

## **County Clare To Be Central Theme Of World's Largest Irish Festival**

*County Clare, IRELAND, 19th July 07*

Organisers of the world's largest Irish culture festival have provided a major boost to the tourist industry in County Clare.

The Banner County will feature as the central theme of next month's Milwaukee Irish Fest in Wisconsin, USA. A tourism delegation led by Clare County Council and the Clare Tourist Council will depart for the USA on 13th August next where it will showcase Clare's tourist attractions to over 150,000 festivalgoers during the four-day event. The delegation, which also includes Shannon Development, Shannon Heritage and members of the Clare Tourism Forum, is also scheduled to meet with members of the Irish-American business community in Chicago ahead of the festival.

The Milwaukee Irish Fest, established in 1981 by members of Milwaukee's Irish community, is renowned as the world's largest Irish culture festival. Covering 74 acres of Lake Michigan's shoreline the event showcases Irish music, history, dance, drama, sports and culture. The Festival, which runs from August 16th-19th, is also used by tourist agencies such as Fáilte Ireland and CIE Tours as an opportunity to market Ireland as a desirable tourist destination.

*"It is hugely significant that County Clare is featuring prominently at this year's festival as it emphasises the quality of the tourism product on offer here", explained Mayor of Clare Cllr. Patricia McCarthy.*

Commenting on the need to attract US visitors into Ireland via Shannon Airport, Mayor McCarthy said, *"The introduction of Open Skies has raised concerns over whether the level of transatlantic business at the airport can be sustained. Clare County Council, along with other leading tourism development agencies in Ireland's mid-west region, has decided to adopt a more proactive approach in a bid to maintain and build on such business by marketing the airport as a key gateway to the west of Ireland, and more importantly Clare. The main aim of our presence at the Milwaukee Irish Fest will be to raise awareness of the many airlines operating flight services between Shannon and such American cities as New York, Boston and Chicago."*

Paddy Maher, PRO of the Clare Tourist Council believes that the overseas promotion of Shannon Airport is a key factor in maintaining the long-term viability of the facility.

He explained, *"It is unfortunate from the West of Ireland's perspective that many potential American visitors are unaware that daily flights operate between the US and Shannon International Airport. Many tourists fly into Dublin Airport before realising that there is an international airport on the west coast."*

*"Our presence at the Milwaukee Irish Fest has led to increased transatlantic traffic through the county Clare airport while the knock on effects for Clare tourism have also been felt. This year we hope to build on the estimated 3000 US tourists who holidayed in county Clare as a result of our promotional campaign here last year", Mr. Maher added.*

During the Milwaukee Irish Fest, the Clare tourism delegation will be located in the festival's 'Cultural Village' where tens of thousands of promotional brochures on local tourist attractions will be distributed. Members of the tourist delegation will also deliver a series of public lectures on various aspects of Clare's history, culture and heritage, including a presentation on two of Clare and Ireland's most significant historical figures, Brian Ború and Michael Cusack.

The Clare delegation will also stage two sessions of the 'Siege of Ennis' during the Festival. It's anticipated that various dance schools and teachers from Milwaukee and Chicago along with over 400 festival goers will participate in the sessions.

Meanwhile, the travelling Clare delegation will be accompanied in the Dairy State capital by a number of other local groups, including the Clare Crafts Association, the Ennis Players, the Clare Céilí Band and local artist Philip Brennan.

According to Liam Conneally of Clare County Council's Economic Development and Planning Department, *"American visitors to Ireland have always been fascinated with the country's rich heritage, including its folklore, history, archaeology, geology, genealogy, and natural and built heritage. In County Clare we are especially fortunate to have such world-renowned heritage sites as the Cliffs of Moher and Bunratty Castle, which we will be promoting among many other attractions. The Clare Tourist Forum, which is funded by Clare County Council, has already undertaken a huge amount of promotional work in this area and I look forward to seeing these efforts continue at the Milwaukee Irish Fest."*

Commenting on the long-term benefits of Clare's presence at the Festival, Mr. Conneally stated, *"Last year, an estimated 3,000 visitors to the Milwaukee Irish Fest made the journey to Ireland with many people choosing Shannon Airport as their desired gateway. They included 110 members of the renowned Milwaukee-based Bel Canto Chorus and over 40 members of the Milwaukee Junior Choir."*

A number of US media appearances by the travelling Clare tourist delegation have been organised ahead of the trip. The current and former Mayors of Clare, Councillors Patricia McCarthy and Flan Garvey will be interviewed live on the FOX NEWS television network on Thursday 16th August.

County Clare's presence at the Milwaukee Irish Fest was established in 2001 when former Mayor Cllr. Flan Garvey instigated a local tourism promotion campaign.