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A35 Eype Picnic Site Faces Demolition for New Highways Depot

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The Eype picnic site, a well-used rest stop off the A35 west of Bridport, is set to be demolished to make way for a new highways depot, pending a decision by Dorset Council's Western and Southern Area Planning Committee this Thursday. The proposal, put forward by National Highways, has sparked significant local opposition, with nearly 120 residents voicing concerns over the loss of one of Dorset's few roadside rest areas.

The plan involves clearing the existing site, including its toilets and picnic facilities, to construct a new operational base for highway maintenance starting in 2026, when National Highways' current contract with Connect Roads expires. The proposed depot comprises a single-storey office, a 3,000-tonne salt barn, garages, parking facilities, and landscaping, with approximately 15 staff expected to operate from the site. National Highways argues the location is critical for rapid response during adverse weather, ensuring timely road gritting and maintenance along the A35.

However, the plan has drawn criticism from locals and Bridport Town Council, who argue the site's closure would deprive motorists of a vital rest stop. "Whilst the council understands and supports the need for a highway depot in this area, this should not be at the expense of the amenity provided for those travelling on the A35," the town council stated in its submission to Dorset Council. They proposed an alternative, suggesting that funding be allocated to develop a rest area at Bridport Football Club's car park.

Symondsburry Parish Council echoed these concerns, noting that even if only three per cent of the site's users are HGV drivers, as National Highways claims, this still represents a significant number of vehicles given the A35's heavy traffic. Locals have highlighted the site's popularity, particularly in summer, and suggested alternative locations for the depot to preserve the rest stop.

National Highways has defended the choice of location, stating it is the most suitable available and would reduce daily vehicle movements at the site from approximately 120 to around 60.

Dorset Council officers, in a report to the committee, suggest the closure could benefit Bridport's economy, as drivers may stop in the town for rest and refreshments. The report also notes the job creation that occurs during construction and operation, alongside the economic benefits of efficient road maintenance.

"In economic terms, the scheme would provide jobs during construction and operation. It is likely more will be spent in businesses in and around Bridport due to travellers visiting, rather than using the current site," the officer's report stated. It also claimed that nearby alternatives for rest, refreshment, and toilets are sufficient.

As the planning committee prepares to make its decision, the debate underscores a broader tension between infrastructure needs and the preservation of public amenities. The

outcome will determine whether the Eype site remains a haven for weary travellers or transforms into a functional hub for highway maintenance.