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West-on-Track: Western Development Commission Conference

**Speech by Éamon Ó Cuív T.D.,
Minister for Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs at the
West-on-Track / Western Development Commission Conference
Claremorris, Co. Mayo, 13 April 2007**

A chairde, I'm delighted to be here with you once again and to have an opportunity to speak on regional development and the vital role that transport will play in achieving this objective in Connacht. Two years ago, I outlined my vision for an integrated approach to development in this region. I stressed the need for a set of interlinking actions, each supporting the other in promoting development. I particularly stressed the inter-dependence of three major policies; the development of the Western Rail Corridor, the development of Ireland West Airport Knock and the development of decentralisation. I would like now to give a short outline of the progress made since.

In relation to decentralisation, progress has been made in relation to the decentralisation of the OPW to Claremorris. In the case of my Department, we already have 79 people located in Tubbercurry and we intend completing the decentralisation once planning is granted for the building at Ireland West Airport Knock.

I think it is true to say that Ireland West Airport Knock has reached new heights in the intervening period. By their own efforts, with the support of the Government, they have easily broken the half million passenger barrier and are now full steam ahead to their target of one million passengers per annum. The Government have now permitted transatlantic flights through Knock and also have made €27 million available for the development of the airport. More passengers means a greater need for public transport and this is where the Western Rail Corridor comes in.

Before I go into the detail, I would like to reiterate the commitment of the Government to the whole Western Rail Corridor from Sligo to Limerick on a phased basis. The Transport 21 and the National Development Plan and recent speeches by my colleagues the Taoiseach and Minister Cullen have time and again reiterated our commitment.

It is true that we have given modest time-scales for the opening of the first phase to Claremorris. However, we have learnt from the past that it is much better to give a modest timescale that allows for contingencies and deliver in time than to over-promise.

Western Rail Corridor

The railway line between Claremorris and Collooney had been closed to passenger rail traffic since June 1963 with the Athenry to Claremorris section closed to passenger rail traffic since April 1976. Limited freight services operated on the line until the early 1990's.

The Inter-County Rail Committee, spearheaded by Father Mícheál Mac Gréil and in more recent times, by the West on Track group, have ensured that this vital piece of infrastructure was not abandoned and sold down through the years. The preservation of the right of way is a vital component to facilitate a future opening of the Western Rail Corridor north of Claremorris.

The announcement by the Government of the phased re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor is the largest ever re-opening of a rail line on this island and is a clear indication of a firm commitment in relation to Western Development.

The position in relation to work on the Western Rail Corridor (WRC) is that Iarnród Éireann has commenced line clearance work and detailed design of bridges and signalling on the Ennis to Athenry section. It has also entered into discussions with land-owners and local authorities. Iarnród Éireann expect to begin construction work later this year with a view to 2008 completion - of the first section from Ennis to Athenry. My colleague, Transport Minister, Martin Cullen has allocated €10m in funding to Iarnród Éireann for work on the project this year.

Transport 21, the Government's investment programme for transport, provides for the reopening of the Athenry to Tuam section in 2011 and the Tuam to Claremorris section in 2014. Iarnród Éireann, with the assistance of funding under the CLAR programme, are also undertaking work to preserve the rail alignment on the Claremorris to Collooney section.

Ennis to Athenry

The reopening of the Ennis to Athenry section (2008) will be truly historic involving, as it will, the re-introduction of scheduled train services between Limerick and Galway, the enhancement of existing commuter services between Ennis and Limerick and the development of the Galway Commuter Rail service between Galway and Athenry. This phase involves the upgrading of 36 miles of track and associated infrastructure, the elimination of approximately 125 farm/accommodation crossings and the provision of 5 stations at Gort, Ardrahan and Craughwell (on the Ennis–Athenry line), Sixmilebridge (on the Limerick–Ennis line) and Oranmore (on the Athenry–Galway line). Seven services a day in each direction are proposed between Limerick and Galway, targeting commuters as well as providing links to Intercity services from the two cities.

The provision of new stations at Gort, Ardrahan, Craughwell, Oranmore and Sixmilebridge will facilitate more sustainable commuting patterns between these growing satellite centres and Galway and Limerick. In the context of considerable population growth projected for the area, the development of stations in existing centres should also facilitate more sustainable and efficient land-use planning on the part of the relevant local authorities.

Case for Western Rail Corridor

It is true that the business case for the WRC did not meet the normal economic criteria for the approval of large scale capital projects. It performs strongly however on a range of other criteria.

Apart from improving the national railway infrastructure, with obvious benefits for those using the railways, the reopening of the Western Rail Corridor will make a significant contribution both to the West and the country as a whole in terms of more balanced regional development. It will improve access within the region and also between the West and the rest of the country. It will support the National Spatial Strategy Gateway clustering of Sligo, Galway, Limerick, Cork and Waterford as a viable alternative development mass to the Greater Dublin Area.

Nationally, the rail link will facilitate the operation of rail services between Sligo, Galway, Limerick, Cork and Waterford as well as providing new links to other Intercity services ex Limerick, Galway and Sligo. Previously the development of the rail network was focused on the Greater Dublin area. Now we are linking the four major cities outside Dublin by rail. The Western Rail Corridor will also improve international connectivity by improving access to both Knock, Shannon and Galway airports as well as to the ports of Cork and Waterford.

I have no doubt that the Western Rail Corridor will prove of immense benefit to the West and that it will be a catalyst for a new phase in the growth and development of the region.

Other Public Transport Investment in the West

The Western Rail Corridor is just one part however of a range of transport upgrade projects that have been completed, or underway on or in planning by the Minister for Transport for the West.

On the railway network, the services to Sligo have benefited from over €150m invested since 1999. This has funded line upgrades and additional rolling stock for an increase in services to 5 each way per day between Sligo and Dublin. The Sligo line will be one of the first to benefit from the 150 new high-specification inter-city railcars which will enter service across the networks during this year and next. The first of this new fleet arrived in Dublin Port on 6 March. Iarnród Éireann plan to introduce 2 new services each way with this new rolling stock. The Mayo line has also benefited from investment of nearly €100m since 1999 on track upgrades, new signalling equipment and the automation of level crossings. The Galway line and signalling has also been upgraded and the number of services each way increased to 7 per day. Again services on both the Mayo and Galway lines will benefit from the €300m +investment in the 150 new railcars.

CLÁR

I would like to say a few words about the work that has been done on the Western Rail Corridor with funds from the CLÁR programme in my Department. I announced CLÁR funding of €5m last September for site clearance works by Iarnród Éireann on the unused railway line between Claremorris and Collooney. Work commenced in October 2006 and to date approximately €2m has been paid to Iarnród Éireann.

To date 49.97 miles of the corridor has been cleared. The line clearance works included the removal of bushes, undergrowth, trees and hedges. A free space corridor was created from boundary fence to boundary fence and all hedges and trees outside the boundary fence were cut back to produce a straight vertical line of sight along the corridor. Timber post and wire fencing commenced on November 14th between the 0 – 3 mile post north of Claremorris. To date 1.86 miles have been completed with further fencing work to be undertaken in 2007. Works on the removal of telegraph poles commenced on November 23rd last and nearly all 1,300 poles have now been removed.

In March, detailed surveys were undertaken in fencing, drainage and signage to determine and prioritise areas to be addressed. The fencing surveys put a particular emphasis on reclaiming of property and areas of encroachment which have arisen over the last number of years since the line has been closed to traffic.

The procurement process to undertake the physical works associated with the fencing, drainage and signage programmes is now underway and these site works are to commence in the middle of May. Works are proceeding as planned and in line with the budget and timescale set out at commencement of the works.

It has been amazing to see the railway line re-appear from the undergrowth. This project has proved that any problems with the right of way even though it was owned by Iarnród Éireann did not arise because the landowners have been magnificent and have co-operated with what has been very dramatic work.

I am a great believer that good fences make good neighbours and that work is to continue, and I have good news for you today. My Department will enter discussions with Iarnród Éireann and the Department of Transport in relation to the expenditure of the next phase of CLÁR funding to be spent in the 2008/2009 period. The CLÁR area extends from just north of Tuam to just short of Collooney and we will be focussing on this area. We will seek advice from the Department of Transport and Iarnród Éireann as to where a further investment could best be targeted to expedite the project. This could, for example, include preliminary works on the stretch between Tuam and Claremorris. I will be making an announcement regarding this once the discussions are completed.

I am often asked when the Government will complete the line to Sligo. I have believed from the beginning that collectively, all of us in the West, working together can take actions that will bring this date forward. These actions include;

1. Public support for the sections of line that are open in terms of public usage as they open.
2. That the local authorities along the line incorporate in their plans as priority settlements, the various towns and villages along the line.
3. That there is continued full co-operation from adjacent landholders which has been so forthcoming to date.
4. That Government continues with its radical decentralisation policy.
5. That the Government commitment to Knock, Galway and Shannon airports continues.
6. That we maintain the West of Ireland as a rapidly growing area with population growth above the national average as has happened over the last 4 years.

If we do all these things, I have no doubt that the date of completion will be a lot sooner than many people believe.