

Public Submission on joint Urban Area Plan 2024– 2030

Ref: - www.athlonejointplan.ie

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Introduction

The Strategic Issues paper document issued during the public consultation is a comprehensive document setting out the headings on which it is proposed to “action plan” the footprint of the council’s perception for a sustainable Athlone urban and environs within the development period years 2024–2030. It is my view that the plan will only succeed if all headings are fully inclusive, properly researched both on paper and in reality by adopting “a hands on” approach, debating, analysing, and listening to real and sustainable arguments argument’s and concerns of the local population during the process. It is acknowledged that it will be difficult to listen and sustain all concerns and proposals, but at least valued arguments and real problems should be examined given a fair hearing. Unorthodox Political interference, lobbying and knee jerk reactions should be prevented and avoided.

Presumably the strategic plan when completed will be incorporated into the New Development Plan for Athlone Urban and environs based on properly assessed criteria, properly assessed zoning which is the subject of close and detail survey’s on the ground, visually inspected by the decisions makers with local knowledge and history being fully explored, examined and assessed. For such an important document, it is disappointing that the Authors did not allow a better timeframe for a public response, given that the first notification was mid-December and the public viewing a mere week before the submission deadline. Maps were only made available the week after the public meeting.

Let us hope that on this occasion that the Planners and the Council Hierarchy take into account the concerns of the general public, and business community and not “fly in the face” of a very concerned community of which it has been mandated to serve, and that it purports to represent. Let us hope that our planners remain professional and transparent, and deliver with respect the sustainable and resilient communities that indeed existed in many towns and villages in the 70’s and 80’s, One of the most notable social requirements that has become obvious to much of the Athlone community is the lack of provision of fully developed open spaces and sporting areas, and indeed it is also noticeable that much of the existing spaces provided in many areas have been built on or eroded to some degree. Sport and active participation in sport has been the back bone of our Rural Towns and Villages; this is a provision that has not been provided on the West side of Athlone.

While it is acknowledged that a lot of good work and perceived good work is being undertaken within the town, such as widening and reconstructing public footpaths, replacement of drainage infrastructure, public water supplies etc., there is a lot of public disquiet with regard to much of the work on the rebuilding agenda and which is clearly not working. There is also clear disquiet amongst many of the natural and longstanding citizens

of Athlone Urban against many of the seriously poor decisions currently in place and that the “Sins of the Past” are again being repeated. Some of the controversial decisions are as follows will form the basis for my comments and submission relative to the proposed “Joint Urban Area Plan 2024 – 2030”.

1. Reconfiguration of the traffic flows in Athlone in general and the omission for any form of set down space for general motorists and Athlone people within Church Street, Outside the Post office on Barrack Street.
2. Reconfiguration and redevelopment of Sean Costello Street, Mardyke Street, and more importantly the historical St Mary’s Square.
3. Reconfiguration of the one way system in church street and the closing of Sean Costello Street
4. The gross neglect in the preservation of our built heritage over many years and the total, and the total elimination of some of the most significant structures within the Athlone Urban Area. It is also noted that some of our most distinguished landmarks and historical treasures have been omitted from the “Strategic issues Booklet” Buildings such as St Mary’s Church and St Mary are Square, The Abbey and the Abbey Graveyard, The workhouse inclusive of St Mary’s Hall. The Town Morgue associated with the workhouse.

Athlone West: Negative

- The Destruction of the West side Connaught St and environs and the conscious decision by the Council to close down Connaught Street and the West side of Athlone, coupled with the many negative decisions of the past and through a lack of investment opportunities contributed to this demise.
- Refusal to grant permission or promote any national and popular supermarkets on the west side of Athlone urban district to serve the community in a sustainable way.
- Destruction of the historical and physical Architecture and heritage of Athlone over many years.
- The total demolition and the annihilation of the Napoleonic defence Fortress known as the Batteries, set in place a pattern of complete disregard for the National heritage of Athlone West. It not only destroyed a National monument of immense proportions but also removed and never to be replaced The first Athlone Golf Course, A series of wonderful adventurous playgrounds, four public football pitches, and a place of relaxation, nature walks and religious Worship during the Annual open air May Summer processions from St Peters Church. It also removed the Playground for the Iconic Dean Kelly National School which was a haven for Hurling, Gaelic Football and Soccer, The Batteries was an all in self contained Multi Purpose public open space for the entire west side communities an its obliteration was indeed short of a Public Disaster. This facility or anything like it was never replaced since then.
- The destruction of the Napoleonic defence Fortress and the Batteries was followed by the infilling of the Canal from the Iconic Canal Bridge to the Old Heaton’s Mill and Lock Gates located at “Mick Mc Quaid’s Bridge”. The Bridge was subsequently covered in

completely. No other country in Europe would allow this to happen to such a vital amenity within the town centre. The Canal made Athlone West an island and I suppose you could refer to the Connaught people in this area as “ Island people”.

- The subsequent urban renewal programme and housing developments undertaken by the Urban Council within the Connaught Street environs Prevented the extension of the Town landscape and eliminated the possibility of providing and developing laneway streets and much needed car parking space.

Destruction of The Visual amenity of “Mick Mc Quaid's Bridge” and the excessive heights of the flood defence walls,

The closing of the Market in St Peters square and refusal to grant permission or indeed encourage the Saturday or weekly markets. It's a worldwide fact that the attraction of country markets properly organised encourages a great influx of people to their stalls on Saturday and weekday mornings many of whom spread out into the broader shopping community afterwards.

Council affordable housing on the West side is / has been non existant for a long period with the more recent development in Iona Park Flooding a short time later.

.A proactive approach the closing down of St Aloysius College by the Hierarchy of The Council may have persuaded and achieved a different outcome.

The Demolition of the Ritz cinema, A “readymade theatre,” by Gold medal award Winning Architect Sir Michael Scott, was short sighted and a missed opportunity to provide Athlone with a wonderful readymade Theatre which would have contributed greatly to enhancing the work of the Dean Crowe theatre and allow even greater events within the most accessible towns in the Country. Its demolition and replacement by apartments – the appearance on the most prominent site in Athlone speaks for itself! Another missed opportunity

East Side of Athlone: Negative

The One way traffic system via Church Street, is contributing to a massive traffic congestion problem of traffic from North Gate Street for the full extent of the “Orange Loop”. It would appear to make a greater sense to reverse the traffic flow to Church Street in the opposite direction. Serious further examination is required to resolve these matters.

Reconfiguration of a straight line traffic route through the town via Sean Costello Street and replaced by two 90% turns within 20 metres of each other , three sets of traffic lights, a box junction on the traffic lights, and poor sight lines for exiting traffic from St Mary's square is making it very difficult for motorists, A major change with Huge expenditure of Taxpayers money was intended to improve and facilitate traffic flow and motorists, but in reality it has proven to be a failure and counterproductive.

Recent comments to the writer in recent times from regular visitors to the town is that it is the most complicated Town in the Midlands and “off putting” for many users.

The high Concentration of energy, resources and policy making has been towards Golden Island and the Town Centre shopping centres on the East side of the town . This one sided approach has contributed significantly to the demise of our natural Townscape shopping, in both Connaught Street and Church Street, and has contributed to many of our small shops closing down or relocating to other areas. The most disappointing aspect of all of this is that it would appear to be oblivious to the Council and Councillors alike.

Joint area urban for Athlone: Westmeath / Roscommon Co Councils

I believe this is a very positive approach and long overdue in putting the joint approach on a statutory framework. Roscommon County Council have created a vast amount of sustainable development in a very short time in South Roscommon, on the periphery of Athlone and indeed serving the Athlone Community in addition to the Roscommon Areas and Villages on the Westmeath/ Roscommon Border. Communities such as Kiltoom, Drum Clonown, Cornfulla, Taughmaconnell, Castlesamson, many of which were and still are attached to the parish of St Peters. I believe this plan should go a stage further by encouraging and assisting the retention of these very fine stable Communities.

In addition the recreation potential of the Preserved Land Commission Bogs and natural Peatland open space in Clonown, Gorry, Coolagara, Duogoue, etc. for both the urban population and the visiting Tourist is a very real possibility. Perhaps a study of the Area potential could be included. The **Spring well Road** and the ancient springwell located on the Spring well road which served the local community for generations is many areas. It was once a very attractive and popular area for walking and relaxation and could be preserved and revitalised going forward. The Board of works have great experience, expertise and ability in this regard.

The Cross river stretching from Doyle's Mill in Bealnamullia to Carrick Bridge on the Clonown road is another area for study and could be included as an environmental study; The Board of Works Heritage officers are very knowledgeable in this Area.

Looking Towards 2030 / an emerging vision

The council have stated they will provide an “overarching land use framework” for different types of development. Preserving and sustaining local and existing local communities is part of the National Development plan. This framework strategy seems to have gotten lost within the Priority list in relation to the investment in Athlone West and has been non-existent for a long time.

Athlone in recent years has produced a highly educated and shifting population which is constantly growing and those who have chosen not to emigrate are finding it more and more difficult to remain due the lack of affordable and sustainable housing. Bastion Court in Connaught Street has proved a very successful residential development and perhaps the council could use this scheme as a benchmark for future development within the Connaught street area.

My vision for Athlone of the future is that it would continue to:

- Develop, attract and sustain current and future industries similar to those encouraged to locate here during the late 50's, 60's. Wonderful industries such as Elan and Athlone Extrusions, and Arran Chemicals on the Western side of Athlone and Industries like Ericsson on the East side.
- For TUS to become and achieve independent academic university, technical and institutional status of worldwide recognition.
- To develop affordable housing communities similar to the many successful affordable housing schemes from the 1930's to the present time and many of which were constructed by Athlone Urban District Council and Athlone Town Council in times past. Terraced Schemes such as the Old Batteries, Iona Park and Talbot Avenue, St Francis Terrace, Retreat Park, St Francis Terrace, Assumption Road, Beech Park and Beechpark West, Auburn Villas Priory Park. Many of those housing areas were wonderful working and middle class communities and produced "Captains of industry" locally, nationally and internationally.
- To resist high rise high density developments such as currently in inner city Dublin, thus avoid creating dysfunctional societies similar to what is evident in parts of our main Cities at the present time.
- Invest in creating a crime free society in Athlone and environs.
- Avoid zoning Low lying, Callow and unsuitable land for Residential development.
- Strive to develop Athlone in to a modern large town or city **without** High rise Residential buildings, and to explore a traditional concept of traditional neighbourhoods with all the modern provisions to achieve the traditional modern Irish neighbourhood society.
- To preserve properly what's left of our natural and built heritage
- To re instate and upgrade the Canal
- To preserve our natural and visual amenity on the Shannon and Lakes

Preserving our Heritage and Amenity

It is very difficult to know where to start when it comes to describing and identifying a topic such as "Preserving our Built Heritage and natural amenity" as described in the strategic Booklet. I have pondered on this subject and have come to the conclusion that the authors of this booklet have very little knowledge of the History of Athlone and of how it was developed since the foundation of the State in the post-civil war period from the 1930's onward. What has been destroyed in Athlone is quite "breath taking" and what has been left it would appear in the eyes of the Council would appear as so insignificant as not fit to be mentioned.

It is surprising very significant historic parts of the History of Athlone has been omitted from the list with the booklet. The "Union Workhouse", The Town Morgue associated with the workhouse and constructed during the Great Famine, and of course the "Cholera Field and

Lime Pit” located on Abbey Road where deceased famine victims were buried was built upon by Athlone Urban district Council.

The Abbey Graveyard and Burial ground/ graveyard have been omitted.

St Mary’s Church and St Mary’s Square were also omitted, The Town Bridge, The Iconic Railway Bridge or traditionally referred to by Locals as the “White Bridge”.

It is indeed very noticeable that with the exception of the Athlone Castle most of the most important Built Heritage has been built located on the west side of Athlone and within the Connaught Street environs. Indeed it is obvious without doubt that Athlone’s History is Connaught side History.

The negative policies adopted for Athlone West, Church Street and Connaught Street is clearly shameful and I think it is time for our Council officials and Councillors to prove they are capable of preserving what is left of our Heritage correct what is incorrect in their planning approach and indeed all that is not working for the town.

It is time to “Rally the Troops” going forward and continue to make Athlone, its environs, and its location the choice of place to live and grow up in for the future.