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MEMORIES: Remember these plans for the Isle of Grain? The London mayor revived his belief it is the best way to ease the airport capacity problem

Boring Boris bangs airport drum again in desperate election ploy

Chris Britcher reports on the surprising return this week of the whole concept of an estuary airport

THE leader of Medway Council has blasted Boris Johnson's latest effort to re-float his Boris Island airport as yet another bid to win over voters ahead of the London mayoral elections.

And he revealed it had set aside a fighting fund when it fixed its recent budget amid fears it came kicking and screaming back into life.

Although Mr Johnson is stepping down in May, he has been on the campaign trail for his Conservative candidate successor, Zac Goldsmith.

And it is that, says Alan Jarrett, that has fuelled the surprise re-emergence of the hugely controversial proposal.

It was touted again as a solution in a 78-page document released by the mayor's office this week entitled *Landing the Right Airport*.

It once again said only an airport east of London would solve the dilemma of the south east's aviation capacity problem.

In the report it reiterated the proposal on Grain and another on fully reclaimed land in the middle of the estuary - north of Whitstable.

It also suggested major expansion at Stansted - already a hugely successful airport serving the capital.

The current proposals being examined by the government are expansion at either Heathrow or Gatwick.

Boris Johnson used a bid to close Heathrow as a carrot on a stick for voters in west London - suggesting it could close if the estuary idea was adopted.

However, in a major report by the Airports Commission, headed by the economist Sir Howard Davies, it rejected the estuary proposals saying they were too expensive and the environmental impact would be too extreme.

There was an almost deafening chorus of opposition in the county to the proposals - including this newspaper which campaigned against it.

Speaking to KoS this week, Alan Jarrett, the Conservative leader of Medway Council said: "Was I surprised to hear he was re-float the idea again? Yes.

"I'm more surprised it didn't leak out beforehand. It seemed to take everyone by surprise.

"But what happened last time is that Boris helped his election for London Mayor courtesy of the west London vote. They can lose you an election, and the airport issue proved successful. This time around, Zac Goldsmith will not want to lose it. It's just politics and we're all politicians so you understand why they do it. But it is still a ridiculous plan we continue to oppose.

"When we were compiling the budget we took the view that we should allocate some money just in case - to keep something of a watching brief on the issue. It's only £25,000 but we knew the issue could reappear. After all, you never say never.

"Certainly Stansted is financially more viable - there's already an airport there and there's substantial land around it. But it's not for me to say where it should go.

"What I'd like is for people to take



notice of the Davies Commission rather than just cobble some report together."

In the report, Mr Johnson, now an MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, claimed: "The only credible solution is a new hub airport, located to the east of London, away from populated areas but connected by fast rail services to London and much of the UK.

"Having considered a long list of locations we identified three: the inner Thames Estuary, outer Thames Estuary and Stansted. Each could accommodate the four-runway hub that London and the UK needs. Our analysis predicts that they would offer around double the number of long haul and domestic destinations served by Heathrow today, while exposing 95 per cent fewer people to significant aircraft noise.

"A four-runway hub to the east of London, rather than jarring with the growth of London will support it, cat-

alysing the regeneration and housing to the east. It is forecast to contribute £92bn to UK GDP in 2050 and support 336,000 jobs nationally. This would be truly transformational for London and the UK.

"We must do better than Heathrow. We need a long term vision for the right airport that sustains our economy and safeguards our public health. That airport is a new four-runway hub airport at the Thames Estuary or Stansted - one that can support a United Kingdom fully engaged with the world. I would urge government not to turn its back on our future."

When the Davies Commission threw out the estuary plans in September 2014, it said it would cost too much and had "environmental hurdles" that "may prove impossible or very time-consuming to surmount".

Sir Howard added: "We are not persuaded that a very large airport in the Thames Estuary is the right answer to London's and the UK's connectivity needs.

"There are serious doubts about the delivery and operation of a very large hub airport in the estuary. The economic disruption would be huge and there are environmental hurdles which it may prove impossible, or very time-consuming to surmount.

"Even the least ambitious version of the scheme would cost £70 to £90 billion with much greater public expenditure involved than in other options - probably some £30 to £60 billion in total.

"There will be those who argue that the commission lacks ambition

and imagination. We are ambitious for the right solution. The need for additional capacity is urgent. We need to focus on solutions which are deliverable, affordable, and set the right balance for the future of aviation in the UK."

The Kent Wildlife Trust was one of the many organisations which spoke out before and were dismayed this week when the plans made another appearance.

Greg Hitchcock, Thames Gateway officer for the trust, said: "We remain vehemently opposed to suggestions that the Thames Estuary area is a suitable location for an airport.

"Such proposals have surfaced several times since the 1940s and get no less ridiculous. Most recently the Airports Commission, an independent panel appointed by the coalition government, ruled it out for a number of reasons after extensive consultation and research.

"For the trust, the impact on internationally important coastal, intertidal and marine habitats and species is unacceptable.

"The area is complex and unique, and has benefits that extend well beyond its area - for example, by providing an important nursery ground for North Sea fish. We suggest that if Boris wants to find an alternative to expansion at Heathrow he looks elsewhere."

Julian Brazier, MP for Canterbury and Whitstable, failed to return KoS calls on impacts of any possible outer estuary proposals may have for Whitstable.