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HCA's case is based on sound business sense



Chairman's report by Colin Smith

THE TRUSTEES of Hilltop Community Association (HCA) have always insisted all voices should be heard. In the autumn, the Bishop of Dover gave his views as to why he believed a 99-year lease was the only realistic offer. In this issue, Margaret Church, as spokesperson for the 'wider Church Community' has an uncensored voice. HCA has always argued that the hall was funded, built and subsequently managed by the community (backed up by minutes, since 1936); now HCA puts the business case.

Certainly the Church funds the electricity and the building insurance. However, the HCA has spent more than £14,000 to bring the hall up to modern standards. 2006 expenditure was £4,400 (£3,500 on electrical up-grade). To say that the Parochial Church Council (PCC) was responsible for keeping the hall in good shape prior to 2000 is something worthy of question. What would the situation be now if HCA had not mobilised?

A rent of £220.00 is paid to the PCC - rent or donation? Correspondence from the PCC refers to it as rent. We are all aware of increases in utility costs; perhaps a dialogue is required in this area. Charities are encouraged to act in a business manner, however, businesses do not ask for increases, they arrive soon enough. If the offerings at church services, and I presume services at St Faith's, have never covered any associated costs, what are those costs?

Obviously, in our community, we have supporters of services at St Nicholas, as we do of St Thomas's (RC), the Salvation Army and others. Our house is one of the 36 subscribers to the church magazine and HCA continue to support the efforts of the church in our local area.

Margaret's article finishes with a hope that the 'difficulties' over the future of St Faith's will be resolved allowing the mutually beneficial management of the hall that has evolved to continue for the advantage of the whole community. The 'difficulties' refer to the dispute over the freehold/leasehold issue. Facts have been disputed, but it's still a negotiation, and we hope with no animosity.

The Church and HCA are both charities working for their respective flocks, but equally both have to run as a business otherwise there would be failure, pastorally and financially. The Charity Commission's job is to ensure failures are rare and we are all mindful of our responsibilities. Therefore the Hall has to be seen as a business case. The case for the PCC is simple; HCA takes a 99-year lease at a peppercorn rent and HCA fund a new hall. It will still be Church property on Church land, without any involvement on their part of the massive project of designing, funding and rebuilding the facility. They will have taken no risk and the PCC would have full control of the design and their amendments would add to our costs.

HCA's business plan is to own a village hall on village land. The scenario is we would have to obtain the freehold of the land; the church is understandably not going to give it away for free. After that comes the maths (using estimated figures): Expected build cost (£300,000 but could be as much as £400,000). With architects and Planning fees currently running at about 7% of the building cost (£21,000 to £28,000). **Total: £321,000.** What business would be able to take this expenditure to its board and say, "by the way we will not own it?" It makes no commercial sense.

If HCA walked away from the negotiation the PCC would have a hall to finance or demolish at considerable cost. The land would have a value as a commercial building plot and the question of whether they would fund a hall or sell the land for a commercial sum is a question unanswered.

THE SUCCESSES of HCA continue, some are not shown on a balance sheet. Thank you, Simon Hewson, for your wise words on pages 4,5.