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Criticism of Thames Gateway Development

With any project on such a large scale and prominence there are going to be democratic judgement over the suitability of a project for the intended purposes. Acknowledging critical review from experts in many different disciplines as well as from residents in and around the area is a worthwhile exercise. Ultimately it will be the immediate investors that will take the input and decide what is useful and what is not. Several important figures have already chimed in with constructive criticism. Groups that represent issues concerning the family life, the environment and transportation have contributed their thoughts on this ambitious development. At every phase of the development there will be new criticism and the criticism will be coming from every direction. It will be impossible to appease every stakeholder's objective. For those policymakers and developers with direct influence a healthy compromise that everyone can live in, work in, and function though is a daunting challenge.

Environmental Criticism:

The Thames Gateway project proposes removing and building on the North Kent Marshes, which are recognized as an Environmentally Sensitive Area by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and are largely covered by Sites of Special Scientific Interest. Opponents of development argue that have argued that increased public accessibility to these threatened marshes and wetlands will cause further erosion. Residents have already rejected a proposal for a large international airport on Cliffe Marshes. A coalition of local residents, local council members, as well as conservation

charities nixed the proposal because environmental and life quality concerns. The north of Kent has historically been a marshland area and is under great pressure to be developed. Even with a large presence of brownfield parcels a large variety of wildlife can be found on and along the Thames. The marshes off of Thames provide natural flood protection for the entire London area. Dave Wardle, of the Environment Agency, notes that “*London and the Thames Estuary currently have one of the best tidal defense systems in the world.*” Future development in the Thames Gateway must not ignore flood risk management, and take into account future plans for flood protection. Effective flood risk management of the whole Estuary has not been thoroughly examined and displayed by early decisions on the development of the Gateway.ⁱ

The Government's refusal to consult people at an early stage about the developments has frustrated environmentalists. Hugh Ellis, Friends of the Earth planning adviser, says, “*The great lie at the heart of the plan is that it's about communities. It's not; it's for the greater good of UK.*”ⁱⁱ

Social Criticism:

A study by the University of East London / London East Research Institute between October 2005 and June 2006 commissioned by leading real estate lawyer Davies Arnold Cooper shows that there will be very little opportunities for families needing more than two bedrooms to move into new homes in the Thames Gateway. The study took into account 56 developments of more than 100 units in 13 authorities with housing density and numbers of units estimated for 2016. This study concluded that 82% of all

ⁱ http://property.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/property/new_homes/article623047.ece

ⁱⁱ <http://society.guardian.co.uk/societyguardian/story/0,7843,911918,00.html>

new properties being built in the Thames Gateway area are either one or two bedroom units.ⁱⁱⁱ

Stephen Stone, Chief Executive of leading regeneration developer Crest Nicholson Plc, insisted *“The results of the study are very interesting and the issues raised should stimulate debate across both government and industry on how we respond to the housing shortages we now face. We believe that the industry must find new ways of building greater numbers of family sized homes.”*

Robert Lee, Head of Real Estate at Davies Arnold Cooper, said *“Two bed flats are nearly 50% of any new Thames Gateway development, with 34% of all units being built being one bedroom flats. Whilst developers are having no problems filling the units, the government has forced authorities to act in a way that is simply not strategic. Many developments are being approved to meet targets as opposed to marrying with the shortfall in housing demands in their area.”* The study showed that only 3% of new housing in Thames would have 4 bedrooms housing. The diversity of housing has come into question. Robert Lee continues, *“The government should not just rely on the private sector to produce innovative schemes such as Crest’s HfL but should also help local authorities to attract families into cities, not just single people and couples. If we continue in this vein of building one and two bedroom flats we will be changing the social make-up of areas. It may well be a return to the horrendous tower blocks from the 60s and 70s, meaning the goal of sustainable communities will never be reached.”^{iv}*

ⁱⁱⁱ Cooper, Davies Arnold. “Thames Gateway – No families allowed.” 28, September 2006. ThamesGatewaystudybyDAC.pdf

^{iv} Cooper, Davies Arnold. “Thames Gateway – No families allowed.” 28, September 2006. ThamesGatewaystudybyDAC.pdf

For working class cohorts the vision of Thames Gateway has not fully incorporated their needs. The national website of the independent Working Class Association noted, “Since working class people living in the Thames gateway have minimal input into the regeneration process, it begs the question - who is intended to benefit from the development in the Thames Gateway? The fact that there is little in the way of direct democratic accountability over the process of regeneration signals that the interests of business are being given precedence over those of people living in the region.”^v

Economic Criticism:

The Thames Gateway development is being overseen by 37 different Government departments which is hindering progress towards new homes and jobs. James Brokenshire, Member of Parliament that represents the district of Rainham in the development shares this concern, “*Many people are depending on the new homes and new jobs promised by the Government as part of the regeneration of the entire Thames Gateway region. 5 years into this project, and the only progress which seems to have been made is the number of quangos established and bureaucrats hired. The Government must finally get to grips with this project and offer clear leadership and start delivering. As this report highlights, there is too much talk and very little action.*”^{vi}

Professor Peter Hall, who designed the original Thames Gateway concept 15 years ago, said about the current plans, “*There are far too many bodies involved, many of*

^v <http://www.iwca.info/cutedge/ce0005a.htm>

^{vi} http://www.jamesbrokenshire.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=148&Itemid=38

which are in competition and tripping one another up.” Other critics include award-winning architect Sir Terry Farrell, who described the plans as *“pathetically under-ambitious”* lacking *“vision,” “aspiration”* and overall is unrealistic. *“You could fit another central London between the River Lea and Dartford Bridge, an area which at the moment is substantially empty, by building at the density of Kensington and Chelsea,”* he said. *“Next to Canary Wharf there is a wilderness with dragonflies and cheap old factories. London needs the investment itself.”* Nigel Kersey of the Campaign to Protect Rural England agrees with Farrell, *“I hope they have finally realised that housebuilding should help regenerate urban centres and make use of existing infrastructure, rather than further erode the green belt and create more commuting from dormitory towns.”*^{vii} The potential for 200,000 homes and 300,000 jobs is serious business for London and everyone wants to get involved but for now the government needs to sort out the productive counsel from the non-productive.

The Thames Gateway plans are “ministerial exaggerat[ed]” and are seriously under-funded, argues Mike Gwilliam director of Planning and Transport at South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA) and Marc Hume of Thames Gateway Kent Partnership. Gwilliam points out that the “housing pressure hotspots” would not be alleviated by growth areas like Kent. Gwilliam does not think the government’s estimates of homes and jobs are accurate. He said that this figure was a “red herring” and the real

^{vii} Thames Gateway'tsar' to fast-track 200,000 homes, Evening Standard (London), Jul 25, 2006 by Mira Bar-Hillel http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qn4153/is_20060725/ai_n16638077

figure was closer to 120,000 homes. Gwilliam emphasizes the need for a new realistic regional planning to reinforce investor confidence in the development..^{viii}

Transportation/Infrastructure Criticism:

There is a heavy criticism pertaining to the lack sufficient supporting infrastructure like schools, hospitals and transport. This could limit the region's appeal for homeowners. Some believe developers goals do not coincide with the goals of London residents. The Thames Gateway has been described as a committee of myriad different agencies developing one parcel at a time with no productive comprehensive goal. When considering the logistics and functions of transportation this piecemeal development can prove to be sternly unproductive^{ix}

A public inquiry beginning in April 2007 will discuss a rail freight depot proposed at Howbury near Slade Green by ProLogis. The area of Crayford Marshes north of the present train sheds will be affected. Trains would be a positive alternative to road haulage. However, there is skepticism as to how realistic this plan is. Railways in the area are heavily used by scheduled passenger trains, new tracks will need to be laid to boost local rail capacity towards Dartford, and the cost benefit analysis of more tracks compared to more productive service is inconclusive. There is also great speculation among many critics as to the aptitude of Thames Gateway chief executive, Judith Armitt, the former CEO of Medway Council. Several experts are disappointed that a higher-profile planner was not given this unprecedented task and responsibility. Her seemingly

^{viii} Regeneration & Renewal, 3 October 2003

http://www.regionalfutures.org.uk/newsdigest/newsletteroct03_page1250.aspx

^{ix} http://property.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/property/new_homes/article623047.ece

lack of substantial experience may hinder investment prospects and overall confidence in the project.

The planned Thames Gateway Bridge is an important element of the Thames Gateway Regeneration Project. The vision of the London Transport Authority is to improve access to the Gateway area by building a 3 km long local road bridge between Beckton and Thamesmead, two areas in the Thames Gateway that have suffered from the decrease in industry in the East London area. The bridge will connect two major roadways that currently run on opposite sides of the Thames and is scheduled to be opened in 2012.

The proposal site is near some industrial zones however there are also residential zones adjacent to the proposed bridge site, particularly on the southern edge of the Thames. Criticism of the bridge project has highlighted the inevitable increase of noise and air pollution linked to the expected increases in traffic in the area. Traffic jams on the bridge are also expected, which will exacerbate noise and air pollution in the area.

According to a 2004 report in the Guardian newspaper^x, the Transport for London's environmental impact assessment "*Admits that the bridge will cause breaches of both UK and EU air quality limits... some residents may need to sleep with windows closed to avoid the risk of sleep disturbance.*"

The bridge proposal expects to promote economic development in the immediate surrounding areas especially for the residents on the south side of the Thames as they will have much quicker access to the north side. However, John Whitelegg from York

^x Hodgson, Martin. 2004. *Troubled Waters*.. Guardian Unlimited Network. London. <http://society.guardian.co.uk/environment/story/0,14124,1330984,00.html>

University argues that most benefits may be enjoyed by commuters from farther distances than residents from the immediate surrounding communities.

The bridge crossing is a very important part of creating new development opportunities in the area. One major question that has been raised the planning process is what kind of traffic should be promoted. Should cars be promoted over public transport and cyclists? Decisions like these will shape communities for years to come once the plan is implemented. Transport for London estimates that, by 2016, some 19.9 million vehicles will use the bridge every year. Independent transport consultant John Elliott had criticism of planners who often underestimate potential problems. *“I don't think they fully paint the picture of the amount of generated traffic from the new bridge, nor of the effect of that increase in traffic on congestion elsewhere. Extra traffic will fill up other roads and cause congestion throughout east London.”*

Plans for the bridge were considered concealed and not made open to adequate public consultation. East London University Professor Kerry Hamilton notes, *“There was very poor awareness of the Thames Gateway Bridge proposal. Instead of mounting an awareness campaign and following it with a consultation exercise, Transport for London attempted to do both simultaneously.”* TfL thoroughly rebutted many of Hamilton's claims but these criticisms are widely shared.

Richard Bourne, of campaign group Transport 2000, said *“Building the bridge would mean that the development of the Thames Gateway, perhaps the most important urban regeneration scheme in Europe, would proceed along discredited and out-moded car-dependent lines.”* The bridge has gone through the public review and deliberation process. Its main purposes will be to improve accessibility to and within the Thames

Gateway area, support the regeneration of East London, and reduce journey times. A decision on whether or not the scheme will proceed from the Mayor's office is expected in spring 2007.^{xi}

One essential transportation need for the Thames Gateway is the Crossrail which is a network of commuter rails linking areas across London. The costs for the new Crossrail systems, including those that will service Thames, is expected to be about £16 billion at 2006 prices. In a May 2003 debate, Transport Secretary Alistair Darling, warned that Crossrail must not be implemented "*on the cheap*." The government does not believe that Crossrail will be completed before the Olympics in 2012 and will not contribute to short term transport solutions. Many believe Crossrail will come too late to prevent severe overcrowding in the Thames Gateway area and comprehensively London's transport system.^{xii}

^{xi} <http://www.tfl.gov.uk/tfl/thames-gateway/tgw-bridge/>

^{xii} [http://www.politics.co.uk/issuebrief/public-services/rail/crossrail/crossrail-\\$366680.htm](http://www.politics.co.uk/issuebrief/public-services/rail/crossrail/crossrail-$366680.htm)