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'They've stolen our Drill Hall' - claim

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Angry campaigners accused council bosses of 'stealing the Drill Hall from the people of Sidmouth' in order to realise their own long-held vision for Port Royal at a packed meeting this week.

Residents filled All Saints Church Hall to capacity on Wednesday to oppose any scheme that levels the site to make way for a massive redevelopment.

They were mobilised by Sidmouth district councillors calling for the existing buildings to be 'retained, refurbished and reused' - and who urged the community to take lessons from East Devon District Council's (EDDC) regeneration projects in Exmouth and Seaton.

The authority, which owns much of the land at Port Royal, is running a scoping study with



Architect Alex Vick has created these designs of how Sidmouth Drill Hall could look as part of an alternative vision by 'Three Rs' campaign group.

Ham owner Sidmouth Town Council (STC) to consider the area's potential and limitations.

Campaigners are concerned that the idea put forward in a recent consultation was a mixed-use scheme with up to 30 homes that could stand up to five storeys high - but the authorities say they remain open-minded and claims to the

contrary are 'scaremongering'. Councillor Matt Booth, who is leading the 'Three Rs' campaign with colleagues Cathy Gardner, Marianne Rixson and Dawn Manley, said: "Port Royal could have endless community benefits - or you could pour five storeys of concrete on it and destroy the heritage. I cannot see how an option that considers

using the existing buildings hasn't gone into the consultation."

Clr Booth previously ran a separate campaign to reopen the Drill Hall for community use. He told the meeting: "I tried to work with STC and EDDC, but they said no. They said the Drill Hall will never be restored and Port Royal will never be developed in the way I hoped - because the [EDDC] cabinet would never sign it off."

He added that constraints such as the flood risk, the conservation area and a covenant on the Ham would make many developers consider the site 'toxic'.

Vision Group for Sidmouth member Robert Crick claimed a covenant proving that the Drill Hall was left to the people of Sidmouth had been lost.

He claimed offers of sworn affidavits of its existence were 'ignored' by EDDC chief executive Mark Williams.

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Drill Hall campaigner Mary Walden-Till, Cllr Marianne Rixson, Jeremy Woodward, Di Fuller, Cllr Matt Booth and Cllr Cathy Gardner at the Three Rs campaign meeting in Sidmouth's All Saints Church Hall on Wednesday.

Packed meeting hears 'nothing has been decided' over Port Royal

From front page

"They [EDDC] stole the Drill Hall and tell us they own it, because they are in charge," he said.

Cllr Gardner said: "We have learned a lot from EDDC's regeneration projects in Seaton and Exmouth. If you have any idea what happened there, you will understand why we are terrified. We have to act early in the process. We need STC to stand up for the town."

She warned that the likes of Premier Inn or Travelodge could be interested in Port Royal if the 30 homes allocated in the Local Plan cannot be delivered.

Cllr Gardner said that the 'best value' EDDC has to get for land it owns does not have to be monetary, and Port Royal could deliver a community benefit.

Sidmouth Gig Club member Jacqui Blackmore asked if the community could buy Port Royal from EDDC. Cllr

Booth replied it was 'not unheard of' but would require a 'buy in' from STC.

Resident Kate Norbury drew parallels with the 'threat' of bookshop chain Waterstones buying Kennaway House, which galvanised residents to launch a £1million bid to save it.

Defending the scoping study at the meeting, Port Royal reference group chairman Councillor Jeff Turner said: "There are no proposals on the table at the moment. It's not from STC or EDDC."

Cllr Ian Barlow added: "We are taking an independent look at it - that's exactly what we have done. Nothing has been decided. We have gone to independent consultants."

A spokeswoman for EDDC and STC said: "Questions around land value, flooding and covenants are all pre-empting the scoping study being undertaken by an independent consultant, which will help the two councils move forward in

consultation with the community on the future of Port Royal.

"Stories of buildings on the Ham are scare-mongering and particularly unhelpful.

"Furthermore, a few people putting forward their own designs for individual buildings at this stage is pre-empting the wider views of Sidmouth people that will be detailed in the forthcoming scoping study report.

"Both councils retain an entirely open mind with regard to Port Royal and already have almost 250 responses to the consultation, together with the 1,863 from the Neighbourhood Plan, which will be used to help inform them of the public's ideas."

A petition supporting the 'Three Rs' vision has garnered more than 1,300 signatures.

Residents at the meeting were urged to sign and share it, and to attend the Sidmouth Town Council meeting on Monday, September 4.

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