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A community newspaper for East Finchley run entirely by volunteers.

Heath funding crisis

By Ann Bronkhorst

Hampstead Heath, London's largest open space, is under threat from the Corporation of London, the country's oldest local authority. In response to a budget crisis, the Corporation's Heath Management Committee is considering making cuts and closures.

Safe hands

When the Corporation took over responsibility for the Heath, in 1989 many people welcomed its management skills and vast resources, and thought the Heath would be in safe hands. Some worried, however, about the lack of democratic accountability if disputes arose. And last November a dispute did arise: cost-cutting plans, claimed to be essential by Heath managers, led to heated debates at

packed meetings and in the local press.

Financial crisis

For two successive years the Heath's budget has been exceeded. Money from the Open Spaces Directorate, which manages the Corporation's seven open spaces, has bailed out earlier shortfalls. To avert an estimated overspend of £330,000 for 2005-6, cost cutting seems inevitable. Measures proposed include cancellation of concerts in



The Heath - looking towards Finchley. Photo by Tony Roberts

Golders Hill Park and closure of the Information Centre at the Lido as well as reductions in garden and conservation staff. The most controversial plans, however, affect the bathing ponds.

"Unsustainable drain"

Proposals to limit swimming facilities and, in particular, to close the mixed swimming pond have outraged amenity and residents' groups as well as individual users. Catherine McGuinness, chair of the Management Committee, explains

that the ponds are the Heath's "most expensive recreational facility" and "an unsustainable drain" on the budget.

Costly policing

Opponents of the proposed cuts have also questioned the high costs of policing the Heath. Half a million pounds are spent annually on the Heath Constabulary, the only private police force in London. Its future has not been discussed with the Metropolitan Police, the Greater London Authority or neighbouring local authorities.

Decision time

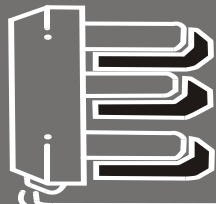
MP Frank Dobson has said, "This is far from being exclusively a Camden issue - it affects many other parts of London." East Finchley users of the Heath may agree. Cost-cutting decisions will be made on 24 January. Information is available on www.cityoflondon.gov.uk or write to The Corporation of London, Guildhall, EC2P 2EJ. Objections or support can be sent to david.milnes@corpoflondon.gov.uk or to saveourswimming@yahoo.co.uk.

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Park House still a puzzle

Despite the proposed sale of council-owned Park House, locals are none the wiser as to what might be developed on the site opposite East Finchley tube station.

At the end of November, Barnet's Cabinet and Resources Committee unanimously accepted the highest

unconditional bid from a total of 36, of which 24 were 'conditional' (subject to the grant of planning permission) and 12 'unconditional'. Sherm Properties Limited's offer of nearly £3million was unconditional and leaves them with the responsibility of seeking planning permission. It is only when they do this that

their plans will be subjected to public scrutiny.

Temporary extension for Institute?

Any new owners will also have to deal with the current lease, held by The Hampstead Garden Suburb Institute. Having spent many thousands of pounds making the building suitable for their use, the Institute took up residence last summer as an interim measure until their proposed new premises on the former Neurological Hospital site have been built. So the Institute is hoping to come to some arrangement that will enable them to remain in Park House until their new home is ready some time in 2006.

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