

Councils Agree to buy Railway Line

A special meeting of Kerry Co. Council, Listowel Urban Council and Tralee Urban Council was held on Friday, called by Chairman of the Co. Council Tom McEllistrim TD. It was called as a result of the failure of Shannon Development to conclude the purchase of the railway line on behalf of the Local Authorities and themselves.

Tom Dunne, Manager of Shannon Development Limited, Ogle Moran, North Kerry Manager and Sean O Nuanain, also of SFADCO, who had been in charge of the Railway Acquisition and Programme, attended the meeting. Explaining why they failed to acquire the property Tom Dunne Manager SFADCO said "When CIE decided to discontinue the railway operation we identified it as a possible trail for cyclists and walkers. We saw it had an amenity value. We commissioned an International Consultant to do a survey on it, his report supported our beliefs. We appointed a full time Senior Executive to be engaged full time on the project, Sean O'Nuanain worked on it since last September and went into every aspect of it, including land ownership. He saw it as having great potential for tourism for the people of the two counties. He believed that if it was developed it would be the best of its type on these islands. Unfortunately we cannot bring it to the international standard that would be needed, the capital and operating and staffing of it would

be beyond the resources of SFADCO. To undertake it out of our own resources would be irresponsible. It would not be possible for us to go it alone. We decided then not to proceed with the acquisition. We believe however, that it has plenty of potential. If it passes to other groups to take it up we will make everything available to them. It is an irreversible decision because we would not be in a position to develop it." **Colm Kennelly Co. Engineer Kerry Co. Council** "It would be a pity to lose it at this stage. It has great potential as a tourist attraction and as an amenity. When Shannon Development did their investigation of it they came up with a figure of £1m to buy it and carry out the work on it. If we lose it we will lose a tourism amenity and an opportunity to save the line which could become very important even if in 20 to 50 years time. If the Shannon Industry site between Ballylongford and Tarbert is developed in time, it would be a great pity not to have the railway line available. It would only need a link to Ardmore

point to enable it to get to Listowel and Tralee. If the project was to be got up and running we could look at it as we did Slibh Corcha Dhuibhne with FAS. If we were asked to become involved here we would have the expertise and the engineering and the equipment. The question of having £1m to spend on it could be resolved. A section of it in Listowel is required for a relief road. That would be acquired separately. I think the project should go ahead if the County Councils wish the project to be brought to fruition." **Senator Denis Foley MCC** "There is no reason why we should not set up a Company between Limerick Co. Council, Kerry Co. Council and others who are interested. At the asking price of £180,000, the price is right. Farmers along the line realise there is a potential in tourism. We should set up a group to discuss this matter and it should include Phil Healy, Chairman of the IFA. There are rumours that outside people are interested in taking over the line."

ABANDONMENT

Cllr. Ted Fitzgerald "I support the idea of a meeting with a view to taking it over in September or October next. As a public representative I would be totally against the

abandonment of the line."

Cllr. John Blennerhassett "I agree with Senator Denis Foley that a small committee should be set up with some experts on it so that we will not end up in High Court proceedings. If we lose that railway line it will be gone forever." **Cllr. Michael Guerin** "We must retain the right of way. We recently walked the railway line and it is in good condition. In order to bring it into use it needs very little done except to have it rolled in places to make it into a tourist trail. The experts agree on that. Our plan will require little money. CIE are asking £1,000 per mile that is a total of £50,000 needed to buy the right-of-way from Tralee to Rathkeale. The ideal thing would be for CIE to return the line to the people. Regarding the interest of farmers on the line, they have a point of view but by sitting down we can sort it out. It would be of benefit to farmers in the area to have it as a tourist trail. There is a big potential for agritourism along the way. £50,000 between four local authorities and Shannon Development does not put the project beyond the bounds of possibility."

Cllr. James Courtney "CIE have said they will sell it to the highest bidder, they said that a few years back and now that Shannon Development has pulled out, other bodies may be interested. There are sufficient funds in the county to ensure that it would be held in public ownership. There should be finance available from Central Authority. When a railway line is closed the local authority has priority in acquiring it. Failing that, the owners of land adjoining it get a claim. The landowners can be quite reasonable. There are very few farmers involved. Has the Minister for Finance already allocated some funds of money for this?"

Cllr. Mary O'Halloran, Tralee UDC "If it is only a matter of £50,000 between two counties to acquire it we can do so. We owe it to future generations to hold on to this railway line. If the Shannon Estuary is developed in the future this line will become essential for transport. We should hold on to it firmly. SFADCO came to Tralee and they were on their knees asking us to join them. Why then, did they let this go? Did they make an application for European Funds for this project? If not I would like to know why not."

Cllr. Tommy Foley "Saving this railway line is a major priority. Private concerns are looking at the North Kerry Railway Line. It should be maintained in public ownership. The development of the line to Fenit will depend on it. The cost of purchase and development is minimal. The money that we would spend is a pittance. Ballylongford/Tarbert

stretch of the Shannon Estuary could be fully developed in 15/20 years."

PULL-OUT

Cllr. Ned O'Sullivan "I already expressed my views about the peremptory pull-out by Shannon Development and their hype about the project beforehand. We have serious traffic problems in Listowel and we need a relief road urgently. The railway is very important to this project. The Co. Secretary should give an assurance that none of the formation will be disposed of by CIE before our sale can be concluded."

Cllr. Pat Leahy said "The money involved is minimal and it is important to future industrialisation of Ballylongford industrial landbank. Most of our children depend on this railway line being retained." **Cllr. Tim Buckley** said that the line had a wonderful tourism potential and that the council should have an active input in the purchase in the line. **Cllr. Maeva Spring** said that the consensus of the meeting was that the line should be retained and she asked an assurance from the Chairman that this would happen.

Cllr. Tom McEllistrim said "It is my feeling too that the line should be kept in public ownership. Some of the property between Tralee and Listowel, being Tubrid Station at Ardferl, Abbeydorney and Lixnaw stations, should be examined. We should ask that CIE would give the first option to the Co. Council and the two local authorities to acquire what is essential for road development. It is essential to Kerry that we should have proper amenities for tourists. If North Kerry is to get tourists some walkway must be developed. This railway should stay in public ownership. I will insist on a meeting with CIE."

PRIVATE SALE FOR CIE?

Acting County Manager John Deasy "The development of the walk trail on the North Kerry Line would be of tremendous importance to North Kerry. With regard to the costing of it you might consider the following. CIE have offered the property for public sale. They are not required to offer it to the local authority or to give a prior interest to the local authority. When the North Kerry Line was put up for public sale we had discussions with Shannon Development. The entire North Kerry Line and its stations, Listowel, Abbeyfeale and Newcastle West are available at £180,000. Any local authority can acquire the railway line itself for £50,000. Half of that railway line is in Kerry so it would cost £25,000 from the Kerry border to Tralee. It would be £500,000 for the development of the Kerry section. Kerry Co. Council have the engineering experience to carry out the work to top standard. We have a system of area engineers in Kerry Co. Council who maintain the national road network in the County. It could cost £500,000 over five years to develop it.

It is surprising that no local group got involved in fund-raising. In my view Kerry Co. Council will not get involved unless there is support for a project in the county. The Co. Manager refused to get interested in Ballyseedy Wood. It was costing £25,000. He said that if the money was collected locally his expertise could be used and would take it over. We have heard that there is a railway fund started with £280 in it. If that is the extent of local interest the Co. Council would not be very inclined to get involved. There should be substantial interest from the community in favour of it. The project's success would also depend on support from adjoining landowners."

Tom Dunne, Manager SFADCO "On the question of EC funding there is no EC fund available for this purchase of the line. There are structural tourism funds for such projects. It was regarded as a good scheme, well costed and the benefit analysis of it was agreed. Such a scheme put together would attract 20 to 25% EC grant. We have not submitted such a scheme because it would be important to put together a cohesive scheme and we would be happy to support it."

Cllr. Denis Foley "I propose the setting up of a limited company between the various local authorities to acquire the property."

Cllr. Michael Guerin "My colleagues from the Limerick Railway Group who are here have approached FAS. The railway line from Rathkeale to Tralee could provide two hundred jobs in its development. I am disappointed with the remarks of the Co. Secretary, John Deasy. It is a bit sly to say that its future depends on the question of £280 having been raised for it. I ask that the Chairman give right of audience to the Limerick group who have travelled here especially for this meeting."

Cllr. Denis Foley asked that the Limerick Railway Restoration Group be allowed to have a spokesman heard at the meeting. He said "I heard them speaking at the Listowel meeting organised by Listowel UDC and they had many interesting things to say that are of use to us."

Tom McEllistrim "It is the duty of public representatives to represent the public."

Cllr. Ted Fitzgerald "I have to refer to what the Acting Co. Manager has said. The representatives of the Co. Council and the local authorities in Tralee and Listowel do not want to have this railway line abandoned. I do not want it said that donations of £280 represent the limit of public interests in retaining this line. Public interest has to be nurtured. We should all be in partnership to block its sale to any other persons."

Cllr. Ned O'Sullivan "I take it, Manager, that finances from the Co. Council can arrange the purchase of the Kerry section of the line at £25,000? Has any costing been done on maintaining the formations, with or without state funding? Groups can come up with projects. No public representatives would countenance the

selling off of any part of the formation. We should proceed on agreement to purchase the formation." **Cllr. Tommy Foley** "On the point raised by the Acting Manager about Ballyseedy, I was in the Grand Hotel at the first meeting and £20 was put up on the table. That was the first subscription we had. It took off from there. When a project like this is put before the people they will respond. In a few weeks the Ballyseedy project raised £20,000. We always have and we always will respond."

John Deasy Acting Co. Manager "By Section 16(1) of the Railway Act 1932 CIE has the right to sell to whoever they think proper. It is my view that these North Kerry buildings do not need to be acquired. The buildings in Listowel could be acquired by a private person who is in sympathy with the project. acquisition. I would like to see in the first place the re-opening of the North Kerry Line and my next priority would be to have the local authority acquire the line and to develop it as an amenity so that we can retain the right of way for the benefit of the railway in the future."

Colm Kennelly "If the project is developed it would have to be developed to the highest standard. That is where the one million pound development money is involved. I say if you are going to do this job, do it properly. We will then have a good permanent way. Maintenance of the line would not cost more than £200/£300 per mile per annum to retain it in good condition."

Ogle Moran, Kerry Manager of SFADCO "All parties are in agreement that the line has great potential. Colm Kennelly is right when he says if we are going for it we should go for quality. If £1.2m is spent to develop it it will certainly attract visitors. Forming a group or company to develop it could be fleshed out. We would have a role to play, and finance for development and tourism grants. Our role would be to support the urban and county councils with cash. We would have to raise about £300,000 over a period of three to four years. Our reason for not continuing is that we would not have the staff to maintain it."

Tom McEllistrim Chairman "Our next meeting will be with CIE. They promised that they will not do anything with the property until we meet them. We agree that the line should be maintained in public ownership."

Cllr. Denis Foley gave notice that he will be putting a Motion before Kerry Co. Council asking that a special meeting of the Council be held to discuss the proposed purchase of the railway line from Ballylongford to benefit the development of tourism within North Kerry."

Comment BY PADRAIG KENNELLY

No explanation was given by Tom Dunne of SFADCO as to why his company made a decision to unilaterally pull out of an agreement that involved four local authorities without consulting with them. To say that what he and Ogle Moran did was because they did not have the staff to maintain the line when others did, that is cut the briars, was an insult to those who gave their time and intelligence to standing for the recent Co. Council elections. To have been forced to admit that they did not put the project forward for EC funding when they themselves had commissioned a report that cost £25,000, and that report was positive at every aspect of the project, is equally mystifying. The mishandling of this project has destroyed what little confidence North Kerry has had in Shannon Development. They have done very little to aid tourism in North Kerry. Look to South Kerry. The government and Bord Failte have committed themselves to a total of £5m for the Blasket Interpretative Centre at Dunquin and its ancillary projects. The government and Cork/Kerry Tourism have committed themselves to £700,000 for an Interpretative Centre at Valentia Island and are funding a ferry service to tour the islands. There was no request from any sector for one single penny of public money for the Valentia Project. In the south half of the County, Cork/Kerry Tourism and the government combined to get the maximum EC funding, far in excess of the 25% that Mr. Dunne envisaged, to see that the tourism infrastructure is put in place to meet the government plans. In North Kerry the question of acquisition had to be faced before development. The local authorities had already agreed to pay their portion and it would have cost

Shannon Development way less than the £25,000 that they paid for the Report, to purchase and safeguard the line on behalf of the local authorities. Al was amazed at the statement made by the Acting Co. Manager that he took into account that only £280 had been raised for the project and that if that was the limit of interest the Co. Council would not become the purchasing body. The raising of finance and the making of policy is a function reserved for Kerry Co. Councilors. The role of the officials is to carry out that policy when it is made by the elected members. John Deasy has fallen into the trap of thinking that state funding plus the rates are there to pay the wages of an ever growing County Council staff and that the cost of projects should be borne by private subscription. The debate in Kerry Co. Council exposes a serious flaw in Kerry Co. Council's Development Plan published in 1989. The Co. Council has specific Objectives in it to enable them to acquire property if necessary under Compulsory Purchase Order. Page 13 of the Plan states: "The Council favours the development of the short spur from Tralee to Fenit by the Rail Preservation Society. This will ensure the continued use of the line and will be a major tourist attraction to the area. The Council shall also seek the restoration of the rail line from Tralee to Blennerhassett." It now becomes urgent for some councillor to propose an amendment to the Development Plan to include as an acquisition the entire North Kerry railway line. The omission from the Plan is a serious flaw since at the time Shannon Development were already planning to use it as a tourist route and the matter had been discussed at Kerry Co. Council.

French P.M. Visits Kerry

Mr. Record the former Prime Minister of France added his name to the long list of famous people who visited Kerry this year and is presently having a break away from it all at the renowned Park Hotel in Kenmare.