Farrell launches Thames Gateway Parklands masterplan

9 October 2008 | By Dan Stewart

Sir Terry Farrell has unveiled his masterplan for the Thames Gateway Parklands.

The architect was appointed Thames Gateway Parklands champion last year by then housing minister Yvette Cooper and commissioned to produce a plan for the region.

The masterplan launched today knits together the various requirements of government and local authority agencies with the needs of stakeholders such as the South East England Development Agency and wildlife charity RSPB.

Speaking to Building ahead of today's launch, Farrell said that the masterplan was a concrete proposal and not simply a conceptual suggestion.

“There is a recognition that the Parklands vision is the vision, and not just part of the vision,” he said. “This is a coherent project.”

Connection and leadership

Working to address the concerns of the various governmental and conservation groups presented its own challenges, said Farrell. “Most of the job was getting from parties what they are doing already and what they would like to be doing.

“One of the great misconceptions about the Thames Gateway is that there’s nothing happening there. There is already a great deal of work being done in places like Gravesend. What this plan does is bring it all into one coherent, connecting idea.”

Farrell wants the region to have an identity similar to the Thames Valley, the Lake District or the Fens. “It's a holistic re-thinking of an eco-region,” he said.

One of the things lacking until recently was a sense of leadership, he said, especially when the project was being overseen by Thames Gateway Forum chairperson Judith Armit.

“She was the economist type,” he said, “and as a result I think the project gradually lost its way.”

The Thames Gateway is now to be the responsibility of the newly created Homes and Communities Agency, led by Sir Bob Kerslake - an improvement on the former structure, according to Farrell.
“They’re already thinking about it, and they intend to take a running start at it and take possession of it. It’s very positive,” he said. Farrell confirmed he had already met with HCA leaders about the plans, and called Kerslake a “proven leader”.

Finance and the future

Effective leadership may be one thing, but will there be the money to pay for Farrell’s plans? The government has already pledged £35m towards preserving and landscaping some of the parklands, but the project needs investment from the private sector if it is going to succeed.

Farrell seemed unconcerned by the possible impact the current financial crisis may have on his plans. “The government has put money towards it already, which shows they are serious about affording it. The only positive thing about a recession - as I can tell you, having lived through a couple - is that it gives you time to think about your plans and take stock of the benefits of long-term policy. That is what has been missing until this point.”

One government body already thinking about the long-term potential of the Thames Gateway is the mayor of London’s office, which has proposed building an eco-airport in the region. “An eco-airport?” said Farrell. “That sounds like a contradiction in terms.”

Maybe so, but Farrell applauded the Mayor for looking at the region in a different way. “I respect Boris for looking at different ideas, and this is what I would call a flyer,” he said. “That is, it is completely unproven. It could be a success or it could be a complete disaster. I don’t know. But if you don’t ask questions, you won’t get answers.”

Today’s launch will no doubt pose questions to the government about how to achieve Farrell’s vision, but it is enough for him that he has been given the freedom to bring together the various visions for the Gateway region.

“I am focusing on what is definite,” he said. “The Parklands concept is already underway. What we have done is put the jigsaw pieces together so that it resembles the picture on the box.”

Postscript: To see the Terry Farrell’s masterplan in context visit the <a href="http://www.thamesgatewayforum.com" target="_blank">Thames Gateway Forum</a> where the model will feature the designs.

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