

Dramatic plans are proposed for town

By Owen Griffiths

A MAJOR development for Tonbridge described as the "single most dramatic" proposal in the town's history is being discussed by developers and council officers.

The plans for the Sovereign House site would see hundreds of new homes, as well as places to eat, drink and shop, built just behind the town's High Street.

But Tonbridge Civic Society, which met with developers Oracle Residential last week, has raised serious concerns about the effect of such a huge development taking place in the town.

Sarah Bailey, Oracle's sales and marketing director, said that the development, which incorporates a 15-storey tower and two other large-scale buildings, would be key to the regeneration of the area.

"For the general public, they are quite keen for the area to have a bit of life. Although it's a major development in its own right, it is part of the whole area," she said.

Should Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council allow the plans to go ahead, building work could start next year, but Ms Bailey said the

timetable was out of the company's hands.

"We are obviously looking for planning (permission) this year but the timing is all down to the local authority. We are hoping it will come this side of summer, but you never know."

As well as the business areas in the development, Ms Bailey said that some of the space in the buildings would be used to provide a facility for the public.

"In terms of community use, we have not finalised that yet, but we're looking at something like a crèche or a community centre."

The potential for such a large-scale building so close to the High Street and Tonbridge Castle, however, has not been well received by the civic society.

Peter York, the society's retiring chairman, said he welcomed the investment in the town but was put off by the sheer scale of the plans.

"We are a market town in a rural setting but this high-rise thing will be seen from every part of the town, and the surroundings as well.

"It seems to have been designed for somewhere like Croydon, as one of our members said."

He said that he did not believe the society's

approval of the 12-storey River Centre tower should set a precedent for future applications.

"It's like the Eiffel Tower. If everybody said that is now the height that we could build to, it wouldn't be special.

"I don't think Tonbridge is capable of supporting this kind of sized building."

He said he would welcome the opportunity for more public discussion of the proposals.

"I think what we would like, if possible, is to have a proper consultation because I don't think people are aware of what's happening here.

"They have had a consultation but it was to an invited audience. I think you could say that this is the single most dramatic planning application we have had for Tonbridge."

The borough council's director of planning, transport and leisure, Steve Humphrey, said officers were in discussions with Oracle over all aspects of the plans.

"This is clearly an important site in the future make-up of Tonbridge Town Centre, and the council's Area 1 Planning Committee will be considering a full report on the proposal in due course," he said.