

Fears over threat of a private Bennachie

CONCERN that Bennachie's show-piece visitor centre could be left high and dry if the government's forestry privatisation plans get the go-ahead have been expressed by Gordon MP Malcolm Bruce.

For there is no guarantee that public access will be maintained if forestry land passes into private hands.

But guardians of the hill, the Bailies of Bennachie, have promised that neither the centre nor the well-loved Garioch landmark will be at risk.

Depute senior bailie James McKay said: "If the worst came to the worst, and Bennachie was put up for sale, there would be

By ALISON DUNCAN

nothing to stop the Bailies from buying it. We would certainly attempt to acquire it."

But he said he was hopeful that public pressure over access would force the government to back down on forestry sales.

"I'm more optimistic than I was," he said. "I don't think it's something local people should worry about too much."

Mr Bruce, who has campaigned for access to forestry land to be maintained, said: "The Scottish Office seem quite happy to sell off parts of Scotland for a fast buck.

"They don't seem to care that people will be denied access to enjoy their country.

"Bennachie is an extremely

important part of life here in the North-east, and up to 100,000 people visit every year.

"The Forestry Commission have spent time and money developing the conservation and recreation aspects of their ownership, and I believe the large number of visitors is testimony to their hard work. The possibility that future privatisation will stop access is totally unacceptable."

He added: "The government haven't said how they will ensure public access - nor if private owners will have any conservation commitments to the land in their care."

He has written to Scottish agriculture and environment minister Sir Hector Monro asking him to

clarify the situation. Prospective Liberal-Democrat Euro-candidate Simon Horner has called on Scottish Secretary Ian Lang to do the same.

Protesters hope the government will make an announcement on the privatisation review in the next few months. Mr Bruce said:

"There's been a lot of hostility to this, even among the Conservatives, so hopefully it won't happen."

● The newly-launched £400,000 interpretation centre at Esson's car park is expected to be completed by autumn. Its design incorporates North-east features such as hill forts, stone circles and symbol stones.

The facility will tell the story of Bennachie, and the people and wildlife who have lived on its slopes. The centre could attract up to 50,000 visitors a year.