

Minutes of the October Monthly Meeting of Athlone Town Council, which was held in the Civic Centre, Church Street, Athlone at 6.00p.m. on Monday 3rd October 2011.

Attendance:

Mayor: Cllr. A. Shaw

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

Officers: Mr. Barry Kehoe, Director of Services
Mr. Hugh O'Reilly, Town Clerk
Mr. Alan Kelly, Town Engineer
Ms. Anne McNamara, Assistant Staff Officer

Expressions of Sympathy:

All the Members wished to be associated with Cllr. Cooney's expression of sympathy to the widow and family of the late Joe Murphy, who served as Town Engineer for many years. They also joined in Cllr. Molloy's expression of sympathy to the Murray Family on the recent death of Canon Paddy Murray who had administered to the people of Athlone for almost thirty years.

Minutes:

It was proposed by Cllr. Henson,

Seconded by Cllr. McFadden and resolved,

"That we hereby adopt and confirm the Minutes of the September Monthly Meeting which was held on September 5th 2011".

Matters Arising:

The Town Engineer advised Cllr. Hogan that the speed ramps in the Old Batteries would be installed in the immediate future, possibly later in the week.

Review of Parking Policy:

The Director advised the Members that the statutory process for Variation No. 3 to the Athlone Town Development Plan had been undertaken and three submissions had been received. The issues raised have been addressed and he advised proceeding with the process.

The Members agreed that the revised Policy was a positive step for the businesses of the town and all supported it.

It was proposed by Cllr. Cooney,
Seconded by Cllr. Moran and resolved,
“Pursuant to Section 13 (Variation of Development Plan) of the Planning & Development Acts 2000-2010 as amended and taking into account the proper planning and development of the area, we hereby agree to the making of Variation No. 3 to the Athlone Town Development Plan, without any material alteration or modification”

Tidy Towns Adjudicator’s Report:

The Town Clerk complimented all those involved in the Tidy Towns Competition and said that despite the small increase in marks, the Report was very positive and encouraging. He said the Committee have now drawn up a three-year plan and he wished them well with that. In response to Cllr. Moran’s query on the bottle banks going underground, the Town Engineer stated that work on the design is ongoing and when completed, tenders will have to be sought. Cllr. O’Rourke asked how successful the pilot exercise was with CCTV and the Town Clerk responded that it was really only suitable for small confined areas, but was quite successful and fines were issued as a result. He said the exercise will be repeated periodically. In response to Cllr. Cooney, the Town Clerk advised that the Tidy Towns Committee are setting up their own website and the Council’s Waste Minimisation and Energy Efficiency policies will be communicated to them.

Managers Orders:

The Members noted the summary of Managers Orders as circulated.

Questions:

Question 1. Cllr. A. Shaw:
“Please provide an update on the awarding of the contract for the maintenance and provision of public street lights?”

Answer: **In mid July 2011 Westmeath County Council appointed Electric Skyline Limited to patrol and carryout public lighting repairs. The contract covers the Westmeath County Council and Athlone Town Council areas for a 12 month period. To date Electric Skyline have satisfactorily completed their duties under the Contract. The Council will continue to monitor their performance.**

Question 2. Cllr. A. Shaw:
“In June 2010, the Council agreed to incorporate signage for Athlone Little Theatre in the general upgrade of signage in the town centre area. When will this signage be erected?”

Answer: **This signage will be erected in early 2012.**

Question 3. Cllr. A. O'Rourke:
"When will the new retreat area traffic plan be presented to the Council?"

Answer: This area is under consideration by the Road Design Section. However, due to pressure of work, it is not yet completed but will be presented to the Members as soon as possible.

Question 4. Cllr. A. O'Rourke:
"Will the Council consider a memorial to the 1948 Irish Olympic Basketball team which had strong Athlone links?"

Answer: The Members are advised that it may not be appropriate to agree to such a memorial in the absence of a specific policy. The risk is that in the absence of such a policy, there would be a proliferation of requests that would be very difficult for the Members to deal with.

Question 5. Cllr. S. Buckley Byrne:
"Is there any update available on the Proposed Chinese Development?"

Answer: It is assumed that this question refers to Westmeath County Council Planning Application number 11/1025. In this regard and following consideration of the application, the Council sought Further Information from the applicant on the 12th July 2011.

Question 6. Cllr. M. Cooney:
"When will work on the O'Connell Street Car Park be finished and available for use by the public?"

Answer: It is expected this work will start in November 2011 and that it will be completed in early 2012.

Question 7. Cllr. M. Cooney:
"When is it planned to commence the next phase of the West Side Improvement Works?"

Answer: The works along Main St. would be proposed to be carried out in March 2012.

Question 8. Cllr. M. Cooney:
“What is the current position in relation to acquisition of the “Railway Field?”

Answer: **Negotiations in regard to purchase of land from CIE for the proposed link road are at an advanced stage but agreement has not yet been reached. The construction of the road will be subject to receipt of funding from the Department of Transport and an application for this funding has been submitted by the Council.**

Question 9. Cllr. P. Hogan:
“When will trees at the back of Annesfield Woods be topped”?

Answer: **These trees will be attended to in the coming fortnight.**

Question 10. Cllr. P. Hogan:
“When will the additional car park spaces be provided at Beechville”?

Answer: **This work is starting imminently.**

Correspondence:

Resolutions:

The Town Clerk informed the Members that two motions had been received from other Councils and he would circulate them.

Deferred Motion:

Motion: Cllr. K. Molloy:
“ That this Council call on Westmeath County Council to resurface main road through Church Street”

Response: **The resurfacing of Church Street in its entirety is considered to be a matter for a larger capital scheme such as the proposed environmental improvement works as part of the one-way traffic system due to the likely costs and traffic disruption involved with such a scheme. In the meantime local resurfacing works will continue to be undertaken as and when required.**

The Members expressed disappointment with the response. The Director advised Cllr. Moran that the Railway Field Road will have to be completed before the one-way system is re-visited.

Motions:

Motion (a) Cllr. A. Shaw:

“That this Council writes to the Minister for the Environment Heritage and Local Government to outline our wishes that the soon to be announced reform of local government should include real devolution of powers to the democratically elected members of Councils including decision making on all local taxes, with increased powers in respect of social housing and that central government funding allocations be linked with inflation to bring greater certainty to multi-annual financial budgeting of local authorities for the benefit of local tax payers and the Council itself”.

Response: Such a letter can issue if the Members so resolve.

It was agreed to write a letter to the Minister.

Motion (b) Cllr. A. Shaw:

“That this Council, as part of next year’s commemoration of the centenary of the Titanic disaster, erect a plaque in memory of Margaret Rice, who was born in Athlone in 1872 and tragically lost her life with her 5 sons in 1912 on board the Titanic. Margaret lived in No 9 Castle Street for a period before deciding to leave for America”.

Response: While the case cited is tragic, the Members are advised that it may not be appropriate to agree to such a plaque in the absence of a specific policy. The risk is that in the absence of such a policy, there would be a proliferation of requests that would be very difficult for the Members to deal with.

Following a brief discussion it was agreed that a Draft Policy should be drawn up regarding commemorative plaques and memorials.

Cllr. Cooney requested that the Board listing all the Chairmen/Mayors be restored and placed in the Civic Centre and the Director said it is being examined.

Motion (c) Cllr. A. Shaw:

“That this Council cut-back overgrown trees beside the tunnel at Bloomfield Drive as the area is in partial darkness at night time, due to the obstruction of the public lights caused by the trees. This is causing a danger for locals living in the area”.

Response: This location will be examined and any works deemed necessary will be carried out.

Motion (d) Cllr. A. O'Rourke:

“For this Council to seek an assurance from Mr. Pat Rabbitte TD Minister for Communications, Energy & Natural Resources that the Hydraulic Fracturing (Fracking) which is about to get underway in the Lough Allen Carboniferous Basin will not pose a risk of contamination of our groundwater, river or lake”.

Response: Such a letter can issue if the Members so resolve.

It was agreed to write a letter to the Minister.

Motion (e) Cllr. A. O'Rourke:

“For this Council to allocate funds in the 2012 budget to assist in the restoration of our Town Canal”.

Response: The restoration of the Canal is not an objective of the Council, as expressed in the Town Development Plan. The Plan does contain an objective to examine the potential to reopen the Canal to stimulate tourism investment and assist in regeneration. However, a feasibility report would be required in advance of any decision to commit funds and the project should be considered in the context of the overall capital programme of the Town Council.

It was agreed that a Feasibility Study be undertaken on the restoration of the Canal.

Motion (f) Cllr. A. O'Rourke:

“For this Council to write to Mr. Phil Hogan TD, Minister for Environment, Community and Local Government urging him to issue a directive to the local decision makers insisting that they prioritise the unemployed for work as Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks in the upcoming Presidential election”.

Response: Such a letter can issue if the Members so resolve.

It was agreed to write to the County Registrar the next day.

Motion (g) Cllr. S. Buckley Byrne:

“That this Council make a provision for traffic management in the towns while ongoing footpath repairs and road repairs take place during the hours of 8.30am and 9.15am to allow for school traffic and peak hours for the public to go to work in the town to prevent the chaos and traffic delays experienced by many people in the last two weeks”.

Response: Traffic Management around road works sites is of the utmost concern to the Council, both in terms of Health and Safety and road user inconvenience. The Council always endeavours to carry out its roadworks programme in order to minimise inconvenience to the road user and this is achieved in most cases; however, there are circumstances where works must be carried out at somewhat inconvenient locations in order to complete work programmes or to deal with emergency situations.

Motion (h) Cllr. S. Buckley Byrne:

“That this Council introduce a small grants scheme for shop front renewal for businesses / shop fronts are unoccupied in the town centre to help improve the depressed appearance of our town centre”.

Response: The provision of such a grant scheme could be considered in the context of the 2012 budget.

Cllr. Buckley Byrne hoped something could be done before Christmas but the Director said this would not be possible as there is no money available. He said the Council had recently met with the Chamber and that they are working on a scheme. Some Members felt the onus should be on the owners of the premises and they should be written to, requesting them to improve the appearance of their premises. Cllr. McFadden suggested that businesses on the outskirts of town might advertise in the empty windows and enhance the shop fronts in return. Cllr. Moran suggested writing to Dulux to see if they have any grants/schemes available.

Motion (i) Cllr. S. Buckley Byrne:

“That this Council use the resources of Athlone.ie to investigate and present proposals on a new Athlone Town Shopping Discount Scheme to encourage people to spend their money locally in Athlone and also to encourage visits to spend a little more in the town”.

Response: Athlone.ie could undertake research in relation to the feasibility of a local shopping discount scheme. Such a scheme would need be led and operated primarily by Athlone Chamber who currently operate an Athlone Gift Voucher scheme. Athlone.ie could also assist in the promotion and advertising of this campaign and it would be necessary to develop a mechanism to fund this advertising.

Motion (j) Cllr. M. Cooney:

“That Members be advised of the current stage of the Castle renovation works and in particular be given an indication as to when it will be open to the public”.

Response: The current position is that tenders have been received for all of the main contracts associated with the Castle restoration. Prior to entering agreements to undertake these works the Council is awaiting a Ministerial Consent from the National Monuments Service. In order to secure such a consent an Archaeological Impact Assessment is currently being undertaken.

Following receipt of Ministerial Consent the Council will be is position to complete agreements with contractors. The construction programme for the refurbishment works is 6 months.

Cllr. Cooney asked why the Ministerial Consent was not sought before now and the Director said that due to problems with the Design Team, it had not been done. He added that no issues are causing any concern in the Archaeological Impact Assessment and hopefully the Ministerial Consent will be given a further update on the Castle at the next Meeting.

Motion (k) Cllr. P. Hogan:

“That Athlone Town Council calls on the relevant authority to provide a mini-roundabout at the bottom of Killyon Hill”.

Response: This junction would benefit from the provision of traffic signals rather than a mini roundabout, in the interests of pedestrians and cyclists, as well as motorists. However, in the current financial circumstances, some other junctions and schemes are of higher priority.

Cllr. Hogan felt this junction should be top priority but the Director said there are two junctions into the IDA Business Park that are higher and must be done first, when funding becomes available.

Motion (l) Cllr. P. Hogan:
“That Athlone Town Council repair subsiding footpaths in Auburn Heights”.

Response: The footpaths at this location will be examined and any urgent repairs will be completed. Any non urgent works will be costed and considered for inclusion in the 2012 Roads programme.

Motion (m) Cllr. P. Hogan:
“That this Council updates Members in relation to the Westside Regeneration Plan”.

Response: The next phase of works at Main Street will commence in March 2012. Thereafter, two further phases are required to complete Main Street and it is intended that these would be completed by the end of 2012.

There will be more information on this scheme with the Capital Projects update at the next Meeting. It was agreed to liaise with the Westside Traders regarding all works to be undertaken.

Abbey Lane/Gratton Row:

The Town Engineer advised Cllr. McFadden that the proposed works for this area should be undertaken by the end of the year.

This concluded the business of the meeting.

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