

For the trees...

By Alison Cameron
editor@northern-times.co.uk

PLANS to transform magnificent Carbisdale Castle into a luxury, five-star hotel, were severely tested at a packed public meeting on Wednesday night, as a small group of angry Culrain residents indicated they might scupper the project.

The development depends on the owners being able to buy around 57 acres of adjacent Forestry Commission woodland, to create gardens and landscaping round the hotel as added amenity for high-paying guests to enjoy.

As outlined at the meeting by Michael Laird Architects, the firm commissioned to take the project

forward, the developer - Carbisdale Castle Ltd - was prepared to spend £1.2 million to purchase the building from current owners, the Scottish Youth Hostel Association, and a further £6.5 million to convert the building into a 21st century, state-of-the-art hotel. Initially, there would be 21 suites created.

Ninety-plus jobs are promised in an area where around 38 posts have been lost in the past two years following the closure of Carbisdale by the SYHA and the loss of the Falls of Shin Restaurant and Visitor Centre through fire.

The managing director of the proposed complex, Kevin Keenan, explained that jobs would be varied and that spin-offs could include

fishing, riding and golf, utilising local outlets.

A planned Michelin-starred restaurant would be open to non-residents.

It was also proposed that around 25 acres of woodland immediately surrounding the castle would be purchased from the Forestry Commission to landscape into contemporary gardens with paths and water features, etc, similar to Dunrobin Castle. This would be accessible to the public although there would be deer fencing around it and it was emphasised that the gardens would be for the guests to enjoy.

Mr Keenan said: "We believe the completed gardens will have international acclaim. The development team are fully aware of the access issues involving the Forestry Commission land."

A further 32 acres of forest to the rear of the castle would also be developed as native woodland.

But a contingent from the Culrain area, who have been "custodians" of the Carbisdale Forest and feared access and amenity might be jeopardised by the sale of part of the woodland to the developers, had formed their own company earlier this month (Carbisdale Castle Holdings) with a view to possibly purchasing the woodland through community buy-out legislation.

At the meeting - which was attended by about 170 members of the public - they questioned the panel as to why they had not been consulted about the company's bid to buy part of the forest and why, until that night, they did not know exactly how much land the developers wished to purchase.

They accused the potential new owners of working "behind closed doors" with the Forestry Commission to strike a deal, and demanded to know what talks had taken place.

However, it has emerged that a representative had offered to attend a meeting held in Culrain, but he was turned down. It is understood that a letter he asked to be read out at the meeting, was not.

James Higgins of the commission, who was in the audience on Wednesday night, explained that it



"If we have surplus land that someone wishes to purchase, they have to prove to us that it any development has to be of public benefit."

James Higgins

was only within the last few weeks that the 57 acres had been clearly identified as being the area which Carbisdale Castle Ltd wished to purchase.

He said: "If we have surplus land that someone wishes to purchase, they have to prove to us that any development has to be of public benefit. We will only sell if they can show us that and that there is community support."

Steve Buskie said that he wanted the developer to be transparent in what it planned to do with the woodland. He said the Culrain residents had formed their new company with the intention of buying Carbisdale Wood through community buy-out to secure the area.

Mr Higgins questioned why they wanted to do that? "It is just a blocking tactic," he added.

'Sense of hope for the future'

AFTER attending the presentation, local area committee convenor Deirdre Mackay told us: "Prominent in its beautiful landscape, we have witnessed the sad, steady decay of this iconic landmark.

"It was energising therefore to sit through a presentation of what can only be described as a once-in-a-lifetime quality opportunity for the area. There was a real sense of hope for the future, from the creation of big numbers of permanent jobs, to the many spin offs for the surrounding business community.

"As we know from elsewhere, the



Developers hope to create gardens similar to those at Dunrobin Castle (pictured) at Carbisdale Castle.

The audience were reminded that the proposed owners and investors had looked at other properties in Ireland and Wales and if Carbisdale was not taken forward, they could look elsewhere.

Several members of the audience continued to voice their disquiet about the purchase of woodland and demanded to know in detail what the developer intended, in writing.

But Diana Bertoldi said: "You now have the plans in front of you tonight. We can see exactly what area of land they are looking at and what they want to buy. What is your problem? As I understand it, the project will not go ahead without this land - do you want to stop that?"

The protagonists admitted that they did not want to jeopardise the development but felt that the situation could have been handled better. "But everyone wants the development to happen," said one.

Answering further questions, Mr Keenan said there was no intention for any further development of the area and they would not be seeking to purchase more land.

Discussion moved on to who was

behind Carbisdale Castle Ltd? Mr Keenan said that they wished to remain anonymous for the moment but had been involved in four other high standard hotels.

"Were the hotels successful?" asked one man. Yes, was the reply.

Community councillor Russell Taylor shouted: "We want to know who they are and we want them here to face us."

But others in the audience asked why? Said one: "Why should we know who they are? It is not our business. If someone built a house next to you, you would not be entitled to know exactly who they are and what their business is."

Another asked if the group was confident it could fill the bed spaces. Mr Keenan said the developers were experienced enough to know their market.

One audience member said she was pleased that the hotel would be open to the public and "not another Skibo".

The meeting ended with the panel being given a round of applause, reflecting the majority's total commitment to, and support of, the proposal.

"Concerns raised focused on the implications for the forested areas used by the public and a desire to protect public access. This is the time to sit down and methodically work through the issues, which are not insurmountable, and the developer has expressed a keenness to do so.

"There is a long way to go and it is right for the developer to involve the community from this very early stage. There is a real appetite to engage with a project which, if it goes ahead, and we sincerely hope that it does, will undoubtedly be a catalyst for change in the area."

'Castle will come alive again'

AT Wednesday night's meeting, Michael Laird Architects revealed that it planned to transform Carbisdale into the "most desirable luxury hotel in Scotland".

The project, it says, will create sustainable jobs as well as bring substantial economic benefits to Sutherland through the use of local goods, services and suppliers, and from the additional off-site spend of guests and other visitors in the local area.

Kevin Keenan, who will be the managing director of the new hotel, said the investment will give the castle a complete new lease of life.

He said: "Our aim is simple - we want to create one of Scotland's luxury hotels and if we can become number one, so be it.

"Carbisdale Castle is a majestic building and we have spent a considerable amount of time, money and resources to plan how we can both respect its grandeur yet still transform it into a five star luxury destination hotel that will rival any hotel offering in Scotland.

"The castle will become alive again with the sound of people enjoying the joys of this landmark building as it must have done in the past. The interiors - and especially the planned 21 bedroom suites in the existing castle - will

be individually designed to be spellbinding while the standards of service will be unprecedented.

"Have no doubt, this is a once-in-a-generation project that will put this area on the international map.

"But more importantly, we are thrilled at the prospect of the economic benefits the new look Carbisdale Castle will bring.

"We are aware of local employment concerns in the Sutherland area, which suffers badly from a lack of inward investment. This project will reverse this - resulting in a multi-million investment.

"We also know that this project will bring substantial spin-off economic benefits from the use of local services, businesses and suppliers."

Included in such spin-offs could be offering guests the opportunity to fish, golf and stalk locally.

The project team aims to submit a formal planning permission during August to September but that will depend on the acquisition of the land from the Forestry Commission. If the planning application is successful and construction starts on time, it is hoped the hotel will open in June 2017, exactly 100 years since the castle was completed in 1917.

THE NORTHERN TIMES MAY 1, 2015