

# RESTORED CANAL COULD PROVIDE MAJOR BOOST

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## Council agrees to look into project's feasibility

THE mother of all water features has taken a step forward with the council agreeing to investigate putting a canal through the centre of Swindon.

The council last night agreed to undertake a feasibility study to look in to digging up the old canal route through Swindon and connecting it to surrounding waterways.

Early indications are the project could cost between £30m and £70m.

Council leader Roderick Bluh said the decision to launch the study did not commit the council to reopening the waterway but he hoped it would show doing so was value for money.

He said the Kennet canal had attracted visitors to the area and injected millions in to that economy and the rewards for Swindon could be even more.

The canal report is due back to the council in February next year.

Coun Bluh (Con, Dorcan) said earlier reports had examined

reopening canals around Swindon but bypassing the town itself, at an estimated price tag of £70m.

He said it was cheaper to reopen the canal through the centre of the town, where it was flat and could attract more visitors.

He said it was the money, not engineering difficulties that would be the only hurdle to putting the canal through the town.

"They are still there, just filled in," Coun Bluh said of the canal routes.

"There is no doubt in my mind the restoration of a canal through Swindon could be a major boost.

"It adds much needed water to the town centre.

"It would act as a catalyst for regeneration along the route.

"It would go a very long way to reversing the negative views of Swindon held by many. We are committing to a serious look at a

canal. This is the last opportunity.

"I believe it is possible but we do need to understand the costs and implications of this sort of project. I believe there is huge support out there for it."

Coun Bluh did not tell the council meeting how much the feasibility study would cost, but said the money would be found in the council's existing budget.

Labour group leader Kevin Small said the council was right to investigate the canal but doubted it would stack up.

"I think it will be a challenge too far," Coun Small (Lab, Western) said. "I hope I'm wrong. At the moment I don't think it's achievable but we cannot make that judgement until we've this information."

The council vote was carried. Coun Owen Lister was the sole vote against.