged with SDC.

The community then have six months to make a bid. The ACV therefore provides some protection, although in a worst case scenario, an offer from the community could be rejected and the owner could apply for a 'Change of Use' to a residential building on the grounds that as a pub it is not

viable, although the pub has clearly only been run down in the past few years; history shows it thriving.

The group are not sure of the owner's plans and have sent a registered letter asking for a formal meeting to ascertain how much the owner is looking to receive, whether the whole plot is included in the sale, whether the owner is advertising the sale etc. That letter has been received, but there has not yet been a response from the McAseys.

The group have been made aware of others who would be interested in purchasing the pub, but they have not seen it advertised.

Should an application be made for 'Change of Use', the community will need evidence to show the pub is viable by putting forward an indefensible argument to save The Ram as a going concern. A strong objection will need to be made, demonstrating community support.

### Potential Cost

In such a sale, a valuation would be made from inspecting the books and the premises. Research into other similar pubs show they have sold in the region of £300-350,000.

Planning permission for two houses is however a complicating factor.

The ACV does not cover the land for housing.

## **2. How we Might Go Forward – Options – Jean Lawton**

Two options need to be explored:

- a. The community buys the pub
- b. A sympathetic commercial buyer is found.

In order to do this a working group will need to be established to plan for both options and assess the viability at each stage.

The protected period for the ACV lasts until the 18<sup>th</sup> March, 2020 before which time a community bid would need to be made.

### What is needed?

- Volunteers are needed to form a working group who have the skills and energy required. A chair, treasurer and secretary will be required as well as those with skills and contacts in this field. It may be that people are aware of other communities that Woodchester could learn from.
- Initial pledges for purchase.
- Help with initial costs e.g. a survey of the pub, professional advice and marketing. Recent discussions with a surveyor led to a recommendation to become a member of the Plunkett Foundation who offer advice and expertise on community purchase. Membership costs £240 per year.
- Complete forms distributed at the meeting.

Whichever route is found to be more viable, active community support will need to be demonstrated.

Jean concluded with the Latin phrase, 'Capto arietem cornibus' – Let's take 'The Ram' by the horns!

Those present were then given a few minutes to talk amongst themselves and consider what had been said. They were then asked for feedback, suggestions or questions.

Responses/Questions relating to:

### **The Options**

- A resident was not clear why the owner would want to run the pub down. He mentioned that the owners of the Post Office and Shop in South Woodchester had tried to sell it without a 'Change of Use' and were unable to. With a potential price of £350,000 he said that each family at the meeting would need to contribute around £6,000 each, which he felt was not achievable and therefore his preferred route would be a sympathetic purchaser.
- A resident talked about the possibility of a limited company raising £1 million through share capital. (These details have been clarified following the meeting). If the pub and lower car park were purchased for between £750-850,000, a repair and maintenance fund of between £150-250,000 would be available. To lease the pub out either as a fully repaired and insured lease for around £15-18,000 or a lease where we have to repair and insure (around £25,000) and if the lower car park were rented to residents for between £5-8,000 (or rented to the pub if it became very successful), this would then see a realistic return of 2% or above.
- A resident suggested a working party might consider presenting different purchase options.

### **The Purpose**

- A resident thought it important to consider what the community wants the pub for. Do we want a community pub or do we want higher house prices through having the pub as an asset in the village?

### **The ACV**

- Before the application for an ACV, Mr. McAsey said he would give the Parish Council twelve months to purchase the pub. The community, wanting more certainty than a promise applied for an ACV.
- A resident asked how the group know The Ram is for sale – SDC notified the AVC group and there was a small entry in the Stroud News and Journal.
- A resident described the situation as 'slippery'. If the McAseys decide they do not want to sell to the community, there is nothing that can be done to progress a community purchase.

### **The Price**

- Representatives from the Parish Council met with Phil McAsey on the 4<sup>th</sup> October (not the 14<sup>th</sup> as mentioned in the meeting) as a representative of his parents who own the pub. Mr. McAsey clarified that the whole plot was for sale and indicated his parents wanted £850,000. He said he wanted the community to buy the pub and in such an instance, offered to continue running the pub for the community. The £850,000 figure he said had come from his family's knowledge of buying and selling pubs.
- One resident present was of the understanding that the McAseys were now asking £1.2 million for the pub and land for development.
- It was the opinion of a surveyor that as a going concern and a pub which was 'up together', it could be worth £600,000. The Crown at Minchinhampton was advertised at £750,000, was valued at £490,000 and sold for £510,000.

- A resident spoke about the value of any pub being related to its viability and asked whether the group were able to look at the books for recent years. The response was given that the value will depend on what a bank is prepared to loan. The planning permission for houses could be a potential obstacle as any buyer will want adequate car parking space. The books will need to be examined and the property inspected.

### **Viability**

- If viable as a working pub, it will need the support of the local community and will require a functioning kitchen in order for food to be served.
- Residents were of the opinion that it will not survive with just local trade from the village, but as a 'destination pub', which it has shown itself to be in the past.
- A resident was of the opinion that at a cost of £850,000 it will need to be very successful to give a return on funding, particularly with a restricted car park.
- It is unfortunate that the figure for the housing development distorts the cost. It was suggested the McAseys might be persuaded to sell the pub and car park separately from the land for development. This additional cost without developing the land makes the pub potentially unviable. If the land is developed and the houses sold, the loss of some of the car park could also affect the viability of the pub.
- It is illogical that the justification for development was the need for funds to develop the pub. The reduction in the space for car parking will in itself limit the viability of the pub.
- A resident confirmed that a record of the finances for the time during which Tim Mullen ran the pub were available. Those records have been kept.
- A resident questioned the viability of running a pub with the building plot included and suggested the McAseys be asked whether they could consider a separate sale.
- A concern was raised that should the houses be built, there would be implications for the pub outlook.
- A resident made the point that when the pub was popular, the car park was full and people were forced to park in adjacent streets. Therefore in order to be viable in the future, it was suggested that ample space was required in the car park.

### **Planning Permission**

- Conditions on the planning application state that 'Prior to the residential dwellings hereby permitted being constructed, the pub car park, vehicular and pedestrian access within the car park shall be laid out and constructed in accordance with the submitted plan, with the area of driveway within at least 5.0m of the carriageway edge of the public road surfaced in bound material, and shall be maintained as such thereafter'. Therefore the pub and development are inextricably tied up and a problem arises from them being interlinked. It was suggested conditions were put in place to ensure Mr. McAsey didn't 'cut and run' and therefore, after purchase, a sympathetic planning officer might agree to a variation of these conditions.

### **Other considerations/Useful Information**

- A representative from SWALT, who own the adjacent allotment spoke about their experience of raising funds and the consideration they gave to ensure community input by limiting the number of shares each investor could own. If someone is willing to make a substantial contribution in the case of The Ram, the question might be asked about whether individual investments are limited to protect the community input.

- A resident questioned a developer's decision to build on the land with a spring, possible subsidence and the belief that a gas main passes through the land.
- It might be worth considering the history of the Beauchamp Arms, Dymock - A community-run pub.
- Bob Jefferies, a CAMRA member had written a book on several local pubs, at least one of which was an ACV.
- The Plunkett Foundation was featured on a Radio 4 programme on the 14<sup>th</sup> November.

Shona Ward rounded off a positive meeting and asked that those present fill in the distributed form, even if they just wanted to be kept in the loop.

Residents were reminded that Woodchester is a village with a recent history of the community coming together to protect assets, namely SWALT land and more recently, the Village Shop. With energy and determination they can work together again to save this village pub.

Capto arietem cornibus!