

## **WHAT IS REQUIRED TO REJUVENATE THE WEST OF IRELAND BOTH IN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL TERMS**

### **SLIGO CHAMBER SUBMISSION**

Sligo Chamber welcomes the opportunity to make a submission for the report to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Arts, Sports, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs on “*What is required to rejuvenate the West of Ireland both in economic and social terms*”.

In assessing the aims of the final report, Sligo Chamber feels that its submission should focus on the key parameters indicated in the proposal from a business/commercial perspective.

#### **Infrastructure & Public Service Deficiencies / Impediments to Job Creation**

The following highlights some stark facts regarding the lack of investment in the North and North West:

- Out of the €16 billion that was provided in the Transport 21 plan for public transport projects and regional airports, only 5.5% was allocated to projects in the West.
- Over the 10 year period of Transport 21, the public transport capacity in the Greater Dublin Area will be doubled.
- Between 2000 and 2004, €5 billion was spent on roads under the NDP 2000-2006
  - Only 20% of this was spent in the BMW Region – 70% of what was forecasted.
  - 80% was spent in the S&E Regions – 150% of forecasted expenditure.
- Between 2000 and 2004, €2.5 billion was spent on public transport under NDP 2000-2006
  - A mere 9% was spent in the BMW Region – 55% of forecast
  - €2.3 billion, or 91% was spent in the S&E Regions – 112% of forecast.

Sligo Chamber feels that such unfair allocation of budgets, investment and commitment hinders and delays the growth of the area to the same standard as the rest of the Country. These shortfalls further compound the lack of growth and development for both business and communities in this region. In this submission, the Sligo Chamber urges that the region as a whole receives support and commitment to key infrastructural projects.

Sligo Chamber feels it is imperative that the Oireachtas Report looks at the development of sustainable travel for the whole region. Improved sustainable policies for transport in certain areas only, will do little to redress the imbalance that currently exists between the South & East region and the area zoned as the BMW region. If adequate focus and sufficient funds

are not invested in the BMW regions to enable sustainable travel now and into the future, not only will this region be further disadvantaged in the short and medium term, but it will have serious consequences for the livelihoods and way-of-life in these areas in the long term.

## 1. PUBLIC TRANSPORT

To avoid the complete dereliction of rural Ireland as we know it, more money must be invested in public transport for **all** areas of the region.

### *Train Network & Services*

- Increase commuter services on existing rail network. The population of Sligo Borough almost doubles every day with the influx of workers from the surrounding towns and villages. The recent improvements on the Dublin-Sligo route must now be supported by frequent and reliable early morning and late evening commuter rail services from Longford to Sligo. This will help reduce the number of cars on this route on a daily basis.
- Ensure commuter services nationally are affordable. Discrepancies exist in the pricing policies for the Greater Dublin Area and other areas nationally. A Maynooth commuter currently pays less than €4 for a return trip to Dublin (17 miles). A Ballymote commuter currently pays €9.40 for a return trip to Sligo (16 miles), this increases to €12.90 from Friday to Sunday.
- Develop national railway network. The current network is understandably more developed in the South and East of the country. Going forward however investment and focus must be placed on the network in the North and North West. Commitment and funding for the development of the Western Rail Corridor from Claremorris to Sligo must be forthcoming. This will greatly extend and enhance the rail network and allow for a looped network from Dublin – Sligo – Waterford.

### *Bus*

- The development of regional bus services should be investigated to cater for commuters without access to the train network.
- Increased bus schedules in existing areas, as the timing of the current schedules do not cater for the changing demographics in certain areas due to recent housing developments. This is particularly the case in many rural towns and villages in County Sligo where many of the new residents need to drive to work and may opt for public buses if the timings were suitable.
- Increased collaboration between the bus and train companies to provide shuttle services from train stations to larger work clusters.
- Continued support for community initiatives such as the Evening Transport Service that was introduced by the Sligo LEADER Partnership in 2007. This not only supports local communities but helps positively position public transport in rural communities.

### *Walking*

- Develop suitable paths and walkways.

- Improvements in lighting public areas will not only entice people to walk but will make it safer.
- Increase security in public areas/walkways through extra Gardaí resources, CCTV and community projects to reduce the incidences of anti-social behaviour.

### *Bicycles*

- Introduce facilities to hire bicycles in the larger urban cities.
- Incorporate bicycle stands and bicycle lanes into planning guidelines for future development.
- Investigate “best practices” and key learnings from other cities, such as Amsterdam where the bicycle is ingrained in the way of life.

## **2. ROAD NETWORK**

- Completion of Atlantic Road Corridor to facilitate access along western seaboard
- Improvement and focus on East-West access along Border Regions.
- Improve road network and access into Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland markets provide substantial untapped potential for businesses in the Republic of Ireland and the current condition of the N16 does little to encourage this.
- Funding for Eastern Bridge in Sligo.

## **3. ENERGY**

With spiraling energy costs it is imperative that businesses have access to an adequate and reliable source of cost efficient energy. Equally, those regions that are able to offer a choice of energy supply will be better positioned to attract new Foreign Direct Investment.

- Development of Gas network for the North West regions.
- Increased development of and focus on renewable energy sources so as to position the region as a leader in the field of Wind/Sea energies.

## **4. BROADBAND**

The importance of continuing to develop the broadband facilities cannot be overemphasized. The lack of adequate broadband coverage in parts of the BMW region has in real terms:

- Forced some companies to relocate.
- Hindered others from relocating.
- Hindered the introduction of working from home.
- Increased the need to travel more frequently into Sligo and to other major hubs such as Dublin and Galway.

## 5. HEALTHCARE FACILITIES

The availability of healthcare and access to healthcare facilities are essential contributors to a region's vitality.

Aside from the many health concerns, the loss of Cancer Care Services in the Sligo General Hospital will have negative implications on jobs and employment in the region. Sligo Chamber fears that:

- The downgrading of these cancer services will not only affect the current employees in Sligo's General Hospital but also its potential to attract high level, good quality medical staff and practitioners in the future.
- Sligo currently competes nationally for foreign direct investment and relocation opportunities, and the services provided in local hospitals are key considerations for investors and would-be employers to the region. The downgrading of our hospital will remove this advantage from Sligo.
- While businesses and employers are very sympathetic when it comes to illnesses, the loss of cancer services in Sligo will cause an extra economic impact to employers, as they will incur increased downtime from employees due to the extra time needed to travel to accompany loved-ones for their treatment.

## 6. OTHER

### **Potential Sectors for Development / Initiatives & Interventions**

- Continued development of tourism and the range of tourist products available in the region in order to adapt to the changing requirements of tourists.
- Thanks to its increased and improved hospitality base, Sligo is currently attracting an increased number of national conferences. The availability of support and investment may create opportunities for the west and north west to attract international conferences and events. The successful hosting of the World Rally Championships in 2007 is an excellent platform from which to attract additional events.
- Increased collaboration between business and the educational institutions in the west and north west to identify and exploit new opportunities in the area of innovation, design, research and development. Investigate potential of developing Sligo, Letterkenny, and Derry into a R&D cluster.
- The markets of Northern Ireland remain largely untapped for businesses in the Republic of Ireland in terms of commercial activities and exports. Incentives such as Enterprise Ireland's "Innovation Voucher" play an important role in assisting increased contact between business and institutions both sides of the border. The introduction of similar initiatives and programmes or assistance in cross border exports will help improve collaboration and Ireland's exports.