

## 'Delay plans for new parking charges to maintain vitality'

By Times reporter

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An impassioned plea was made for the introduction of new car park charges to be delayed to maintain the vitality of town centres.

Christina Jackson, president of Richmond Chamber of Commerce, urged the council to put its proposals on hold for six months to support small businesses during the downturn.

She told the 170-strong audience at a economic summit at Twickenham stadium's new conference centre on Wednesday that some independent shops and firms were feeling the knock-on effects of the crisis.

It was not all bad news, she said. Businesses canvassed by the chamber showed some were faring better than expected as people's shopping habits changed.

But she said more could be



Summit: Susan Kramer MP, right, was among the many guests at Twickenham

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done to support the business sector and asked the council to consider a range of ideas.

These included:

□ Introduce a procurement policy so businesses can negotiate with the authority and ensure money stays in the area.

□ Penalise landlords of empty shop and office units so they are brought back into use quickly.

□ Allow small businesses to use A-boards to market themselves. The council banned A-boards on pavements last year.

□ Introduce a park and ride

scheme.

□ Introduce free 30-minute parking for shoppers or free parking one evening.

Richmond Council, which organised the summit, has moved across to a 10-day payment system so companies are paid promptly and is inform-

ing businesses about financial support available through commercial rate relief and other entitlements.

Council leader Serge Lourie said all ideas put forward at the meeting would be considered, but he ruled out Tory proposals to freeze council tax this year and scrap VAT on parking fees.

He also sounded a word of warning about the council's financial position and how it could restrict what ideas it took forward.

Councillor Lourie said: "The council is not immune from the financial crisis. We are being squeezed.

"We are seeing our revenue from activities like parking and planning falling. At the same time demand for services is rising."

And he would not be drawn on calls to delay the CO<sub>2</sub> parking charges which, if everyone is eligible to register for a discount, could net the council £320,000 a year.



Warning: Vincent Cable MP

## Property scheme

Twickenham MP Vincent Cable was guest speaker at Wednesday's summit and predicted there would be more difficult times ahead.

He told the conference: "People were borrowing enormous amounts - some six times their income to get on the property ladder - it was totally unsustainable."

He said the council was looking at ways of cushioning the blow for businesses and residents by bringing empty properties back on to the market, publicising advice for people falling into arrears and advice on where to go for financial support.