

Submission:
On behalf of

John O'Meara



30.01.2024

Dear Sirs,

My submission is to consider rezoning lands that were not included in the previous Local area plan for Westmeath /Roscommon.

The lands are located in Bogganfinn , Roscommon Road, opposite Ganlys Hardware.The specific area is surrounded by roads , a finite development.The lands are encircled by the N6 Dual carriageway to the south , a link road from Ganlys Roundabout to the north and west and by both the n61 and R914 roads to the east. These lands were originally specific operational lands and had a multiple of zoning types attached to them all of which were de-zoned in the last plan. I would suggest with the best of respect and to insure proper planning for growth and sustainability that these lands be rezoned for Commercial/Industrial/retail use.(see map attached coloured in pink).

Best Regards,

John O'Meara

John O'Meara



Letter Reference: OMGS2024

Date: 28 January 2024

Administrative Officer
Forward Planning
Westmeath County Council
Mount Street
Mullingar
N91 FH4N

Deadline for Submission: 1 February 2024 before 5pm.

Dear Sir/Madam

Re: Pre-Draft Submission to the Athlone Joint Urban Area Plan 2024-2030

This submission is made by John O'Meara with an address at [REDACTED]. The submission seeks to encourage the review of the Neighbourhood Centre allocations in the current Athlone Town Development Plan 2014-2020 and the Athlone Joint Retail Strategy 2019-2026 (Variation No.4). This is specifically discussed in the context of what is known as the "O'Meara Garage Site" at Galway Road, Baylough (Bellaugh/Bogganfin), Athlone, County Westmeath.

The O'Meara Garage site (O'Meara Site)



Figure 1.0: General Location of the "O'Meara Garage Site"

The O'Meara Site is located in the west of the town of Athlone, on the western side of the Shannon River. Located at the junction of the Galway Road (R446) and Roscommon Road (R914) the area especially at this junction, is a mix of commercial and residential lands uses. This junction is also controlled by traffic lights.

The land is largely overgrown and vacant. There is an existing car sales use in a conventional format with a central sales office and yards used for parking car stock.

To the south west of the site is a small car repair garage encasing a residential unit to its rear. All the buildings on site are relatively unkempt with irregular boundaries and generally the site looks untidy in the wider environment.

St Joseph's Villas are located to the north of the application site, separated from the site by a laneway. The rear gardens of the southern-most line of houses in the Villa's face onto the application site.

There are existing traffic light controlled, pedestrian crossing points on the Galway and Roscommon Roads, which means the site is safely accessible from the wider residential areas by foot. In general the footpaths on the Galway and Roscommon Roads are suitably wide and safe for pedestrian traffic.

Running east from the Galway Road/Roscommon Road junction are a number of commercial uses including: Monahan's Public House and a Toyota garage. On the Roscommon Road there is Mulligan's Topaz and Londis. This property also houses An Post.

An Bord Pleanála Refusal – Small Supermarket in 2020/2021

A planning application was made in March 2020 for a foodstore and café on the O'Meara Garage site, under Pa Ref: 20/7039. Westmeath County Council granted permission for the development which was subsequently appealed to An Bord Pleanála.

In April 2021, the Board refused permission (ABP-307725-20) ostensibly due to its scale and extent but importantly the site's exclusion from "Retail Tiers" identified in the Athlone Joint Retail Strategy. It then went on to consider the Sequential Approach noting it to be insufficient to prove there were no other site inside the designated retail tier sites. That decision at odds with the substantial support shown by Westmeath County Council placed the site in a state of paralysis with no further activity since.

Essentially, this submission is seeking a review of the Retail Tiers as part of the preparation of the Joint Plan, and the inclusion of the O'Meara Garage Site as a Proposed Neighbourhood Centre.

It is noteworthy that in comments made by the Director of services in respect of a previous Planning application on the same site (19/7138) the following was observed:

- The level of retail proposed is within the AJRS range: there is capacity for the new retail space;
- The proposal is not a neighbourhood centre and should not be assessed as such;
- Neighbourhood centres are proposed in Cornmaddy and Clonbrusk in the east side of the town but this does not preclude retail elsewhere which accords with the zoning matrix in areas outside designated neighbourhood centres;
- The development will not have the potential to impact negatively on the delivery of the above neighbourhood centres which are in the east of the town;
- Objective 8 of the AJRS specifically seeks to “*encourage and facilitate the re-use and regeneration of derelict and vacant land and buildings for retail and other regional centre uses, with due cognisance to the Sequential Approach”*

The “Retail Tiers”

The so called retail Tiers are illustrated in Figure 2.0 which is appended to the Joint Retail Strategy.



Figure 2.0: Retail tiers in Athlone and Monksland. (O'Meara site in Green)

It illustrates the relative locations of the existing and proposed Neighbourhood Centres, including two proposed centres at Clonbrusk and Cornamaddy.

Social Exclusion

At pre planning with Westmeath County Council, in the build-up to the March 2020 application, there was a significant emphasis on how that proposed development would help create a more connected and inclusive town. The area around the site suffers from high levels of deprivation and low car ownership.

This is a central theme of the Pre-Plan Issues Paper:

A key parameter for the future development of Athlone is the effective implementation of compact growth. Compact growth seeks to consolidate the urban built environment in order to develop more integrated and connected settlements with improved integration between land uses, social / community infrastructure and services and sustainable modes of travel (page 10).

Page 12 discusses Sustainable Communities and Social Infrastructure:

Liveable neighbourhoods, those which provide an appropriate mix of adaptable and inclusive housing options and social / community infrastructure, will set the foundation for delivering Athlone's sustainable communities. Sustainable communities are places of resilience, where the needs of everyone in the community are met, the economy is robust with economic security established and the natural environment is protected.

Social infrastructure refers to the facilities and institutions required by communities to satisfy their social, health, economic and cultural needs. Examples of social infrastructure include healthcare, education, religion, community centres, libraries, swimming pools, public spaces, childcare services, recreational facilities and parks / playgrounds. Art and cultural institutions, such as the Dean Crowe and Athlone Little Theatres, also contribute to Athlone's social capital with regard to strengthening connections amongst diverse groups and supporting community pride and cohesion. In this regard, social / community infrastructure will often provide a natural platform for community and social interaction, and consequently, form an essential part of liveable neighbourhoods and sustainable communities.

Social Infrastructure also includes accessible local shops, including basic food shopping. Supermarkets are perhaps one of the most sociable locations where neighbours meet and greet one another on a frequent basis. Social interaction is perhaps at its highest in local retail which also often serves as a meeting point and naturally becomes a focus of community interaction.

In addition, retail is recognised in the Issues Paper as a key employer alongside professional services, information and communication and manufacturing (Page 20).

Socio Economic Factors – Athlone West Urban ED

During pre-planning for the above 2020 application, the issues around the socio economic disadvantage in Athlone were discussed at some length. It was noted that the area in which this application is located is particularly disadvantaged.

Figure 3.0 provides a breakdown of some general indicators of disadvantage derived from Pobal.ie (from 2006-2016). The subject site is located in the heart of the Athlone West Urban Area.

District electoral Division/County	Deprivation Score 2006	Deprivation Score 2016	Lone Parents 2016	% with Third level Education	Unemployment Male 2016	Unemployment Female 2016	Proportion of IA Rented Accommodation 2016	Total Households 2016	% of households with no car.
ATHLONE EAST RURAL	-1.25	-0.11	30%	37%	21%	19%	13%	2694	18%
ATHLONE EAST URBAN	-7.21	-1.87	29%	35%	21%	21%	9%	1784	36%
County	-1.27	-1.84	n/a	n/a	17%	16%	0%	31813	13%
Athlone West urban	-11.50	-8.82	38%	31%	26%	22%	16%	1403	35%

Figure 3.0: Source: Pobal.ie

The most recent Pobal Index for 2022 points to a worsening deprivation Score of -10.32 for Athlone West Urban DED. Within this DED there are Small Areas with elevated levels of deprivation of -43.34 (classified as "Extremely Disadvantaged") and -16.37. This is set against a County Average score in 2022, of -1.43 for County Westmeath and -1.97 for County Roscommon.

The Pobal Index provides a method of measuring the relative affluence or disadvantage of a particular geographical area using data compiled from various censuses. It is a key resource to enable a targeted approach towards tackling disadvantage, by providing local analysis of the most disadvantaged areas throughout the State. Percentage data for the area is provided under a range of categories such as unemployment, educational attainment and population change.

The Athlone West Urban area in which the application site is located, performs poorly across the entire range of data. Notable issues include having the lowest level of affluence in the town and County and some of the highest rates of no car households.

All these factors place burdens on the community in the local area proximate to the O'Meara site. Provision of localised services in this area, with the preference given to addressing issues in this area should be a key priority for the Joint Plan.

There is an extensive section in the Athlone Town Development Plan on social and community issues. The aim is to ensure all people have equal access to goods and services. Its aim is:

To support the development of inclusive sustainable communities in Athlone, that have a sense of place and belonging, with equal access to the facilities and services residents need, including housing, community and recreation, education, health and childcare and to ensure that such facilities are sufficient to meet the needs of the current and future population of the town, as they contribute to and support a high quality of life. (page 119)

In considering equal access one has to consider the constraints of communities on a spatial level to ensure local shops (an example of a facility that residents need) are delivered to an

area where car ownership is not as high as other parts of the town. Where lower income groups can access competitively priced, basic food offerings, close to their homes.

The location of the application is at the core of an area with high levels of deprivation, low levels of car ownership and high (albeit improved) levels of unemployment. Local retail can help to provide job opportunities suitable for many skill levels; reduce the distance to travel reducing fuel consumption; reducing public transport and/or taxi costs for those with no access to a car; and generally contribute to a better level of locally accessible services, assisting with a better quality of life. Of course a locally accessible foodstore, is only one factor in enhanced quality of life but it is nonetheless an important contributor.

A shop is also a meeting place and by definition a community facility where neighbours and local people will meet and greet one another. A neighbourhood centre will also contain other important local services, at a level which maintains the importance of the town centre in Athlone.

Concluding Comments

These factors should be accorded substantial weight when making the Joint Plan for Athlone. In addition the importance of retail to support and bind local communities is important. Added to that the site contributes the objective expressed in the Issues Paper: Compact Urban Growth and reuse of underused, brownfield sites.

The combination of all the above factors point to the O'Meara Garage Site being a key location within Athlone to expand and better serve the local needs of a disadvantaged area of the town.

Yours faithfully

John O'Meara



