

Wimbledon expansion plans face backlash

Residents' group has been fighting the project for four years, believing it will cause environmental damage and cut off public access to green space

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As he sipped a cup of English Breakfast tea in the cool comfort of an exclusive restaurant inside Wimbledon's Centre Court stadium, Christopher Coombe hardly looked like a rabble-rousing community activist bent on thwarting the ambitions of the All England Lawn Tennis Club.

Mr. Coombe, 72, is an ardent tennis fan who has been coming to Wimbledon for more than 30 years. He's among the club's debenture holders, an annual pass to the championships that's good for five years and currently costs upward of £200,000 (he shares the cost with friends).

Perhaps it's because he's such a Wimbledon insider that Mr. Coombe has become a leading figure in a prolonged battle against the club's £200-million expansion project, or CA\$374 million, which would more than double the number of championship courts and add an 8,000-seat stadium.

He and hundreds of other local residents believe the club is overreaching and that its overflowing coffers the AELTC generates more than CA\$760 million in annual revenue and CA\$170million in operating profit are already sufficient.

"We've been saying all along that we wouldn't be here if they didn't have such a grandiose plan," he said. "We love Wimbledon. They don't need to treble the size."

The AELTC is a members-only club that has been running the Wimbledon championships in southwest London for 147 years. Officials say they need more courts to keep up with the other Grand Slams in New York, Paris and Melbourne, which are run by national tennis organizations.

Crucially, the expansion will allow the AELTC to host the week-long qualifying tournament which is currently played in a community sports centre in nearby Roehampton. The club also argues that the project will create 200 seasonal jobs, add 11 hectares of parkland and increase community sports opportunities.

Much of the proposed expansion will be on a 29-hectare golf course the club fully acquired in 2018 and which is no longer in use. The golf course is across the street from the main Wimbledon site, and it lies within the wider Wimbledon Park green space, created in the 1700s. The area has been designated by the city as Metropolitan Open Land, which means that any development can only be permitted under "very special circumstances."

Mr. Coombe doesn't buy the club's pitch. He lives a few blocks from Wimbledon and like several hundred other local residents, he believes the project will cause untold environmental damage and cut off public access to badly needed green space. The group feels the expansion has also become a symbol of the greed and excess of modern-day sports events.

The residents' group, called Save Wimbledon Park, has been fighting the project at various municipal planning stages for four years. Last September, the AELTC won a major victory when London's deputy mayor, Jules Pipe, who is responsible for planning applications, approved the project and said that it met the "very special circumstances" test.

"As is widely accepted, the Wimbledon championships is the most prestigious tournament in world tennis, which attracts a global audience, visitors, and contributes to London's brands in terms of culture, sporting, heritage and as a visitor destination," Mr. Pipe said in his ruling. "I consider that the proposal would be important in helping secure the future of these Championships in this location."

Save Wimbledon Park has appealed that decision to a judge and a two-day hearing starts on Tuesday. It's also part of another legal action to determine whether the AELTC's proposal violates a covenant on the golf course which said any future development must ensure public access and recreation.

The group has raised around £200,000 from a crowdfunding campaign to cover legal costs and around 22,000 people signed a petition against the expansion. They also held a couple of public meetings recently that drew a few hundred people. "This isn't just a local issue. People are really bothered about green belts all around London," said Mr. Coombe.

Not everyone in the neighbourhood is against the project. During last September's hearing a couple of residents spoke out in favour of the development and the AELTC has won high-profile backing from several players including Novak Djokovic.

Sally Bolton, the club's chief executive, told reporters this week that the AELTC is confident the project will go ahead.

"In terms of the opportunity that presents, both in terms of advancing and protecting the future of the championships, but also providing incredible benefits for the local community, we're still really committed to those and determined to deliver them," she said.

Mr. Coombe said his group isn't giving up and the legal wrangling could go on for years. However, the club could probably win over the opponents if officials worked with residents, scaled back the project and allowed more public access.

"If they were just wanting 18 qualifying open courts over there and nothing else, I don't think we'd be here today. But they went big. They said, 'Oh, we want to do the whole lot,' " he said.

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