

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING (APPEALS) (SCOTLAND) REGULATIONS 2013

**APPEAL UNDER SECTION 47(2) OF THE TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING (SCOTLAND) ACT
1997 BY DART ENERGY (FORTH VALLEY) LTD CONCERNING COAL BED METHANE PRODUCTION,
INCLUDING DRILLING, WELL SITE ESTABLISHMENT AT 14 LOCATIONS AND ASSOCIATED
INFRASTRUCTURE AT LETHAM MOSS, FALKIRK, AND POWDRAKE ROAD, NEAR AIRTH, PLEAN
(REFERENCES PPA-240-2032 AND PPA-390-2029)**

PRECOGNITION BY DAVID ALEXANDER

ON BEHALF OF

**CONCERNED COMMUNITIES OF FALKIRK
(AND SUPPORTERS)**

1. My name is David Alexander and I am currently one of two SNP members representing the Falkirk North, multi member, Ward of Falkirk Council. I became the leader of the main opposition SNP Group and served in this capacity from 1992 to February 2001 when I became Leader of Falkirk Council and served in that position until May of 2007. From 2007 to May 2012 I led the opposition within Falkirk Council before standing down as Group Leader in May of 2012 and have been a back bench Opposition Member since that date.
2. In addition to 26 years of experience at a local level, in 2004 I was appointed by the current First Minister to serve in his Shadow Cabinet as “Local Government Spokesperson” and served that body until May 2007 when the SNP formed a minority government after the 2007 elections.
3. As my party’s longest serving Councillor in Falkirk Council and with the considerable experience gained at both local and national level I now use that experience to guide and advise the next generation of Councillors and local community groups.
4. Of course my main area of expertise relates to the particular period between 2001 and 2007 when I was Leader of Falkirk Council during which time the District began a transformation from the post industrial time with declining industries and opportunities to the regenerated district with the ability to take advantage of our unique location at the centre of Scotland, transport links and general environment. At that time I was also a board member of Scottish Enterprise Forth Valley and NHS Forth Valley giving me a unique insight into how Economic Development and Health go hand in hand.

5. In my evidence I will outline the industrial heritage which informed the challenges to Falkirk's future; the commitment and effort it took to remodel Falkirk along a future which saw green policies going hand in hand with civic pride and a flourishing economy; and how I believe Dart's application puts at risk this process of positive change.

The Challenges to Falkirk's Future

6. Falkirk district has a long and rich industrial heritage. The Carron Iron Works was where the Industrial Revolution was born and Carron has become synonymous with the birth of heavy industry leading to the use of the term "Foundry Town" to describe Falkirk.
7. In the middle part of the 20th century the area became the prime site for the new industries of Chemicals and oil - so much so that the town of Grangemouth required to be effectively built to house both the plants and also the workforce.
8. The canal network also contributed to the role of Falkirk as an industrial hub which included coal mining and the infrastructure that goes with such industries. Like so many comparable towns the basic infrastructure fell into disrepair leaving the landscape scarred and an air of despondency within the wider communities concerned. The term "post industrial town" became a stigma term that created an image of decline and decay and one that Falkirk had borne for many years.
9. Despite our problems the statistics for the overall local economy appeared healthy and the Oil and Gas Sector along with the Petro Chemicals industries were booming. However, in 2001 BP announced from left field that they were shedding 1000 jobs from their Grangemouth Refinery and Petro Chemical Plant with the equivalent number of jobs been lost in the supply and support sectors being lost as a direct consequence. BP management also made it clear that if the downsizing did not deliver the plant into higher profitability then they would close the complex which would have resulted in the loss of a further 3000 jobs directly employed by BP themselves and, once again, equivalent number in the supply and support sectors.
10. Commissioned reports for Falkirk Council by Scottish Enterprise Forth Valley confirmed what we already suspected in that the Falkirk economy was over reliant on Oil, Gas, and Petro Chemicals. We concluded that we desperately had to diversify the economy.
11. A combination of officers from Falkirk Council, Scottish Enterprise Forth Valley, Forth Valley College, Falkirk Business Panel and various other third party partners produced the first Falkirk Action Plan that was submitted to the Scottish Executive.
12. This was developed into a full blown Economic Development Strategy "My Future's In Falkirk" (MFIF), a strategy that became internationally respected and was described by the then Communities Minister, Wendy Alexander MSP, as "the best she had seen".

13. The strategy relied on 18 specific projects with a number of principles and a general ethos to give flexibility to allow Falkirk Council and her partners to take advantage of opportunities that may present themselves through changing market requirements.
14. In seeking to redress the imbalance in the Falkirk economy we had to overcome major obstacles, not least of which was the image of Falkirk as a run down post industrial town in the eyes of investors. MFIF sought to repackage Falkirk district as a clean, green pleasant place to live and work. This was necessary in order to promote the location benefits of Falkirk and our excellent transport links at the heart of Scotland.

The Outcome

15. Ten years further on from the launch of MFIF and we can see the impact of the strategy on both the general environment and the overall picture of the Falkirk economy. As I write we are preparing for the official opening of the Helix Eco Park between Falkirk and Grangemouth. Projects such as the Helix Park, which was the recipient of Scotland's largest ever lottery award of £25 million, have helped reposition the local economy and contributed to the changing perception of Falkirk District. The practical side of the Helix is that it links the world famous Falkirk Wheel development and waterways upgrade at the Forth & Clyde Canal with Grangemouth featuring the iconic Kelpies. The latter structure giving Falkirk a second major tourist attraction that will not only draw in new visitors to the area but also hold these people in the Falkirk area for longer thus boosting the local economy. Tourism is a growing contributor to the Falkirk economy but this growth is dependent on the retention of the image we present of a modern green society that has pride in its industrial past but recognises that this contrasts with the vision for the future.
16. Other outcomes from the repositioning of Falkirk District include developments of a series of strategies including a local biodiversity policy, open space and green strategies.
17. On the green agenda Falkirk has won a considerable number of awards for recycling where we have never been out of the top three within Scotland for our levels of re-cycling of domestic waste, all of our primary schools have green flag awards for environmental matters and our parks and recreational spaces have received additional investment through an innovative park strategy.
18. There are a number of indicators for the success of MFIF not least being the growth in the population of Falkirk district which has risen from 148,000 to 158,000 in ten years. The decision to go for growth in the residential population has been a success as the above statistics demonstrate. Falkirk district has around 11,000 new houses in the pipeline as part of the district wide Local Plan, demonstrating the confidence felt by not only Planners but also the investors in this industry all of whom say environment is a major factor in their high levels of confidence. To sustain this high level of confidence we are seeking to enhance Falkirk District's green credentials.

19. Another objective of MFIF is to encourage and facilitate growth in the levels of civic pride by various means. One of which is improved engagement with our communities and the groups that add value to the area. This is very much in line with the objectives of the Scottish Government's Community Empowerment Bill and I and many other Councillors have applauded CCoF's Community Charter for giving shape to the values which underlie this civic pride.
20. One example of not only the success of this engagement strategy but also the need for even greater public engagement on the shape of their community is the work of the Concerned Communities of Falkirk. The knowledge and expertise they have brought to the table on the issue of Coal Bed Methane Extraction is phenomenal and they are one of the best examples of a community fully and properly engaged on the shape and direction of travel they wish their elected representatives to take on their behalf. The group's Community Charter will, in my opinion, become a template for community groups across the length and breadth of Scotland. It is the very outcome the Scottish Government sought with the formulation of the Community Empowerment Bill.

The Future

21. If we are to continue to diversify our local economy, develop our tourism industry and further improve the lives of residents we require continuity with the MFIF strategy. Proper strategic planning is required to ensure this continued improvement; Planning Policy is a crucial element of this process.
22. It is my personal view based on the experience of seeking to re-brand Falkirk as something other than a post industrial district, that the proposals submitted by Dart Energy are not only in conflict with the wider economic development strategy adopted but would be clearly detrimental to the processes of positive change.
23. I further believe that many of the gains Falkirk has achieved in terms of the re-energising of our communities through the promotion of civic pride and the green agenda that favours young families in particular would be compromised if Dart Energy's proposals were to be accepted. Their application is a throw back to a bygone era, an era that left scars both physical and on the wider perception of our district that has taken massive investment, financial, physical and emotional to turn around.
24. To approve the Dart Energy application would be regressive, and detrimental to the area, something no sane individual would want.

(words – approx. 1650)

18 February 2014