

## Eco-towns? Britons say no thanks

James Kanter



Since the "eco-town proposal" proposal for Stoughton became public, posters proclaiming "Down with Eco Town" adorn shop windows and homes in Stoughton and nearby villages. (James Kanter/International Herald Tribune)

The British may be among Europeans most concerned by climate change, but few people in this tiny village in the English Midlands want to be part of their government's latest proposal for a low-carbon future: an initiative called eco-towns.

Stoughton is one of about 60 areas under consideration for new eco-town developments, so-called because they are supposed to be made carbon neutral through clean technology and projects to reduce carbon dioxide. A shortlist of about 15 areas will be announced shortly, and Stoughton - like a number of other communities across Britain - is fighting hard to avoid selection.

Villagers in Stoughton and their politicians say that their area is predominantly rural and that these developments, containing up to 20,000 new homes, would do more harm than good to the environment and to the community. They also say eco-towns are being used by developers as a smokescreen to win approval for unpopular projects to ease a chronic housing shortage in Britain.

The eco-town concept was mooted by Prime Minister Gordon Brown last year and it partly reflected his strategy to outflank the opposition Conservative leader, David Cameron, on green issues.

Government officials insist that eco-towns are innovative way to cut greenhouse gases at a time when residential housing represents about a quarter of British carbon emissions. They also say that constructing entirely new infrastructure to create low-carbon housing is much more cost effective than adapting older housing.

In part, the hostility toward eco-towns reflects the desire of locals to avoid new developments that would threaten their rural beauty spots. But it also highlights how difficult it could be for governments - even in green-minded countries like Britain - to find ways of developing housing that genuinely transforms the way citizens live and work.

Developers have "stuck on the word 'eco' and they are hoping that will have a whole new appeal," said Edward Garnier, a Conservative member of Parliament who represents an area that includes Stoughton. "I'm yet to be convinced that many of these eco-towns are anything more than reheated planning proposals that were turned down in the past," he said.

Phil Edwards, a spokesman for the Cooperative Group, which owns the land and is seeking to develop the eco-town jointly with English Partnerships, a government agency, said plans for Stoughton were genuinely new. But he said it was too early to say what technologies would be used to help the town reach zero carbon status.

Edwards said those plans would be discussed with the community if an eco-town in Stoughton were given the go-ahead.

According to the British housing minister, Caroline Flint, the eco-towns would be entirely new kinds of settlements because of ways they would manage water, encourage community living, and prioritize pedestrians, cyclists and public transport.

Families would live within a 10-minute walk from newly developed schools and health centers, while fewer than half of all households would rely on cars for their transport needs. Each town would also have to set aside about half an hectare, or an acre, of green space for every hundred homes.

Another benefit, Flint said, would be that up to half of each development would consist of affordable housing to ensure "that the very highest standards of green technology aren't only the preserve of the wealthy."

Environmental experts say one sign that the government is serious about eco-towns is the promise of thousands of pounds of tax breaks for purchasers of zero carbon homes.

Georgina Crowhurst, an environmental lawyer with the firm Clyde & Co. in London, said developers were eager to participate in building eco-towns because they expected enthusiastic buyers for homes.

Villagers in Stoughton say it would make far more sense to upgrade existing housing stock in the nearest big city, Leicester, rather than create towns from scratch impinging on nearby villages, paving over farmland and destroying recreational facilities.

In the case of Stoughton, those facilities include a small airfield situated at the heart of the planned eco-town. A flying club there would have to close if development went ahead, and its members are among the stiffest opponents of the project.

Ivan Court, a manager of the Leicestershire Aero Club, said he did not believe that any town could be made to be carbon neutral.

Court said the airfield would have no greater impact on local air pollution than an eco-town; he also pointed out that the 70 light aircraft based at the airfield each consumes about the same amount of fuel as a standard-size family car travelling over similar distances.

Since the proposals for Stoughton became public in November, hundreds of people from towns and villages have marched and leafleted against the plans. Posters proclaiming "Down with Eco Town" adorn shop windows and homes in Stoughton and nearby villages.

Locals are particularly wary of a growth in traffic, warning that a new town could bring as many as 30,000 additional cars in the area.

Villagers say other plans for the eco-towns - such as keeping drivers to speeds of 25 kilometers, or 15 miles, per hour on key roads - were unrealistic, and that any new development inevitably means new roads and vehicles.

"We're told that the idea is that people will stay in this eco-town, and that they won't need their cars to travel that much away from the town," said Bob Battey, 72, who lives in Stoughton.

"But how can you enforce the kinds of rules that would take away peoples' freedom of choice?"

Disponível em: <<http://www.iht.com>>. Acesso em 1/4/2008.

A utilização deste artigo é exclusivo para fins educacionais.