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Sligo Greenway Co-op submission to 2040 Framework

Sligo Greenway Co-operative Society Ltd was registered in 2015 with the sole objective of enabling the 32km of disused rail line from Charlestown to Colooney to be returned to public use as a cycle and pedestrian Greenway. The founding members set this single goal in the belief based on earlier assessments that it would be the single most important public capital project to benefit South Sligo and enhance access to its many cultural social and sporting groups.

The Co-op has over 800 members to date, and has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with Sligo Co Council to govern our respective roles in the promotion of this project. The co-op has sought and received the full co-operation of Irish Rail in proceeding with the surveys and studies including access to detailed engineering files on the Charlestown to Collooney line. Two substantial studies have already been commissioned by our co-op to quantify the impact and the technical feasibility of this development

- An economic feasibility study by Meehan Tully identified the Greenway as the best option for the disused line recognizing that a greenway would operate under licence from Irish Rail such that Government policy would not be restricted in the event that it was decided to reinstate a rail service.
- The payback period they estimate could be less than two years based on conservative levels of use and a study format previously applied to the Great Western Greenway
- A technical feasibility study by RPS is underway which includes an environmental base line study and the best technical options for each stage of the process including the various crossings of public roads and other access points.
- This study will be completed before the end of 2017 and submitted to the Dept of Transport and Sport by Sligo Co Council with the Meehan Tully Report as part of an application for funding.

Sligo Greenway Co-op compliments the work to date on **Ireland's 2040 Framework** document, the values and vision it represents and in particular the realistic approach to setting growth targets by region and by category of town. A Growth target of 15% for smaller villages and towns will demand new levels of engagement by the development agencies of the state and local communities. Any shortfall will add to the pressures on the major urban centres, and therefore to pressure on land and housing prices, public services and school capacity. Quality of life projects such as the greenway will significantly enhance the prospects of towns and villages linked by greenway to avoid these pressures by achieving their growth targets.

The main reasons we believe Greenways will have a disproportionate effect on the growth potential of rural areas are;

- It highlights the positive side of small town versus urban quality of life considerations
- It restores the capacity of those smaller towns to attract and retain its well qualified young graduates and therefore the boutique enterprises which can offer them jobs within commuting distance.
- It presents a marketable attraction to visitors to share in the challenge faced by all smaller towns to sustain quality lifestyle amenities and cultural attractions, including craft enterprises, sports and cultural events and activities or coffee shops and restaurants. This in turn makes the small town more sustainable and capable of achieving higher population growth rates.

The main reason for this disproportionate effect from greenways however is that most small towns and villages are much richer in social enterprise than conurbations. They have an array of sporting and cultural facilities including golf, tennis, athletics, team sports, drama, dance, music, crafts and other societies and groups all looking for new members or supporters or patrons and offering much easier access than their counterparts in cities.

As a form of induction of the visitor into a local community, the greenway is much more likely to add to the sustainability of these social enterprises and to the commercial impact visitors bring to small villages and towns. In essence the pearls of sporting social and cultural events operating in isolation in rural Ireland are strung together to form a merchandisable necklace of amenities and experiences by the addition of a greenway adding further to the quality of life in areas rich in social enterprise.

This explains why a two-year payback on investment is credible in a greenway linking an area rich in social enterprise. The Sligo Greenway has additional reasons to be prioritized over and above the general greenway impact on environment, health and wellbeing and as a visitor attraction;

- The distinguishing feature of the old railway from Charlestown to Colooney was the number of level crossings. This led to it being nick named The Burma Road and to having a speed restriction of 30mph. The

number of level crossings at about one per mile meant that the old steam engine could not even achieve the restricted speed on this stretch of line! This drawback for a rail service is a key advantage for a greenway as it increases the number of access points and in effect gives the user access to virtually every village and townland in South Sligo and each of the residents in those villages and townlands direct greenway access.

-Many of South Sligo's towns and villages were added into the Upper Shannon Catchment Area Pilot Rural Development scheme which resulted in speculative home building on an unprecedented scale in the 1990s. This in turn resulted in over supply and had a serious impact on local property markets, and in turn on the appetite of banks and investors for further investment which persists in towns thus effected to this day. Such towns are ripe for ambitious population growth if their amenities and social enterprises are given the benefit of being linked by a greenway.

When as forecast for 2040 our population touches close to 6 million the population of the island as a whole is likely to be back at levels not seen since the Great Famine of the mid 19th century. The impact of the famine was especially acute in the North West which, even if the targets are met for 2040, will be the only region significantly off its pre-famine population peak.

The North West is also the region most at risk of not meeting its population growth target. It will require the fullest support of local government and the development agencies to enable it to compete as a place to live and work, even for its own native young graduates, with our major and faster growing urban centres.

Failure to achieve the targeted rate of growth in this region, given its unique challenges compounded by Brexit, and the consequences for Irish city living, of that failure, makes it all the more important that the strategy for 2040 optimises the prospects in the Northwest region and in our smaller villages and towns. To succeed the strategy must fully reflect the importance of the distinctive quality of life factors outside our cities and not stint on investing in the relatively small elements which include greenways, to make these towns and villages sustainable

To fail to do so means that we will be faced with the much greater cost of trying to ensure that public services keep pace with a higher than target population growth rate in our cities.

Conclusion

Spatial Strategies primarily set priorities for Public Capital Programmes and land use. Based on history they are a poor indicator of outcomes. We cannot afford this luxury in the 2040 strategy, not least because of the high growth it anticipates and the deep recession from which we have just emerged. Success will depend on giving more weight to the complex mix of small things which determine population settlement, while giving due weight to the powerful economic propensity for concentration.

Getting this wrong will put all public services under pressure, from over capacity in the regions, and under capacity in the cities. Getting it right will mean a quantum leap in the quality of and access to public services for all.

The difference is down to the allocation of the last billion of public spending, and whether the North West can be primed to be able to absorb its growth target. Greenways and other ways which add to the interconnectivity of the social and economic enterprises within its indigenous population and restore the live at home option, for highly qualified young people, and attract others to share that life experience as visitors, is a factor critical to the success of the new strategy. Land policy.

As is land use policy. It is notable that Ireland with one of the lowest population densities in Europe, ranks among the highest in cost of building land. **The Kenny Report** of over half a century ago, recommended that the owners of zoned land be paid a premium set by the state over its existing use value. Given that zoning is a function of local government, this would seem to be logical and not to unduly impact on property rights. Yet, local Government involvement in the process has the opposite effect, adding to the scarcity and therefore to the price of development land before we get to the imposition of development levies and other fees, all of which in an imperfect housing market further inflate the price of a house.

Given the scale of demand forecast in this strategy it is appropriate that it includes a mechanism to remove the anomaly of Europe's lowest density population paying Europe's highest prices for development land. Two practical and immediately available measures would fundamentally change the inflationary impact on development land of present procedures;

- 1) A developer by custom and practice is ceded control over public services such as water gas sewage etc. to undertake his development works. One of the unintended consequences is that he can effectively control development in the surrounding zoned area and manage the timing of competing housing in the area by managing the timing of commencement of building on adjoining lands, even long after his estate is occupied and handed over to the local authority by retaining a "ransom strip". In addition, the developer can profit from adjoining zoned lands without ever buying them. We could cite cases in greater Dublin where access to public services were sold by one developer to another at a cost of up to €200,000 per house. This cost and the market manipulation available through this kind of local government created local monopoly, can be avoided by the simple expedient of making it illegal for local authorities to cede control over public services. They could of course facilitate developers by providing them with access to these services under license, as in other countries even where the developer is extending these services at his own cost

- 2) County Development plans propose land for zoning based on their growth projections. It is then voted on by public representatives taking account of local representations from land owners/ developers and the

public. This invariably means that all land proposed for zoning is not approved resulting, if the population forecasts are correct, in a scarcity of zoned land.

Combined with retention of control of services by local authorities this measure would remove two artificial constraints on the zoned land market to which other steps could be added to greatly reduce the impact of site cost on new housing stock

***Signed: John McCarrick, Hon Sec. Sligo Greenway Co-op
On behalf of Sligo Greenway Co-op***

November 2nd 2017