

HUNSTANTON CIVIC SOCIETY

Charity Registered Number 1101087

Chair

Martin Chown
Willowtree Cottage
Hunstanton
PE36 5HZ

Phone: 01485 532223

Email: martin.chown@btinternet.com

Secretary

Andrew Murray
7 Bernard Crescent
Hunstanton
PE36 6ER

Phone: 01485 532376

Email: andrew.murray1@virgin.net

Treasurer

Ken Lawson
1a Queen's Drive
Hunstanton
PE36 6EX

Phone: 01485 532163

Email: kennethlawson180@btinternet.com

12th. January 2010

The Wash SMP Consultation
Environment Agency
Kingfisher House
Goldhay Way
Orton Goldhay
Peterborough PE2 5ZR

Dear Sirs

Re: **The Wash Shoreline Management Plan 2 (SMP2)**

General Observations

Hunstanton Civic Society is pleased that it has had the opportunity to participate in the consultation on this very important subject that has the potential to severely affect local ecology and livelihoods.

The Wash is large (approx 615 sq. km.) and very special – it is the largest estuary system in the United Kingdom with 5 rivers meeting the sea –the Steeping, Witham, Welland, Nene and Great Ouse. These rivers drain some 10% of the land area of England. It has the second largest area of inter-tidal mud flats and sand banks that are nationally and internationally recognised as important habitats for birds and other wildlife. We welcome the honesty in the narrative that in many aspects there is insufficient data to make accurate predictions and therefore careful scientific monitoring will be part of the planned SMP actions.

Climate Change

Even though England is gripped by a prolonged cold spell at present, the scientific evidence suggests that for whatever reason, the world is getting warmer and the likelihood of storms is increasing. The warming of the seas leads to expansion whilst the melting of glaciers adds further to the volume of seawater. The Department of the Environment forecasts indicate that the sea level will rise in the near future by about 4 mm per year but that increases to 15 mm per year later in this century producing a total rise of some 1129 mm. by 2105. The fact that England is tilting and East Anglia is sinking adds to this problem.

Flood Risk

In 2007, there was sufficient evidence of danger that the Cabinet's Emergency COBRA committee was convened. A flood disaster of the Fens was averted only when the direction of the wind changed and the water came to within 80 mm. of overtopping and perhaps of breaching the defences. This suggests that there is some urgency in finding ways of improving the defences not just maintaining their current levels.

An in depth study of the actual flood risk has been done by Fabel and Maunsell but they conclude that:- "That because substantial improvements will be necessary to the Borough's tidal flood defenses, both along the shores of the Wash and within the tidal outfall channel of the Great Ouse, to maintain the standard of flood defence throughout the Borough at its present level, the Borough Council makes vigorous and persistent representations to ensure that these improvements are made. These improvements should be implemented in a programme of works that will ensure that tidal defence standards are maintained at or above present (2008) levels and are not permitted to fall below present defence standards at any time in the coming hundred year period."

Observations about Policy Development Zone 1 – Gibraltar Point to Wolferton Creek

Flood defences in this area are essential to protect The Fens. This land, some 3855 sq. km is generally at or below the present mean sea level. It is drained by 4 rivers assisted by Internal Drainage Boards who maintain 6115 km. of water courses and 286 pumping stations. There are 96.5 km of coastal sea walls and 154 km. of fluvial embankments. It encompasses 11 districts, 4 counties, 2 government office and development agency regions. In addition to being home to about half a million people, 88% of land in the fens is cultivated and makes up about 50% of all the grade 1, most productive, farmland in England. 37% of all vegetables produced in England are grown in the rich fertile soils of the fens. Because of the importance of this area to the food supply of the country, the proposal to hold the existing line may not be good enough and will require significant expenditure to ensure that the line is held.

Observations about Policy Development Zone 2 – Wolferton Creek to South Hunstanton

This area is less important for agriculture but more for local tourism. The large number of caravans and holiday homes may require to be relocated out of the severe flood risk zone. This will make it safer but less attractive to the holidaymakers who will have to travel to the beach and shoreline. It has been found that the Heacham shoreline is exposed to the most extreme wind and wave conditions in The Wash (Posford Duvivier 1996a). The sea defence is a shingle ridge (susceptible to being breached in a storm) backed by a grassed sea bank. The shingle ridge needs constant costly maintenance.

Observations about Policy Development Zone 3 – New Hunstanton Town

The Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk elected to take responsibility for sea defences consisting of the promenade and seawall along the Hunstanton sea front but has done little to meet the amended standards and requirements instituted by DEFRA in areas for which it is responsible. There is concern that some of the southern promenade that was built on landfill material may not be in a good state of repair at present. The levels of sand on the beach are maintained by timber groynes that trap the sand and reduce long-shore drift. Further work will need to be done to ensure that sand levels are such that the promenade cannot be undermined.

Observations about Policy Development Zone 4 - Hunstanton Cliffs

This is currently the only area of The Wash that is completely undefended. The sandstone and chalk striped cliffs are very distinctive and are an important geological and landscape feature. Since the promenade was built in 1956, there appears to have been preferential erosion of the cliffs just to the North of the promenade. The accompanying photograph reproduced by kind permission of Mr. Mike Page illustrates the situation. Because erosion is due to a combination of surface water seeping through the rock and wave action at the base of the cliffs, we do not think that erosion can be completely stopped. It would therefore seem prudent to investigate ways and means by which that rate of erosion may be decreased either by impregnating the rock structure or by protecting the base of the cliffs from the full force of the waves. The grass area along the cliff top linking the esplanade gardens with the lighthouse area is an important feature of the resort. The proposal to allow continuing erosion until the B1161 road is threatened is far from a satisfactory one. We recommend commencing action now whilst there is still some leeway.

The Wash Tidal Barrier

Having heard Mr. Peter Dawe (The Wash Tidal Barrier Corporation plc) give a presentation on Tuesday 5th. January 2010, we consider that it is very short-sighted of the team to have dismissed this as one man's vague idea and not to feature it in developing SMP policies. We consider the idea of a barrier or barrage deserves very serious consideration. An 18 km barrier across the mouth of The Wash from Hunstanton to the Lincolnshire coast plus another 5 km to reach higher ground would be an alternative to raising the height of the defences all around the perimeter of The Wash and up the tidal rivers, a distance of some 200 km. Although The Wash is 40 m. deep in the middle, much of the line is in shallow water. Construction has been estimated at £ 1.5 bn. with perhaps as much again for remedial works. In addition to stopping habitats being squeezed or destroyed, the tidal water flow could generate 4 giga watts of electricity, the equivalent of 2 or 3 atomic power stations or 2 to 3 % of energy needs of the UK. As 1 giga watt of electricity for a year would be worth £ 1 bn. the finances seem to stack up. The present stumbling block appears to be the need to spend £ 3 to £ 10 million on obtaining permissions with no guarantee of commercial advantage for that outlay.

The Hunstanton Civic Society is not in a position at present to support the construction of a Wash Barrier but considers that this matter needs thorough scientific assessment of the possible costs, benefits and adverse effects. It has been suggested that such a barrier would increase the flood risk along the North Norfolk Coast because water coming down the North Sea would not be able to flow into The Wash. As one of the reasons for building a barrier would be to generate electric power from the movement of tidal water in and out of The Wash, the quantity of water held up outside the barrier is likely to be relatively small.

Conclusion

Hunstanton Civic Society is not happy with the overall plans to manage The Wash. Although we fully support the need for a clear plan to monitor, study and collaborate, it can only postpone action and decisions that are needed now. Cost implications under the current national economic conditions clearly favour holding the line. For the reasons given above, we do not think that simply 'holding the line' in PDZ 1,2 &3 whilst permitting continuing erosion in PDZ4 is going to prove to be adequate or acceptable. We think that within the strategy for the East Coast as a whole, particularly the geographical area into which we fall from the Humber to the Norfolk Coast, plans need to make provision for future food safety, green electricity, sustainable development and tourism.

Kind regards
Yours faithfully

Andrew Murray
Hon. Sec.



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