

Minutes of the April Monthly Meeting of Athlone Town Council, which was held in the Civic Centre, Church Street, Athlone at 6.00p.m. on Monday 4th April, 2011.

Attendance:

Mayor: Cllr. S. Buckley Byrne

Members: Cllrs. M. Cooney, J. Henson, P. Hogan, G. McFadden, K. Molloy, K. Moran, A. O'Rourke & A. Shaw.

Officers: Mr. Danny McLoughlin, County Manager
Mr. Barry Kehoe, Director of Services
Mr. John Walsh, Town Clerk
Mr. Alan Kelly, Town Engineer
Mr. Aidan Bass, Administrative Officer
Ms. Anne McNamara, Assistant Staff Officer

Minutes:

It was proposed by Cllr. Moran,

Seconded by Cllr. Molloy and resolved,

“That we hereby adopt and confirm the Minutes of the March Monthly Meeting which was held on March 7th 2011”.

Matters Arising:

Cllr. Cooney stated that the signs on the motorway which show the new logo for the Midlands Region, are far too small and barely visible. The County Manager said he would pass on his views and hopefully they would be addressed.

Cllr. Shaw asked that the Minutes be amended regarding Destination Athlone and his comments. He stated that “the existing tax incentives are ineffective and should be reviewed by this Committee”, not that we need new tax incentives for tourism in the area.

To clarify the position for Cllr. Hogan, the Town Engineer said that all reasonable costs for reconnection to the water main in St. Patrick's Terrace, will be paid to the five householders directly by Westmeath County Council and they pay their contractor.

Draft Loughandonning Plan:

Cllr. Moran felt this Plan should be deferred until the CFRAM report comes out in 2015, as it will bring more clarity to the area regarding the flooding issues. Cllrs. Cooney and Molloy expressed agreement with this and the County Manager agreed that it would be a reasonable thing to do.

It was proposed by Cllr. Moran,
Seconded by Cllr. Cooney and resolved,
“Having considered the Loughandonning Local Area Plan we hereby decide not to make the said Local Area Plan”.

The Director confirmed for Cllr. Cooney that there were sufficient objectives in the Town and County Development Plans, to justify the construction of the Link Road independently.

The Waterfront Study:

The County Manager’s report had been circulated and Mr. Terry McCague, Senior Planner, advised the Members that a number of issues had emerged regarding the amenity value, tourism value, the asset value and how to fully exploit these values. Seven submissions were received and responded to as in the Report. He asked the Members if they had any queries.

Cllr. Moran felt the Plan should proceed and asked that it start by improving the area at the Strand, the steps there and the edge to Burgess Park. He asked that a place be provided down river from the weir, to launch small boats. Cllr. Cooney pointed out that residents of the Strand area, have serious reservations about the pedestrian bridge and asked if approving the plan would mean approving of the Bridge. Cllrs. Shaw, O’Rourke and Buckley Byrne expressed a positive reaction to the Study. The Manager informed the Members that the provision of the pedestrian bridge would involve a Part 8 process and would need much more investigation and independent engineering assessment. He was merely seeking a mandate to explore further the projects and concepts in the Study.

It was proposed by Cllr. Moran,
Seconded by Cllr. Hogan and resolved,
“That we hereby approve and adopt the Waterfront Study”.

Update on N6 Works;

The Director introduced Mr. Michael Kelly, Project Engineer and Ms. Deirdre Reilly, E.E. in Roads. He outlined the work being done, the reasons for it and its cost. The contractor is Wills Bros. Ltd. and the contract is due to take 40 weeks. He said the works have been broken into 11 phases: Phase 1 is a series of temporary median crossings to allow for a contra-flow system; Phases 2-6 are discrete road sections eastbound and Phases 7 to 11 are discrete road sections westbound. The current Phase 3 is due to finish on April 8th and Phase 4 begins. He outlined the improvements to be made to junctions also. As anticipated, traffic delays have been caused, but these are considered reasonable in the circumstances, except on occasions when traffic accidents have effected delays.

All the Members expressed dissatisfaction with the length of the traffic delays. They felt they were not reasonable and many business people had complained to them about the

effects on their business. Cllr. Moran pointed out that when the Gardai took over management of the traffic after the terrible accident at Custume Place (he expressed his sympathy to the family), the traffic flowed much better and all the Members agreed that it would be helpful if the Gardai did point duty at peak times during the day. He also asked if the Road Sweeper could be rescheduled for Connaught Street, as it's usual time is around 9a.m. when the street is blocked with traffic. Cllr. O'Rourke added that Athlone Chamber are meeting with the Gardai in the morning to discuss the traffic problems.

Mr. Kelly advised the Members that he meets with the Gardai regularly and that the traffic is monitored on a daily basis and that the delays average at 15-20 minutes.

The Director stated that the works are on schedule and that he would set up a meeting with the Gardai regarding the control of traffic.

Audit Report:

The Report of the Local Government Auditor in respect of the year ending 31st December 2009 was presented to the Members by Mr. Aidan Bass A.O. who advised that the Council's finances were quite good, with a credit balance of €810,000. The main issues discussed were the low collection of rates and the Development Levies owed. Mr. Bass said that there has been a lot of contact with rate-payers and legal proceedings were taken where necessary. The Town Clerk advised that allowing for the write off of bad debts, offsets for works carried out for the Council and solid payment arrangements for €2m, the net sum outstanding was €1.4m and this represented approx. 10% of all levies imposed and would be pursued through the Courts.

Cllr. Shaw welcomed the introduction of the internal audit.

Athlone Castle:

The Town Clerk outlined the background to the Regeneration Project and brought the Members up to the current situation where tender documents are being finalised. It is hoped that Tenders will be assessed in May and the physical work will actually commence in late June and be completed by December 2011.

He informed the Members that the Council was contacted last autumn by the John Count McCormack Society in Dublin, making available some personal memorabilia for exhibition in Athlone and more recently has been advised that memorabilia from America may also be made available. In view of this, the Council considered that a larger space was required than that available in the Castle and proposes to locate the exhibition in the Customer Service area of the Civic Centre. This will include a small theatre, an audio area and an exhibition area. It is also proposed he said, to erect a life size figure in bronze of John Count McCormack to the front of the Civic Centre. Funding for the McCormack Exhibition will be sought from Failte Ireland.

The Town Clerk advised the Members about the new company established, Athlone Art & Heritage Ltd. which will operate, manage and develop the Castle, Art Gallery and Artists Studios. The recruitment process for the Manager is almost complete and hopefully will commence in June to enable advertising and marketing of the facilities prior to their opening. It is hoped the Art Gallery will be completed in December also. Regrettably the Castle will have to remain closed in 2011.

The Members had expressed concern over the delays with the Castle and the Town Clerk explained that the complexity of the project due to its status as a national monument, the level of detail required by the procurement process and the new Government Construction Contracts system, the change to the McCormack Exhibition (now going to be filled with the life and times of some major personalities of the Siege of Athlone) and a slowness on the part of the Design Team have delayed the project, but he expressed confidence that matters are now on track for the end of the year completion. He added that it is a major project costing €3.5m and to have it completed within two years is normal.

The Members thanked him for the update and asked that they be updated again at the June Meeting. Most Members welcomed the move of the John McCormack Exhibition to the Civic Centre and welcomed the extra memorabilia that would be available. In answer to queries, the Town Clerk advised that the Exhibition would be open at weekends and as regards the location of the Tourist Office, he stated that a meeting would take place with Failte Ireland to discuss this.

It was proposed by Cllr. Moran,

Seconded by Cllr. McFadden and resolved,

“We hereby agree to locate the John Count McCormack Exhibition in the Civic Centre, Church Street, Athlone together with a figure of the tenor in the Civic Square”.

Managers Orders:

The Members noted the summary of Managers Orders as circulated.

Questions:

Question 1. Cllr. G. McFadden:

“What is the update on the derelict site in Baylough?”

Answer:

This site was subject to a planning application which was recently refused by An Bord Pleanala, action will now recommence under the Derelict Site Act.

Question 2. Cllr. G. McFadden:

“Would this Council examine the footpaths on Strand Street with a view to repairing them urgently?”

Answer: **The area will be examined and any urgent repairs will be attended to as soon as possible.**

Question 3. Cllr. A. O'Rourke:
"Is the detailed design proposal for the general Baylough area on target for presentation to this Council before July?"

Answer: **It is intended that this will be presented to the Athlone Area Committee at the July Meeting.**

Question 4. Cllr. A. O'Rourke:
"With work soon to commence on both the Castle and the second phase of the Westside streetscape, what is the latest situation regarding the removal / relocation of the OPW sheds?"

Answer: **An alternative site has been identified and the feasibility of locating a building there is being assessed. Funding will also have to be considered.**

Question 5. Cllr. A. Shaw:
"Will the Council agree to review the times at which the main gates at Coosan cemetery are open for access by cars. This is necessary as the present hours are far too restrictive for people to carry out maintenance on graves and access which in some cases is necessary through the main gates?"

Answer: **Coosan cemetery is maintained by Westmeath County Council and it is considered that access via the pedestrian gate is adequate for normal maintenance purposes outside of the usual opening times for the main gates.**

Question 6. Cllr. A. Shaw:
"Based on feedback from the public, there is a general belief that a higher than average number of public lights still remain unserviced and that insufficient resources are being invested to overcome the problem. Will the Council agree to step up efforts to get on top of the lighting maintenance problem that currently exists in Athlone?"

Answer: **The Council is in weekly contact with contractors to report lights which need servicing and the countywide contract for this servicing is expected to be in place in May. A press advertisement has been placed requesting that defective lights be reported to the Civic Centre.**

Question 7. Cllr. P. Hogan:
“What stage is the Loughanaskin Area Action Plan currently at?”

Answer: Plan adopted.

Question 8. Cllr. P. Hogan:
“What stage is the contract for public lighting within the town boundary currently at?”

Answer: Contract expected to be placed in May 2011.

Question 9. Cllr. K. Moran:
“When will flood relief works begin at the Strand?”

Answer: A flooding mitigation scheme of works in the Strand area has been complicated by the complexity of surface water and sewerage pipelines in this area and these matters require resolution either as part of the main drainage works or as part of the CFRAM study currently underway. In the meantime, a flood defence barrier has been purchased in 2010 which will be deployed to prevent water spilling over the quay wall and into the Strand area at this location should the need arise.

Question 10. Cllr. S. Buckley Byrne:
“When will works start on the new carpark at Connolly Street and when will it be operational?”

Answer: The Part 8 planning process is currently underway. It is expected that these works will commence in September of this year and that they will take approximately 3 months to complete.

Question 11. Cllr. S. Buckley Byrne:
“Why have the works on the Willow Park action plan been stopped?”

Answer: The works carried out thus far were the removal of trees and hedging and these works were carried out in order to comply with the requirements of the Wildlife Acts 1976 and 2000 concerning the restrictions on the removal of hedgerows. The fence along the eastern boundary is currently being procured and new trees will be provided in the area in the next fortnight.

Car-parking at Social Welfare Office:

The Members noted a letter from the Manager of the Local Office in which he stated that the recession had caused a big increase in the numbers visiting the offices and they had spread the assigned days to try and alleviate queuing and car parking problems. He said that a staff of over 50 people work there and so the staff car park is now full most days. He felt he could not do anything more, but would discuss any aspect if required. Cllr. Moran suggested the Department of Social Protection purchase the ¼ acre site beside the offices in Grace Road to provide staff parking and thus facilitate customers in the current staff car park. Cllr. Buckley Byrne asked the Town Engineer if he had any update on Cllr. Henson's suggested car parking area at St. Mels Terrace / Sarsfield Square and he advised that he would have a costing for the May Meeting.

Hospital Issue:

The Members noted a letter from Miley O'Neill, who suggested the new Children's Hospital causing difficulties in Dublin, be located in Athlone, for the convenience of the country people.

Liberalisation:

A letter from the Dept. of Communications, Energy and Natural Resources outlined the phasing of the opening up of the postal service. It stated that the universal postal service would be maintained by designating An Post as the universal postal provider, who will continue to provide a high quality, nationwide postal service and maintain a nationwide customer focused network of post offices. The new legislation aims to ensure no legal or regulatory barriers to new entrants to the postal sector and to provide the necessary framework to regulate and oversee this.

Conferences:

The Members noted the location and costs of the following conferences:

Dundalk - LAMA Economic Revival 29th – 30th April 2011

Greystones - La Touche Seminar 30th Sept. – 2nd Oct. 11

Bollard at St. Peter's School:

In response to Cllr. McFadden's motion the Town Clerk stated that the provision of a bollard at this location will require public consultation and the Council will commence this process, if the Members so wish. He said that there is insufficient width within lands owned by the Council here to provide additional car-parking and it is considered there is adequate available car-parking in the general vicinity to meet the resident's needs. Cllr. McFadden said that the residents have nowhere to park at busy times and requested the Town Engineer examine the possibility of providing a bollard, to prevent the rat run existing in this location.

Cllr. O'Rourke referred to his motion concerning Grattan Row where residents have cars within inches of their doors. The Town Engineer said that the narrow footpath which was in Grattan Row had been removed and replaced with a red strip some 2/3 years ago. The Members supported both motions and it was agreed that the Town Engineer would examine Abbey Lane and Grattan Row areas, with a view to providing traffic calming measures and come back to them at the next meeting.

Pedestrian Crossing at Annesfield Woods:

The Town Clerk advised Cllr. McFadden that a pedestrian crossing survey would be carried out to establish the need for such a crossing and in the event that such a need is identified, a costing will be carried out and funding set aside from W.C.C. roads budget.

Bus-parking at Accommodation Road:

In response to Cllrs. McFadden and O'Rourke's motions, the Town Clerk advised that the bus and coach parking on Accommodation Road has been moved northwards to facilitate the temporary pedestrian crossing point which was installed to provide an alternative route for pedestrians crossing as a result of the site hoarding at the Fr. Matthew Hall. Cllr. McFadden felt that this is creating more inconvenience for people, while Cllr. O'Rourke felt that bus-parking should be provided on the river side by cutting into the promenade and taking it off the road. The Town Engineer said it is not recommended to dig beside trees, as it may undermine them and the parked coaches serve as a traffic calming measure on what is a long straight road. The Director added that there are no funds available anyway. Cllrs. Moran and McFadden did not agree with the promenade being interfered with in any way. As parking should be safe and convenient, the Members asked that the Town Engineer examine the possibilities for the area.

Invitation to U.S. President:

Cllr. O'Rourke asked that the Council extend an invitation to the President of the U.S. Mr. Barack Obama and his wife Michelle, to visit Athlone during their forthcoming visit to Ireland. He said he knew it was a long shot, but we should try as the benefits would be unimaginable. Cllr. Shaw supported this and added that he had written to the Taoiseach, requesting that they play their round of golf in Glasson. Cllr. Buckley Byrne added that she has also written to the President, as she was born in Chicago, the President's home town and it would be nice if a Chicago born Mayor of an Irish town, could be recognised. It was agreed to write.

Removal of grit:

In response to Cllr. Shaws motion, the Town Clerk stated that the grit was left in place until the end of the winter period and it is intended to have removal carried out within the coming month. Cllr. Shaw welcomed this.

Housing Adaptation Grants:

The Town Clerk advised Cllr. Shaw that the Housing Adaptation Grant Scheme is managed by W.C.C. and the Scheme was approved at the February Council Meeting, so it is intended that approvals will issue in the coming weeks. Cllr. Shaw welcomed this.

Footpath at Cornamaddy:

In response to Cllr. Shaw's motion the Town Clerk stated that the cost of this footpath is in the order of €80,000 and there is no specific funding set aside for this purpose in 2011 from the WCC roads budget. The Council is not aware of any particular increase in pedestrian/cyclist usage at this location, however additional road markings were put in place along this section of hard shoulder, as part of the resurfacing scheme and it is considered that these markings have increased the safety of road users in this area. Many of the Members supported the motion and the Director said he would look to the NRA to fund the footpath, as the County Council have no funds for it. It was agreed he should write to the N.R.A.

Trees at Annesfield Woods:

In response to Cllr. Hogan's motion, the Town Clerk advised that WCC carried out works to these trees in late 2010 in order to reduce their height and any overshadowing effects and it is not considered that there are dangerous trees at this location at present.

Cllr. Hogan said some of the trees had fallen and he thought the remaining ones were dangerous. The Town Engineer agreed to examine the trees again.

Indiscriminate dumping:

The Town Clerk informed Cllr. Hogan that skips were provided at the Council's expense to the Residents Association in Sarsfield Square and a major clean-up was undertaken in 2010. He said the Council is aware of the continuous dumping in this area and are liaising with the Resident's Association on the matter. It is important that the perpetrators of this problem are reported to the Council, so that appropriate actions may be taken.

Road maintenance at Willow Park Football grounds:

The Town Clerk informed Cllr. Hogan that this section of road is not maintained by Athlone Town Council. Cllr. Buckley Byrne asked if the Council could help them with materials as the schools championships is coming up and over 1000 children will be participating. The Director advised that the Council cannot spend public funds on a private road.

Footpath at Iona Park:

In response to Cllr. Moran's motion the Town Clerk stated that a drainage scheme for this grassed area is the solution to any waterlogging problems in this area and these works will

be progressed in the summer months. Cllr. Moran welcomed the response.

Trees at Connaught Gardens:

The Town Clerk advised Cllr. Moran that works were carried out to the trees in Connaught Gardens recently, following an examination by an arboriculturalist and it is not considered that there are any safety issues remaining. Cllr. Moran disagreed, stating that the trees are old and very high and the elderly people are frightened by them, particularly in stormy weather. The Town Engineer said that nothing can be done with them now because of the Wildlife Act. They can be re-examined in August.

Slip Road to B&Q:

The Town Clerk informed Cllr. Moran that this road is under review as part of the junction upgrade proposals currently at Part 8 Planning stage. Cllr. Moran felt something should be done urgently, as it is just an accident waiting to happen.

Footpath at Fr. Matthew Hall:

In response to Cllr. Buckley Byrne's motion the Town Clerk advised that the footpaths on the approaches to the hoarding around the Fr. Matthew Hall works, have been dished in order to divert pedestrians around the works and via existing pedestrian facilities. The signage for these diversions is being reviewed with a view to putting more permanent interim signage in place as some of the initial signage has been vandalised and removed by others. Cllr. Buckley Byrne felt it was dangerous to have the crossing half way across the bridge and asked if the entire bridge might be cordoned off in the interests of safety. The Town Engineer said this would not be feasible and would also be unsightly. He did however agree to review the matter.

Athlone's Business Community:

In response to Cllr. Buckley Byrne's motion, the Town Clerk stated that there is regular contact between the Council Executive at various levels and the Trader Associations/Business Community including Athlone Chamber. However if the Members wish to meet with these organisations, such a meeting can be arranged. Cllr. Buckley Byrne felt it was important for public representatives to meet with business people to listen to their issues and possibly help find solutions. The next 6 to 8 months will be critical for them. Cllr. O'Rourke and Shaw supported the motion, agreeing that rates were a big issue for them. Cllr. McFadden felt the business community was already well represented and was concerned over what form the meetings would take. Cllr. Henson agreed with this. The Town Clerk pointed out that the Council Executive has contacts with the business community and this meeting is seen as something between the Members and the business community. The Director pointed out that such a forum already exists under the County Development Board, Cllr. Hogan being the Council's representative on that committee. It was agreed that the Mayor will indicate who should be invited to the meetings.

Vote of Sympathy:

All the Members wished to be associated with the expression of sympathy to Andy Dolan, Staff Officer, on the recent sudden death of his uncle, Charlie Dolan.

This concluded the business of the meeting.