



PRESS RELEASE 22nd May 2018

COUL LINKS GOLF DEVELOPMENT IS “FANTASY ECONOMICS”

Another report by a leading economist calls into question economic impact claims made by the developers of the proposed Coul Links golf course.

The assessment by Professor Gordon Hughes criticises an earlier economic forecast by Biggar Economics, which was funded by the developers and submitted as part of their planning application to Highland Council. Professor Hughes is a former Professor of Economics at the University of Edinburgh and was a senior adviser on energy and environmental policy at the World Bank.

According to Professor Hughes: “As with all too many of the economic assessments intended to shore up planning applications, the report by Biggar Economics is simply spurious. It claims substantial economic benefits for a relatively small project, when any careful and independent economist would be likely to come to the conclusion that the net impact will be small at best.”

In a comparison with visitor play on the nearby world-famous Royal Dornoch Championship course, Professor Hughes notes that Coul Links is predicted to attract “twice the number of visitors to a new course with higher green fees and little history”, describing this as “fantasy economics, not serious analysis”.

“Adding 30-35 jobs within this labour market will make no significant difference to the economic prospects of the area. The case for or against the Coul Links project should be decided on other planning considerations.”

Dr Tom Dargie, chair of local opposition group Not Coul said: “Last year an analysis by Steve Westbrook – Director of the Economic Intelligence Unit at the University of the Highlands and Islands – came to the same conclusions now reached by Professor Hughes, that the economic impact of Coul Links would likely be much less than that promised by the developers. These are the only detailed analyses made of this scheme. Highlands and Islands Enterprise has strongly supported the development but did not subject it to careful scrutiny.

“It all feels acutely reminiscent of the Trump development at Menie. Surely we must learn from past mistakes and accept that a small number of mostly low-paid, seasonal jobs simply do not justify the loss of a triple protected and internationally important site. Dune habitats like Coul are rarer than rainforest and were they to be buried under golf lawns then this precious jewel in the Highlands’ environmental crown would be lost, forever. That’s why more than 1,400 people have now written to Highland Council to object, making this one of the most unpopular proposals in the Council’s history.

“The most frustrating thing is that a solution is staring the Coul Links developers in the face. As SNH have advised, a golf course could be built using more of the adjacent agricultural land, avoiding the most sensitive and protected areas. But as with the Trump development, the developer seems stubbornly determined to hold a gun to the Council’s head by forcing them to choose between golf jobs and dunes, when we could have the former without the tearing up the latter.”

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NOTES TO EDITORS

- Not Coul is an unincorporated group of Third Party objectors, opposing September 2017 plans which were submitted to Highland Council for an 18-hole golf course on the site (application reference 17/04601/FUL) by a group of developers led by US millionaires Mike Keiser and Todd Warnock.
- Coul Links a stretch of coastline in East Sutherland, near the village of Embo. It is protected for its rare dune habitats and wildlife by national (Site of Special Scientific Interest), European (Special Protection Area) and international (Ramsar) designations.
- Coul Links is home to more than 1,200 species including the extremely rare Fonseca's Seed Fly, which is restricted worldwide to this stretch of coastline.
- Scottish Natural Heritage and a group of organisations, including RSPB Scotland, The Scottish Wildlife Trust and National Trust for Scotland, have objected to the proposal on the basis that it runs contrary to the Scottish Planning Policy (SPP), by compromising the environmental integrity of the site.
- The developers claim that "less than 2%" of the site will be affected and that mitigation measures will lead to biodiversity net gain. Coul is part of the large Loch Fleet SSSI which is 80% tidal mud and sand. In fact, the impact on land habitat is very large and analysis by Scottish Natural Heritage shows extensive loss of dune heath, dune grassland and dune wetland would occur. SNH also considers that mitigation measures will be largely ineffective, and states that "adverse impacts will still greatly outweigh any benefits for the sand dune habitat".
- The developers claim "overwhelming local support", even though consultations held in Embo and Dornoch to poll support were only attended by around 10% of the local population. 1,424 objections have to date been lodged with Highland Council versus 342 support comments. Almost 90,000 people have signed a UK petition against the development, while a petition supporting it closed with 606 signatures.

Further information:

<https://wam.highland.gov.uk/wam/applicationDetails.do?activeTab=summary&keyVal=OX10GYIHH0I00>

www.coullinksgolf.com

<http://www.notcoul.com/home.html>

<https://you.38degrees.org.uk/petitions/conserves-coul-links-for-nature-not-golf-1>

Attachments:

- Report by Professor Gordon Hughes and Fol (HIE release)
- Economic assessment by Not Coul and report by Steve Westbrook
- Image (no photo credit required)

Please direct all press enquires and requests for comment to Not Coul:

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