

Consultation and the Rising Universe



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HORSHAM District Council, normally quite happy to take controversial decisions, has been uncharacteristically reluctant to decide the future of our iconic water feature which was due to have been up and running again months ago. When working as it should it is undoubtedly impressive and gives many people, particularly children, a lot of fun. But, that is the problem. From the start it has been dogged with problems. It

underwent a major overhaul in 2005 which was supposed to ensure its continued reliability, yet now the council has been told it will cost a substantial further sum to repair the hydraulics. It is right to question whether it should continue to use public money in this way. The leadership knows that whichever way it jumps it will offend a significant majority because since it was erected in 1996 the Rising Universe has polarised views in a quite remarkable way. However, one wonders whether the current consultation is really as open as the council suggests. Will it really stump up the cost needed to fully repair the sculpture, or is it hoping the vote will be so fragmented that

it can take a cheaper way out? Assuming the council wants to listen to the public, one is still left with the impression that the consultation was thought up hurriedly. Not enough has been done, for example, to think through who is being consulted and how. Whose voice should count? Horsham residents, visitors, or outsiders from anywhere who opt to vote on the council or County Times websites? And the three options – repair, lock in position, or remove – are inadequate. Nobody I have spoken to can imagine leaving the huge space at Lynde Cross completely empty. I would bet a large sum that if a fourth option had been added of replacing it with a more straightforward public

water sculpture that would have won the majority vote. The option of locking the mechanism is crazy. The whole point of the Rising Universe is just that – it rises! The only conceivable reason for considering this is that it is probably the cheapest option. But it would make the council and the town a laughing stock. So what is the answer? Unless the council is able to assure itself that maintenance costs can be contained at a reasonable level in the years ahead, and the record so far seems to suggest not, at some stage it will be forced to say enough is enough. Perhaps that time has come and it should bite the bullet and remove it. It would be a controversial decision but it would be made much more

acceptable to everyone if it were accompanied by a plan for a replacement. The Horsham Society has suggested raising the funds for a new public art feature – preferably with moving water – partly through public subscription. Individuals and local groups would be encouraged to give their support and the council could sponsor a competition to choose the design. *The Horsham Society is concerned about the town's past, present and future and seeks to promote good planning and design for the built environment and open spaces. For more information and details on how to join visit our website www.horshamsociety.org or telephone 01403 261905.*