

19th November 2013

5. Questions to Ministers without notice - The Minister for Planning and Environment

The Bailiff:

Connétable of St. John?

5.1 The Connétable of St. John:

Could the Minister let Members know the secret of having 9 lives, as he has been able to kick out yet another vote of no confidence?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel (The Minister for Planning and Environment):

I wish I knew but, as long as I have got several left, I will share the secret with the Connétable when the 9 comes to an end.

5.2 Deputy R.J. Rondel of St. Helier:

Would the Minister give the Assembly an update on the proposed development of the old J.C.G. (Jersey College for Girls) site, together with the total number of proposed units to be built and advise the Assembly of the number of social-rented units and affordable homes to purchase and when their delivery may be achieved?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

Again, I have to be careful because this is a live application and it has been amended following decisions that have been taken at the Council of Ministers to allow the former Jersey College for Girls' site to be used for affordable housing. The original application was only to provide 40 social housing units for one of our housing providers and the remainder of the site to be used for first-time buyer developments. A Supplementary Planning Guidance note was issued by myself as part of the master planning for the area which indicated that, in line with the proposals that are coming forward for the Island Plan, all States-owned sites, wherever possible, should be reconsidered in terms of their ability to bring forward the affordable homes project, and the former Jersey College for Girls' site is one of those sites. Subsequent to those discussions and papers being written, we are at a position where the States bodies looking after the application are amending their point of view. I think the latest suggestion is perhaps that out of the potential 180 units that are able to be built on the site of the former Jersey College for Girls' site, and to the rear, some perhaps 70 units might well now be offered for social-rented purposes, but I have yet to see anything, any application, that suggests that any of the units will be offered for affordable purchase, which is part-and-parcel of the Affordable Homes programme.

5.3 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

Given the embarrassing, but frankly abortive, vote of no confidence, will the Minister be sticking to his long-term vision for the future of trying to make Planning fit within Environment cohesively, or will he be selling out and joining the short-term group think beliefs of all his colleagues?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

When I was appointed to the position of Minister by this House following the nomination by our Chief Minister, it was on the basis of my long standing in politics; I am the senior Deputy of the House, and those persons who have been in the House for that length of time, or indeed shorter periods, will know that this leopard does not change his spots. It was on that basis that I think I did have the confidence of the Chief Minister to be proposed for this particularly difficult job in trying to bring environmentalism into the planning process. It is not something that I will back down on in any event but, that said, the position of the Minister for Planning and Environment is not a bloody-minded one in that he has to only promote the environmental issues. As Members know in the States Chamber the planning process requires and encourages the Minister for Planning and Environment to achieve balanced consensus, and that is inevitably what usually happens. So this Minister will not be giving up his environmental credentials to join any particular organisation that the Deputy was referring to.

5.4 Deputy M. Tadier:

Does the Minister have confidence in the Council of Ministers and, in particular, would he state whether there are elements within the Council of Ministers who find it difficult to tolerate alternative viewpoints?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I feel that if I answer this openly and honestly I may not just lose one of my lives, I will probably lose several of them. [Laughter] Perhaps all I can say is that I am one of the longstanding Members who did not vote for Ministerial government, who agrees still that perhaps the better way of governing this Island resides in a system that allows the talents of all Members to be party to our government system, and that inevitably means that perhaps my viewpoint is at loggerheads with some of my other Ministerial colleagues. Notwithstanding that, he did ask if I have got the confidence of all colleagues on the Council of Ministers. All I can say is that I have probably got more confidence in them at this point in time than they have got in me, but we will see. I did ask for any particular reservations that Ministers had at a Council of Ministers meeting to be made openly available to me in written form and signed but as yet I have only received one partial reply.

5.5 Deputy J.H. Young:

I am sure the Minister will be reflecting on his 2-year reign, having been given a new lease of life. Could he advise the Assembly if he has formed a view whether the role performed by the Planning and Environment Department in terms of land-use applications should be more of a process facilitator and a helper or whether or not it should be that of a regulator? Could he share his views about that and whether or not, in his continued lease of life, he will be changing direction?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

Indeed, that is one of my stated aims and the Deputy will know, because it is being referred to in the media at the moment, that I have made substantial changes to the pre-application service within the department in order to allow a certain level of certainty to be applied to the comments that are coming from my offices, and I have received from the Chamber of Commerce website in an article that appeared in their October version a recommendation by themselves that this is a sensible way forward and a full endorsement of that scheme. Everyone who has taken the time to speak to me over the years will know that long-term

strategic planning is a particular key aim of mine and I do not, and never have, considered the planning job as being one of just form-filling and regulation.

5.6 Deputy J.M. Le Bailly of St. Mary:

Could the Minister indicate if there has been any progress with regard to defining a criteria of persons who will be eligible to access the truly affordable housing units envisaged in the £200,000 bracket?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

There has; indeed, I have been in discussion with the Deputy on this very point. As Members will know, there is an inspection in public for the Island Plan review and all colleagues of this Assembly have been invited to attend a meeting at lunchtime to put forward any further ideas, or whatever, into the mix for the inspector to take on board before he advises me. That said, the Island Plan amendment review was mainly called for on behalf of the previous States in terms of the H3 and H1 policies. It is essentially a housing issue and the definition of “affordability” has been clearly defined, and that is one of the things that we will have an opportunity to consult on and to debate in the States Chamber next year when it comes back. For those Members who have not read it, and I am sure everybody has, the suggestion is that affordability for purchase must be for those on median incomes.

The Bailiff:

Minister, if you do not mind, if you could give concise answers otherwise we will run out of time. Deputy Hilton?

5.7 Deputy J.A. Hilton of St. Helier:

Has the Minister been involved in any discussions with the J.E.C. (Jersey Electric Company) on the siting of the proposed substation west of St. Helier and does he agree with the recommendation the Parish of St. Helier is now supporting that the quarry site is, in fact, the best site?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

The Minister has been in consultation with the J.E.C. with officers, he has also been in consultation with the Connétable of St. Helier and others. In terms of the recommendation, I only heard that this morning from the Parish Assembly. In essence, this is a parochial matter which will be decided upon by the Parish representatives who take the time and trouble to attend the Parish Assembly meeting. Once a decision has been taken as to the acceptance or not of whatever is being offered by the J.E.C. to the Parish of St. Helier, then the usual planning application process will be put into practice. No application has been received as yet and, indeed, cannot do until the Parish has decided that indeed it is happy to release the land which is owned by the public.

5.7.1 Deputy J.A. Hilton:

A supplemental question please? Does the Minister agree that this matter is indeed very urgent and that he will afford it the time that it requires and deliver the consent in a timely fashion?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

It goes without saying that this Minister adopts that approach on all applications that come forward and, indeed, the criticisms that I have received, and perhaps due to receive at a future time and place, to the effect that I am unaccountable for delays in the system is not a valid one and Members should look at the details of the applications and bear in mind that the Minister makes very few decisions these days under a system that was implemented and promoted by myself.

5.8 Senator L.J. Farnham:

Just for the avoidance of any doubt, is the Minister for Planning and Environment intending to resign any time soon?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

The Minister for Planning and Environment is not intending to resign but, then again, he has not received any requests for him to do so as yet.

5.9 Deputy J.A. Martin:

All States Members received an email at 5.28 p.m. last night to say that the Chief Minister had asked the Deputy of St. Martin and others to withdraw the vote of no confidence. Could the Minister inform the House when he was informed and if he has been informed of the matters that have come up that need discussing with other Ministers, which has stopped this debate?

[12:15]

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I think it was late on Sunday, about 8.00 p.m. I did have a note both from the Chief Minister and another separate note from Deputy Luce saying that he would be withdrawing his proposition. That came later.

5.10 The Connétable of St. Ouen:

Could the Minister tell the Assembly what his vision is for the future of contribution to art and developments, bearing in mind I have recently heard a rumour that it might be scrapped?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I do not know about being scrapped, it is certainly an area that I have my officers working on at the moment. There is good work being undertaken with the Education, Sport and Culture Department to ascertain whether or not the Percentage for Art scheme that was set up by my predecessor can have its terms of remit widened in order to allow those voluntary-offered monies to be spent on a wider remit than the, perhaps in some instances, narrow art schemes that have characterised the scheme to date.

5.11 Deputy T.M. Pitman:

I think it is probably fair to say that one of the smokescreen issues behind the attempted political assassination of the Minister is the issue of housing and what might be called the Uplands issue. Does the Minister feel able to tell Members the truth about that saga?

Deputy R.C. Duhamel:

I do not know, that is going back quite a while. We did have a previous Homebuy scheme which was not particularly well applied and was part-and-parcel of the request by this House during the Island Plan debate for whoever the Minister was going to be, to bring forward amendments to that proposed policy, and H1 as well, and were based on the non-successful outcome of the Homebuy scheme. I think, at the end of the day, those persons who were placed on a list by the Constable working with the Dean, managed to get what they had been promised by other bodies who did not own the property at the time. I think a successful conclusion to those negotiations was undertaken by myself whereby the Treasury and Resources Department was called upon to accept any monies on the first time of resale. I am not sure that it is an issue, and it is the real issue that the Deputy is thinking that is perhaps the missing piece of information that people have been alluding to.

The Bailiff:

Very well, that concludes questions to the Minister.