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Cambridge Labour Party,
Cambridge Liberal Democrats,
Cambridge Green Party,
Cambridge Conservative Party

18 April 2007

Dear Candidates,

Over the past few weeks we have received numerous campaign materials before the upcoming local elections on May 3.

However, your party's campaign material does not seem to have addressed some matters of considerable local importance, including your viewpoints on Cambridge rowing and, more generally, your vision for maintaining and enhancing the River Cam as a major local recreational resource.

Town club rowing and student rowing (both local Universities) is enjoyed by a figure of roughly 4000 people annually in the Cambridge area, a sizeable proportion of the electorate of some of your candidates in the City and South Cambridgeshire, and critical to some central and riverside wards. Local participation in the sport takes place at many levels, involving people of all age groups and backgrounds, ranging from the purely recreational to the highest professional level. Home-grown talents such as Anna Bebington, Charlie Palmer and Simon Goodbrand, to mention but a few, are all fruits of the Cambridge rowing phenomena.

Over the past 10-15 years there have been significant adverse changes to the river scene in Cambridge, and to its ability to continue its important local recreational and environmental function. The most radical and highest impact change has been a drastic and until recently completely uncontrolled increase in the number of permanent residential boats mooring along the banks between Stourbridge Common and Jesus Lock. These now number approximately 100-110 vessels, with 70 of these completely occupying all allowable City Council owned land on Stourbridge and Midsummer Commons and Jesus Green, with the remainder on the unregulated County-controlled stretch along Riverside. As recently as the mid to late 1990s, such a density of mooring was an unknown phenomenon (recent or historical) in Cambridge, and publicly available aerial photographs from that time confirm the views of long-term local residents and river users that virtually none of the space currently taken by moored boats was then used. The rapid increase in mooring can be attributed to several causes, but prime amongst these are the active decision by the then City Council in the late 1990s to cease enforcing the standard 48 hour mooring limit on its riparian-owned land on the various Commons (a decision and subsequent policy apparently not repeated or operated by any other comparable riparian local authority nationally), combined with a subsequent failure of either the City Council or the Cam Conservancy to either interact with each other in the context of their enforcement activities, or to take responsibility for the subsequent creeping erosion of this local resource. Combined with the deliberate advertising of Cambridge on the Web as a free and unregulated mooring location by a then boat-dwelling Cam Conservator, this resulted in the rapid attraction of a large number of boats to Cambridge.

Between the late 1990s and 2006, these boats in effect moored illegally on City and County controlled land, with neither authority nor the Conservancy responding to increasingly strident and indeed desperate requests for action from the other affected local communities. Despite the now complete occupation of City and County controlled land by permanently occupied residential moored boats, at no point has this process, and effective creation by these authorities of a new residential area in central Cambridge (in part in a conservation area) been subject to any form of planning application or scrutiny

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of any sort by any form of official or regulatory body. Rather, in 2006, the City adopted a mooring policy which finally achieves the raising of some income from up to 70 permanently moored residential boats linked to the lowest band of Council Tax, who previously paid nothing to local government as expected of other local residents (indeed, the vast majority still choose to licence their vessels with the EA rather than the local Conservancy, a choice unavailable to other local sporting and recreational associations). The County has yet to develop any policy over charging licence fees for the bank along Riverside that it controls, hence boat owners mooring here are still contributing nothing. In effect, the City's new policy also sets the newly-evolved and previously technically illegal *status quo* on the Commons in stone. There is also serious concern amongst the large electorate forming the recreational users of the river as to the unbalanced influence this group of 70 license holders now appears to have in practice on the decisions of City Council committees. This was illustrated last autumn by the City failing to invite any of the formally representative local sporting associations (rowing, fishing, canoeing, etc) to its review of mooring policy, and allowing its entire agenda to be set by the Camboaters group, the only group actually consulted in advance, and again most recently by the Council dropping proposed and entirely reasonable fee increases without a murmur as soon as this group complained in the local press. The fact that the river along these banks remains governed by several authorities, the Cam Conservancy, the City Council, the County Council, South Cambridgeshire District Council, continues to be unhelpful.

Aside from the highly unsatisfactory background to this issue, the direct impact of the more or less continuous chain of over 100 continuously moored residential vessels is to result in severe traffic congestion for other river users, particularly along Riverside Road and Stourbridge Common upstream of Chesterton Footbridge. Before their presence, it was perfectly possible for all river users to travel in both directions (i.e. two-way flowing traffic) in and out of town at any time during the day. However, with the high density of houseboats along this river stretch it is now impossible for boat traffic to move in both directions, particularly adjacent to Riverside Road, without frequent collisions occurring. The same occurs should some exceptionally large motorised vessels (including but not restricted to *Georgina*) encounter others in this stretch of river, in these cases with very serious implications for personal safety of sportspersons (and many near misses and actual accidents are on record, particularly with the Conservancy). As a result, the student-controlled rowing clubs have been forced to voluntarily impose a one-way traffic system on winter term-time weekday mornings, when the majority now are restricted to train. This means that rowing boats go out of town at a certain time (before c. 0800) during the morning and are only allowed to row back at a later time (after c. 0800). This unsatisfactory system then creates its own conflicts, making it near impossible for town club crews to train according to their own schedule on weekday mornings during university term time.

With the rapid rate of residential development in Cambridge, a further concern relates to the increasingly powerful residents associations that now consider themselves to have significant influence on how rowing clubs can coach and steer their crews. With the number of highly attractive flats being built along Riverside Road one can expect that in the future ever more powerful residents associations will try to limit rowers' permission to address their crews verbally.

Because of the political manner in which the University interacts with local authorities, the student rowing clubs are generally seen as a passive electorate, always trying to be very diplomatic and conforming to whatever restriction is being imposed on them. The fact that student rowing clubs, by definition, have an almost complete membership replacement every 2-3 years (and therefore have little long-term view of river developments) is also easy to take advantage of.

Both student and town sports participants make an active and important contribution to City life, as well as to the electorates that you are keen to attract, and the two groups cannot be seen in isolation. The relationship between student and town rowing clubs is symbiotic. A significant proportion of students who go on to obtain employment in the Cambridge region subsequently join a town rowing

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club, while many local residents coach and train student clubs, and a smaller number are directly employed by Colleges or clubs. As such the quality of town rowing is intimately linked to that of the student community, and *vice versa*. It would be a shameful legacy if new talents like those mentioned earlier no longer are able to learn and develop their skills in Cambridge because the local river resource has been destroyed to the extent that it has been allowed to develop into a housing estate and effectively only permits a few recreational rowers to have outings on the river.

We would therefore like to ask your party what its position is with regard to these issues. We find it logically and democratically totally unjustified that anything approaching the current number of residential boats are being permitted to live permanently on City and County controlled land, when this policy, which impacts thousands of athletes and local residents who try to enjoy this local resource, has not been subject to any form of planning assessment (which should almost certainly have been required by law) or balanced scrutiny. Does your party agree that this situation should be rectified and if so what will you propose? How does your party plan to handle vociferous residents' associations?

We would very much like to hear your stance on these questions and we are certain that the many members of the various student and town rowing clubs are equally keen to learn what your position would be on these matters before this coming local election.

Faithfully,

Dr. Pete Convey
Chair, Cambridge University Combined Boat Clubs
Honorary Vice President Cambridgeshire Rowing Association

Dr. Robert Oeffner
Rob Roy Boat Club,
Ex-Churchill College Boat Club

Cc: Cambridgeshire County Council,
Andrew Lansley, CBE, MP,
David Howarth, MP